

Create nontoxic nest for baby

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The baby is on her way and there is so much to do: buy a crib, a changing table, paint the walls, redo the floor. It's an exciting time —a time to make sure everything is in place in the newborn's nursery. For most expectant parents and parents of young children, preparing the room means making the space environmentally safe with furnishings that are non-toxic and free of harmful chemicals.

The exposure to dangerous chemicals by infants and toddlers is a growing concern. In April, the American Academy of Pediatrics called for an overhaul of the national Toxic Substances Control Act, which has not been fully revised since it first passed in 1976. The law has allowed companies producing tens of thousands of new chemicals in the last few decades to ignore the impacts on women and children. Joining American Academy of Pediatrics in calling for the overhaul of Toxic Substances Control Act is the American Medical Association, the American Public Health Association and the American Nurses Association.

The biggest offender to a baby's vulnerable and sensitive immune system is

volatile organic compounds, the gasses emitted from certain solids or liquids that can cause short and long-term health issues, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Volatile organic compounds are found in paint, pressed wood furniture, cleaning products and air fresheners. Infants and young children are especially sensitive to volatile organic compounds because they have a much larger ratio of skin surface to body size, breathe faster and have a faster metabolic rate.

"Toxicity had become the buzz word of the 21st century," said Dr. Joseph Malak of Bambini Pediatrics in Poughkeepsie. "It's frightening how much the number of man-made synthetics has grown."

When Jill Rubin and Andrew Lehto bought an 80-year old fixer-upper house in Beacon, they started painting all the rooms with non-toxic paint, including what would become their first baby's room.

"Some of the plaster was crumbling, so we

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just dry-walled over it and painted it with no VOC paint. We also used non-toxic floor finishing," said Jill Rubin, adding that their cleaning products are all non-toxic.

Dana Devine-O'Malley, a mother who also lives in Beacon, sought out non-toxic paint before her first child was born more than three years ago. The effort to "green-clean" her house actually began before she became pregnant. Devine-O'Malley and her husband detoxified their entire house, first focusing on wall paint and floors. She is expecting her second child before the end of the year.

"You have to think about the child's first year of life when their bodies are like a sponge in every way."

When they were ready to paint the baby's room four years ago, they couldn't find non-toxic paint in local stores, unlike today.

"We had to order the no or low-VOC paint directly from the company, but today it's easier to find in big retail places like Pottery Barn or Home Depot."

Paints labeled "No-VOC" or "Low-VOC" have to pass special EPA emissions tests. Today, these eco-friendly paints are offered by standard paint brands such as Sherwin Williams, Benjamin Moore, Olympic Paint and Stain. There are also natural paints made from all-natural materials such as milk casein (a protein found in milk), clay, bee's wax, and natural mineral dyes that do not contain off-gassing

solvents (off gassing is what happens when volatile organic compounds evaporate and release harmful chemicals into the environment). Companies making natural paints include the Real Milk Paint Company and BioShield.

Most babies sleep about 10 hours at night in their cribs, plus a few hours for the daytime nap. Traditionally-made cribs and mattresses are sources of volatile organic compounds and harmful chemicals called polybrominated diphenylethers, used in flame retardants.

Cribs and changing tables made from pressed wood contain adhesives that often emit the toxic chemical formaldehyde. A safer choice is a crib with a metal mattress support rather than a plywood one. Solid wood furniture with non-toxic finishes is preferable to pieces with standard wood finishes such as stains, paint and sealers, another source of VOCs.

"I try to base my decisions on what my

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children would be doing the most," said Christina Vazquez, a New Paltz mother of two children, 3 years and 18 months.

"They spend a considerable amount of time sleeping, and I don't want them breathing in toxic chemicals from a mattress that smells like a new shower curtain. I'm also nervous about compressed particle board, wood that releases toxins and chemicals for years and years."

Vazquez was guided by the GreenGuard Environmental Institute, an organization that certifies products that have no adverse affect on indoor environments. She found cribs and furniture made by Stanley Furniture at Davis Furniture in Poughkeepsie.

"We ordered my son's dresser which was made from all natural wood. Everything he wears is stored in there, and it's clothing that comes in contact with the wood all the time." Vazquez also found a crib mattress made from organic materials at J.C. Penney.

Kerry Zeff, a Kingston mom who runs the baby store Waddle n Swaddle in Rhinebeck, said the most important item for her toddler and infant was the mattresses for the bed and crib. "It's what they put their face on 12 hours a day."

Zeff splurged for mattresses from a company called Q Junior in California because it was made with organic wool and/or cotton. They also make non-toxic latex mattresses. Zeff also found a fun, creative, non-toxic paint at Tivoli

Mercantile in Red Hook called chalk board paint that kids can draw on with chalk and then erase.

"It's a fun way to decorate your kid's room, especially using removable stickers called Wall Candy Art. Some of the stickers are as big as two and three feet and are adorable animals, creatures, patterns."

Jenn Sullivan, owner of Waddle n Swaddle, who runs the Poughkeepsie store, says since she opened her business three years ago, she has seen her clientele steadily increase.

"More parents out there are educated. Parents are more aware about the toxic materials that their babies can be exposed to. Our customer base has grown ten times since we opened."

Sullivan started the store after her first child was born more than six years ago and she couldn't find any local stores selling non-toxic baby products.

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"You had to order everything on line if you wanted natural, safe products," she said.

Her store offers a wide range of products including children's clothing made with organic fibers, locally made organic salves, safe detergents, organic rubber toys.

It's also important not to forget the floors, the terrain of adventurous crawlers. The rule of thumb is stay away from wall-to-wall carpet in the nursery. The new carpet smell we have grown to associate with fresh, soft carpet is actually a cocktail of chemicals off-gassing in the room. Carpet can also hold dust, mold, bacteria and chemical residues.

Devine-O'Malley found tiles made from recycled natural fiber from a company called FLOR, that has a recycling policy that lets customers return old tiles for new ones. She also pulled up all the carpet in the house and left the natural wood floors. In the kitchen, she used natural linoleum made from linseed oil. Other safe floor materials for babies are cork and bamboo flooring with a non-toxic finish and natural wool area rugs.

Even though safe baby products and materials are being sold in major stores, they tend to be expensive. Malak said detoxifying your house could be costly, and it's important to be informed and to set priorities.

"Try to read about flame retardants, off-gassing and vinyl furniture and anything that has lead in it. It gets overwhelming at times and the number of baby products

that are recalled can be intimidating." Malak also suggests using common sense. "Use your nose. If the room smells bad or if the basement is damp, your baby might develop a mold sensitivity."

For Vasquez, choosing one safe product over another is tricky.

"You got to pick your battles and not get riddled with guilt thinking you made the wrong decision. We try our best to be consistent, but it's hard."

Vasquez, who spent \$900 on a dresser for her child, says she drew the line with the toys. "We're not a non-plastic household, and many of their toys are plastic. They don't bury their face in the toys like they do their mattress."

Another cost cutting approach is buying second hand — something that traditionally makes parents cringe. Although expectant parents want to buy new products for the new baby, research suggests second-hand articles have had time to naturally lose their

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dangerous chemicals. Purchasing second-hand clothes and toys not only saves money, it is one way to practice recycling, which makes for a good environment locally and globally.

"We got a lot of hand-me-downs from friends," Jill Rubin said. "Some are made with organic material, some aren't. We feel good about reusing them because they've been washed so many times, and we're not so worried about the toxins in the second-hand clothes."



Zoom

Jill Rubin and Andrew Lehto used nontoxic floor finishing and no VOC paint in their child's room. / Karl Rabe/Living & Being

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