Cleaning and Disinfecting Safely: Avoiding Chemical Exposure in Childcare Settings Meeting Kit



WHAT’S AT STAKE

Cleanliness is essential in childcare. Toys are shared, surfaces are touched constantly, and young children explore the world with their hands and mouths. Cleaning and disinfecting help prevent illness and protect developing immune systems. However, cleaning products can also create risks when they are misused, mixed incorrectly, or applied without precautions.

WHAT’S THE DANGER

Chemical exposure in childcare settings is more common than many people realize. Cleaning products are used frequently throughout the day, and when they are sprayed, mixed, or handled improperly, they can affect both children and staff.

Inhalation Risk

The CDC reports that exposure to cleaning chemicals can irritate the lungs and trigger asthma symptoms, especially in enclosed spaces. Sprays and aerosols increase this risk when they are used often or without proper ventilation.

Skin and Eye Contact

According to NIOSH, repeated contact with disinfectants such as bleach can cause skin irritation or dermatitis. Splashes to the eyes can cause immediate injury.

Mixing Hazards

Mixing certain products, such as bleach and ammonia, can release toxic chlorine gas. Poison control centres in both the U.S. and Canada report thousands of incidents each year caused by mixing cleaning products incorrectly.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Safe cleaning starts with understanding both the product you’re using and how to use it correctly. Following proper steps helps reduce chemical exposure for both children and staff.

Know the Difference Between Cleaning and Disinfecting

Cleaning and disinfecting are not the same, and both may be needed to keep childcare spaces safe.

- **Cleaning:** Removes dirt, food residue, and visible mess from surfaces so disinfectants can reach germs.
- **Disinfecting:** Kills germs on surfaces after cleaning, especially on high-touch areas like door handles, changing tables, and faucets.

Understand the Products You Use

Product labels explain how the cleaner should be used. They tell you the correct amount, whether dilution is needed, how long the surface must stay wet, and whether gloves or ventilation are required. Safety Data Sheets (SDS) also provide information about hazards, first aid, and safe storage.

Use Products Correctly

- Follow label instructions and recommended dilution amounts.
- Never mix cleaning products, especially bleach with ammonia or acids.
- Apply cleaning solution to a cloth instead of spraying into the air when possible.
- Keep children away during cleaning and until surfaces are dry.

Improve Ventilation

Good airflow helps reduce chemical exposure. Open windows, increase ventilation, or schedule cleaning when children are outdoors whenever possible.

Protect Skin and Prevent Access

Wear gloves when required and wash your hands after cleaning. Store all cleaning products in locked cabinets and never leave bottles, buckets, or cloths unattended where children could reach them.

FINAL WORD

Clean environments protect health. Safe cleaning protects everyone. When cleaning is done thoughtfully and consistently, you reduce illness without introducing new risks.