

MONTANA

# Choose Safe Places

## FOR EARLY CARE & EDUCATION PROGRAMS

A Resource for Local Health Departments and Sanitarians

This voluntary program helps early care and education programs choose locations that are safe from environmental hazards. The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS), Public Health and Safety Division offers free resources and assistance to help early care and education educators keep children safe from toxic chemicals.

### INSPECTORS OF EARLY CARE & EDUCATION PROGRAMS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE.

Many young children spend more time at early care and education programs than anywhere else outside of their home. That means it's especially important to make sure kids are cared for in a safe environment where they are not exposed to harmful chemicals.

As an inspector of early care and education facilities, you have many processes to ensure children are in a healthy and safe environment. This includes protecting them from harmful chemicals that might be in the air, water, soil, and dust. You already look for issues to ensure their health, safety, and wellbeing, but what about other environmental exposures that are not so obvious?

### CHEMICALS CAN POSE HIDDEN DANGERS.

Children and adults could be exposed to harmful chemicals from sources such as:

- Outdoor air pollution.
- Chemicals used indoors.
- Contaminated soil and groundwater.
- Polluted drinking water.



These chemicals can get into our bodies through breathing, eating, or drinking, or skin contact.

### CHILDREN ARE NOT JUST SMALL ADULTS

- Their brains are still developing.
- They drink more water and breathe more air for their size.
- They play on the ground and put their hands in their mouths.

Exposure to toxic chemicals can disrupt development, learning, and behavior. It can also contribute to diseases later in life. That's why DPHHS is working with the Montana Child Care Licensing Program and early childhood educators to give every child a safe place to learn, play, and grow.



### HOW DO EARLY CARE & EDUCATION PROGRAMS PROTECT CHILDREN FROM CHEMICALS?

Montana DPHHS, Early Childhood Services Division requires every licensed early care and education program to meet safety regulations. Some of these reduce chemical exposures by restricting pesticide application and use, and requiring regular drinking water testing. MT Choose Safe Places program builds on these protections. With support from federal, state, and local partners, MT Choose Safe Places is working with participating early care and education facilities to check for environmental contamination at new and existing locations. The purpose of this program is to help new early care and education centers ensure there are choosing a site free from environmental hazards and to assist current centers with assessments and technical assistance.

Visit <https://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/epidemiology/mehea/cspece>  
or email [ChooseSafePlacesMT@mt.gov](mailto:ChooseSafePlacesMT@mt.gov) to learn more.



**Choose Safe Places**  
for Early Care and Education  
Planning. Guidance. Protection.

## MONTANA CHOOSE SAFE PLACES HELPS NEW AND EXISTING PROGRAMS CHECK FOR HAZARDS.

Through this voluntary program, we can assist participating early care and education centers in assessing if their site is safe by considering the following:



### Former uses of the site.

- What was on this site in the past? Even if a site looks clean, it might not be free of chemical hazards. Past uses of the building might not be obvious. If the site ever housed a dry cleaner, factory, gas station, or dump site there could be contaminated soil and/or groundwater. Some pollution can vaporize and enter indoor air spaces through cracks in the foundation (called vapor intrusion).
- We can help centers find out how their building and nearby properties were used in the past. Lead exposure is another concern for buildings built before 1978. Testing for lead based paint is easy and inexpensive. We can help centers get a lead paint inspection.



### Nearby sites and activities.

- What is nearby? Contamination can come from a source nearby and move onto the early care site through the air, water, or soil. For example, is the early care site near a dry cleaner? Children could be exposed to chemicals in the air.
- We can help centers learn about nearby businesses that use chemicals such as dry cleaners, nail salons, gas stations, factories, and farms. We also look at how close the site is to hazardous cleanup sites (sometimes called Superfund sites).



### Naturally occurring contamination.

- Some contaminants occur naturally in air, water, and soil. Radon gas is a common natural hazard. It can seep from underground into indoor air.
- We can help educators learn how to test their buildings for radon.



### Access to safe drinking water.

- What is the source of drinking water? Children are especially vulnerable to chemical contaminants in drinking water because they consume more water for their body size than adults. Drinking water can become contaminated with lead, copper, or other chemicals as it travels through pipes to the faucet. While public water supplies are regulated and tested regularly, private well owners are responsible for testing. Wells can become contaminated by a variety of sources, activities or problems such as naturally occurring minerals, fertilizers, pesticides, manufacturing and industrial processes, and septic waste.
- We can help centers learn how to check for lead plumbing issues and how to have their private well tested.

## INSPECTORS CAN HELP BY OBSERVING AND REFERRING TO OUR PROGRAM.

When inspecting an early care and education program sometimes environmental hazards are not always apparent. Here are a few observations you can make to determine if there may be other environmental exposure hazards.

- Check the outdoor property to see if chemical drums, barrels, old vehicle parts, appliances, debris piles, machinery, or equipment are present.
- Check early care and education buildings for characteristics of former mill, factory, industrial facility, or anything indicating past commercial use.
- Check for nearby businesses such as nail salons, dry cleaners, auto paint shops, or print shops to determine if they are using hazardous materials that could migrate through the soil, air, or groundwater to the center.
- If you observe any conditions that could cause potential exposures to hazardous chemicals, you can refer the center to the Montana Choose Safe Places Program for further assistance and recommendations.

Visit <https://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/epidemiology/mehea/cspece>  
or email [ChooseSafePlacesMT@mt.gov](mailto:ChooseSafePlacesMT@mt.gov) to learn more.

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