

Lauren 00:10

Welcome to the LD month mini series of the LDA podcast, where we're bringing you conversations about support, education and advocacy, LDA's main missions. Today we're talking to Tracy Gregoire, the coordinator of LDA's Healthy Children Project about why it's so difficult to get toxic chemicals out of products to healthy children projects, current projects, and more.

Lauren 00:35

Hello, everyone, I'm here with Tracy Gregoire, she is the coordinator of LDA's Healthy Children Project. Tracy, thank you for being here with us.

Tracy Gregoire 00:42

Thanks for having me.

Lauren 00:44

So would you be able to give us a little bit of background on the Healthy Children project? Sort of why were you guys formed? And what are the sorts of things that you work on?

Tracy Gregoire 00:53

Sure. So the Healthy Children Project was established in 2002. It's almost 20 years old. And the focus is raising awareness of toxic chemicals that are harmful to brain health. The Healthy Children Project works to prevent exposures to harmful chemicals that are linked to learning, attention, behavior, and developmental disabilities such as autism, basically any different disability that affects how the brain works. The Healthy Children Project works to protect the health of pregnant women and children in particular, because those are vulnerable populations, and looks at chemicals in our products, food, water or air.

Lauren 01:36

How does Healthy Children Project work on chemicals?

Tracy Gregoire 01:40

So one of the things that Healthy Children Project does is translating the scientific evidence on toxic chemicals and brain development into education and advocacy. So that everybody understands about those lengths and what we can do to protect people's health. We also work to prevent toxic chemical exposures to both pregnant women and children who are to vulnerable populations, some tactics we use to accomplish that include education, pushing for policies at the state and federal levels for safer products, and also pushing retailers to sell safer products.

Lauren 02:17

Great. So Tracy, how did you get involved personally with the Healthy Children Project? Why is this a cause that's important to you?

Tracy Gregoire 02:25

So I've been doing education and policy work for almost 20 years now. And I've learned that education is really important, but policy work is an important tool to enact change. When I learned about the lack

of laws to protect people from harmful chemicals, I knew that was an area that I wanted to work more on and focus on. And I strongly believe that all children have a right to safe and healthy environments where they live, learn and play, which is why I advocate for the safer products, clean air and water for all families.

Lauren 02:59

That's great. I know that the Healthy Children Project has had a lot of accomplishments within the span of its time, would you be able to tell us some of the highlights maybe that Healthy Children Project has accomplished?

Tracy Gregoire 03:12

Sure. So we've been working on federal policies for a long time because the old Toxic Substances Control Act, which was passed in 1976 basically grandfathered in 1000s of chemicals with little or no testing. So LDA and partner organizations have been working on TOSCA reform for a number of years. And in 2016, we were able to help get passed a better law to really tackle the problem of all of these chemicals and how to eliminate the worst of the worst chemicals quickly and assess chemicals before they come on the market and get used in products. It did have, you know, it wasn't a perfect law. It still has a lot of things that we need to work on. But we've kind of shifted over the past four years to implementation of that law to ensure that the Environmental Protection Agency is using the law to protect the health of all families. And so we are involved in that ongoing process. LDA several years ago helped start Project Tender, which is a group of over 50 leading us scientists, health professionals, and nonprofit organizations like LDA. We released a joint consensus statement on how toxic chemicals in our environment are increasing children's risks for neurological disabilities, and that collaborative continues to publish academic papers and really push for policy change to protect children's brain health. And another recent one that we had was on amalgam, which is dental fillings, which are 50% mercury. LDA feels that we should be eliminating the sources of any neurotoxins, and amalgam is one of the biggest uses of mercury in a product in the US. And the whole lifecycle of mercury is harmful. So we did comments to the FDA, we attended meetings in person and by phone with the Food and Drug Administration. And just last week, they came out with a recommendation, saying that pregnant women, nursing women, and children, among other vulnerable populations, should be getting other safer dental fillings when possible. So that was another recent win that we had. And that's definitely a win.

Lauren 06:01

So I know that this could definitely vary from time to time, but how long can it take for some of these measures to get passed?

Tracy Gregoire 06:09

That's a great question. So for some of the things like federal policy, working with agencies, it's a number of years or more. I mean, federal bills take a long time to get through the process. Even working with agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency and Food and Drug Administration, it can take years to have a big win. We do use different tools, we work with EarthJustice a lot and EarthJustice represents LDA and other partners in a number of cases. So, for example, we have a litigation case against the EPA right now. Because the EPA was planning to ban chlorpyrifos, which is a very nasty, neurotoxic pesticide. Their own scientists said it should be banned for commercial use,

because it's being used on the food that we eat, and had banned it for residential use a number of years ago. Unfortunately, even though their scientists said that they need to ban the chemical, they haven't taken action on it yet. So that's one case LDA is involved in, and we're still waiting for a determination on that case. We've also petitioned the FDA to set a protective limit on arsenic and baby food, which seems like a no brainer, no pun intended, but, again, has been something we've been working on for a long time. And there are other cases that we work with our justice and other partners on. So some of the agency work can take quite a bit of time. Really, like a lot of perseverance. The good news is LDA also uses market pressure tactics to push retailers and manufacturers to get the worst of the chemicals out of products and to really screen and replace harmful chemicals with proven safer alternatives. So under that retailer work, we work with a number of partners and coalitions across the United States and we've had a number of wins that happen much more quickly than federal policies tend to. So again, it's another tactic that we're using. So for example, in 2015, we worked with Safer Chemicals Healthy Families and got Ashley Furniture, IKEA, Walmart and Macy's and a number of other retailers to stop selling furniture with toxic flame retardants, which unfortunately don't do very much to slow the spread of fires but do have strong ties to harming brain health. In 2015, we were able to get Walgreens to commit to passing a chemical policy to really look at all of their products and, and how they can get harmful chemicals out of their products. Some other wins were getting phthalate chemicals, again, another chemical linked to neurological harm, out of vinyl flooring. And that was with the Mind the Store Campaign, and we were able to get companies from Lowe's, to Home Depot to Menards and a number of other retailers to get phthalates out of vinyl flooring. So pretty much no matter where you go now if you get vinyl flooring, it doesn't have phthalates in it. And we've gotten other companies like dollar stores to work on chemical policies, stores like BuyBuy Baby that sells baby and toddler products to get flame retardants out and have more robust chemical policies to tackle this problem. So there's a number of wins on the retailer and manufacturer from where we're really getting chemicals out much more quickly than policy could do alone.

Lauren 09:59

Right, well, those are huge corporations. So that makes a big difference. I know that you said before that some of these are no-brainers like getting arsenic out of baby food. So why are some of these things not passed? What are some of the main obstacles, would you say?

Tracy Gregoire 10:15

I think first, sometimes unfortunately, we wait for the science to be so piled up like with lead, and keep saying, oh, we need to research these chemicals more before taking action. There's also a lot of opponents, unfortunately, the chemical industry, the manufacturers that make these products, I mean, they will use chemicals that they are already using and don't like change. So we have to push for not only getting harmful chemicals out of products, but also making sure that the gold standard is before chemicals are being used in a product, that it's proven to be safe. Unfortunately, right now, you have to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that a chemical is toxic before it's often taken out of products. The good news is that retailers and manufacturers don't want the bad publicity of having a chemical like PFAS, which has enough scientific data to show that it's linked to cancer and could be linked to, you know, issues with development for kids. They don't want to have to say that those kinds of chemicals are in their products. So sometimes that public pressure makes a really big difference.

Lauren 11:36

Well, that sort of leads into my next question, what is Healthy Children Project working on right now?

Tracy Gregoire 11:42

So one class of chemicals we're working on are PFAS chemicals. PFAS chemicals are in a lot of products there used to make products water resistant and grease resistant and and they're in so many products that we use every day. Unfortunately, because of the high volume of PFAS chemicals, it's polluting our drinking water and we know a number of towns and cities have polluted water with PFSS chemicals.

Lauren 12:12

So what do PFAS chemicals do to the body?

Tracy Gregoire 12:16

So, PFAS is a big class of chemicals. And some of them have been tested more than others. But in general, some studies have shown adverse effects of growth, learning and behavior of infants and children, which is obviously a concern for LDA. They can lower a woman's chance of getting pregnant, they can interfere with the body's hormones, affect the immune system, increase the risk for certain types of cancers. And there are also some studies have shown concerns with making vaccines less effective. So the immune system and the vaccine issue is obviously big concerns during COVID. And some of these other chronic health issues it can cause are also concerned during the pandemic. So there's a lot of evidence that some of these PFAS chemicals are linked to strong health concerns. But as a class whether it's short term or long term PFAS they seem to act similarly. So instead of replacing one PFAS with another, LDA and our partners are strongly advocating to get rid of PFAS so that we're not having regrettable substitutes. The bad news about PFAS chemicals is that they're nicknamed forever chemicals because they don't break down in the environment or in people. So because PFAS chemicals last pretty much forever, it's really hard to get rid of them. So LDA is working with, again, with partners to both pass state policies. Like we worked on, I worked with some state LDA affiliates in Oregon and Michigan and Maine to support PFAS-related bills and their states. Another tactic we're using is working with the Mind the Store Campaign and pushing fast food companies that use PFAS and their food packaging to phase it out and use safer food packaging chemicals instead. So for that campaign right now, we're targeting McDonald's and other fast food chains, asking them to replace their packaging that has PFAS chemicals with safer alternatives. So you might see on our Facebook page or on Twitter that we're kind of pushing these companies to sell safer products for some of these chemicals like PFAS chemicals and food packaging. You know one concern is obviously that the chemical can get into the food, but the whole lifecycle of the product, including it being thrown away in a landfill or incinerated, also exposes people.

Lauren 15:02

So what are some resources that you can share with us that can help people to find safer resources and products?

Tracy Gregoire 15:08

Sure. So our healthychildrenproject.org website has a number of resources listed on our resource page, including links to apps and online source resources to search for safer products. So whether you're looking for personal care products like shampoos and lotions, or looking for products for your child's nursery, there are a lot of resources out there on what to look for and what to avoid, which is really helpful. People can also join LDA's e-newsletter, and check out our Facebook and Twitter pages for both the Healthy Children Project and LDA. Because we share a lot of the most recent tips and research and testing of products on those social media sites.

Lauren 15:58

And for people who want to get involved with LDA's healthy children project, where would you suggest that they start?

Tracy Gregoire 16:04

Yeah, they can. They can check out our website and our social media pages or join LDA's newsletter to get more information. Some of the federal policy related work that we're working on right now include a bill that's related to PFAS chemicals. So the National Defense Authorization Act is passed every year and that's funding for the military. And this year, again, there's some great amendments to the bill that would tackle issues around PFAS chemicals, including money to pay for testing of military personnel that are exposed to PFAS chemicals, funding to increase PFAS cleanup around military sites and designated some of these PFAS chemicals as hazardous substances. So we're working to get those amendments passed in that bill. We're also opposing Nancy Beck's nomination to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. The CPSC is one of the top agencies with the job of protecting us from dangerous chemicals in everyday products. And Beck has a long history of being on the wrong side in terms of protecting people's health from chemicals. So we're educating senators on this issue and asking them to oppose her nomination.

Lauren 17:28

So a lot going on still even in the midst of COVID. Right?

Tracy Gregoire 17:31

Yeah, there's a lot of work to be done.

Lauren 17:33

Well thank you, Tracy for being here.

Tracy Gregoire 17:35

Yeah, thank you so much.

Lauren 17:47

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. Our theme music is little idea by Scott Holmes. Learn more about Learning Disabilities Awareness Month by following us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. And for more learning disabilities resources, visit lda.org