Art Smart

As with so many everyday products, we can simply assume that any art material for sale (or in our homes or schools) is safe.

However, the reality is that paints, glues, glazes, markers, and other products can contain dangerous solvents, heavy metals, phthalates, parabens, formaldehyde, and more. These in turn can cause headaches, nausea, breathing problems, lung and kidney damage, and even cancer.

So how can we protect ourselves and those under our care? Well, it’s a vast topic, but here are some key steps to get you started.

How to Choose Safer Supplies

1) Identify the products you want to evaluate. These might be materials you’re considering buying, or ones you already have. Check your cleanup supplies too. (Note that your older products might contain now-disallowed ingredients and lack current warning language.)

2) Understand the two overall levels of art supply standards.

• Children’s standards. These are stronger to reflect children’s greater vulnerability to toxics. That’s because of their smaller size, developing body systems, lower ability with directions, and habit of putting things in their mouths. Products meeting these standards can also work for folks who are physically ill, limited in their ability to follow safety instructions — or just want something safer!

• Professional standards. These allow additional ingredients that professionals might want to use.

3) Consider the expected amount of use. The more a product is used, the higher the exposure risk. So it’s even more important that an artist, art teacher, or frequent user look for less-toxic products — or at least limit their exposure to more toxic items.

4) Read the product packaging to learn about its safety and risks.

• Check that the product says “Conforms to ASTM D-4236.” This label (and underlying evaluation process) is legally required on all art and craft materials sold in the U.S.

• Look for ACMI certification logos. They’re optional but handy.
  - ACMI’s “AP” (Approved Product) logo indicates that the product is assessed as nontoxic to both children and adults. (Older products might have a CP (Certified Product) or “nontoxic” seal instead.)
  - ACMI’s “CL” (Cautionary Label) logo indicates that the product contains potentially harmful ingredients and is not appropriate for children. (Older products might have a “Cautions Required” label instead.)
  - Avoid products marked “Danger,” “Caution,” “Warning,” or “Poison.” Or at least be sure that they’re worth the risk. Don’t allow children 12 or under to use them.

• Take seriously any hazard and usage statements, to understand and address the risks. They’re listed because of serious concerns.

5) Recognize the limits of labeling. For instance:

• A product with ACMI’s “nontoxic” AP rating isn’t necessarily completely free of toxics. It’s just assessed to contain none “in sufficient quantities to be toxic or injurious to humans” when used as labeled. Thus it might still cause harmful effects if used contrary to
Art, continued

labeling, at higher rates, or in combination with other exposures.

• There is debate about the AP on some products. For example, Healthy Child Healthy World (HCHW) disagrees with it on polymer clays. That’s because these are made of PVC softened with phthalates, which are linked to reproductive and organ damage. ACMI says the amounts are too small to cause harm; HCHW says users have cumulative exposures from multiple sources.

6) Find out more about a product’s ingredients and hazards. Start with its Materials Safety Data Sheet (MSDS), which you can get online or from the manufacturer.

7) Look for less-toxic options to more-toxic products. See the box (to right) for some ideas.

Following Safe Use Practices

1) Read and follow package directions, and share with other users. As needed, cover surfaces, and wear gloves, smocks, and goggles. Cover any cuts. Don’t transfer materials to other containers. (Or, if needed, transfer the label safety information too.)

2) Don’t eat, drink, or smoke when using art materials, to avoid ingestion. Don’t put your brush or pen in your mouth. Don’t use products on the skin or in food that aren’t labelled for it. Avoid inhaling solvent vapors or dusts from mixing and sanding dry paints and clays.

3) Use sufficient ventilation. But also be sure to avoid air disturbance when using powders.

4) Keep children away from risky processes. These include: spray painting, spraying fixatives, airbrushing, soldering, etching with acid, and certain steps in making ceramics. They also include activities with hazardous materials that produce vapors, fumes, suspended particles, spattering, or splashing.

5) If products have cautionary labels, keep them out of the reach of children.

6) If a product has a flammability warning, don’t store or use it near heat, sparks, or flame.

This is just starting information. For more important specifics on your products, see the resources below. In the next issue, I’ll talk about safe cleanup and disposal. Please feel free to email me any questions!


Toxic-Tinged Fog

Fog is such a lovely part of our local natural eco-cycles — gently rolling over our hills, beautifully filtering the light, pulling in fresh marine air, and bringing tender cool refreshment to the ground below.

But could there be toxics inside? UC Santa Cruz professor and environmental toxicologist Peter Weiss-Penzias wondered exactly that. He and other researchers (including Kenneth Coale of the Moss Landing Marine Laboratories) formed the FogNet project, and started sampling various California coastal spots.

Unfortunately, they found the neurotoxic mercury in the fog — at concentrations 19 times higher than in rain. The researchers consider these amounts still relatively low for direct human exposure. Coale says, “walking around in it and breathing it in doesn’t seem to be a health risk.”

However, Weiss-Penzias says that this hasn’t been previously reported in scientific literature, so this reveals another way that mercury moves in coastal environments.

The real concern is that this adds to the mercury already bioaccumulating up the food chain, concentrating exposures from a wide range of sources. This process leads to increasingly potent doses in humans, animals, and our food supply. Mercury is known to cause neurological and reproductive harm.

The researchers note that humans introduce mercury into our environment through coal burning, mining, and metals processing.

Coale suggests that “perhaps we should be considering limiting [mercury] emissions, particularly from coal-fired power plants — not just from a climate change perspective, but from an ecosystem health perspective as well.”


ABOUT STEP

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