

Testimony for the Field hearing on Toxic Chemicals and Children's Environmental Health

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By Lisa Ann Huguenin

I am very pleased to be here today to provide testimony on such an important topic. My name is Lisa Huguenin. I was born and raised in New Jersey and currently live with my family in Franklin Township. I graduated Rutgers University and UMDNJ with a PhD in Environmental Science and Human Exposure Assessment. I have done postdoctoral work at Princeton University and have worked at both the state and federal level in the area of worker health and safety as well as chemical exposure assessment. I have taught college level classes on environmental health and air pollution. However, I stand before you today not as a scientist, but more importantly as a mother, a concerned mother.

My story begins like a fairy tale. I met my husband while at Rutgers, and it was pretty much love at first sight. We married and moved into a lovely house along the Delaware and Raritan Canal. A few years later we welcomed our son, Harrison, a fun loving and beautiful boy with a fantastic smile. Harrison took his first steps just after he turned a year old and said his first word, bubble, at about 14 months of age. Although not a chatter box, he had about 40 or 50 words in his vocabulary, words that at about 18 months of age started to disappear. Gone was his ability to hold a crayon and scribble. Gone was his amazing ability to kick a soccer ball and jump. Gone was his ability to say mommy and daddy. It was heart wrenching. Our son was losing skills before our very eyes and we were helpless.

It took a little time, but Harrison was eventually diagnosed with autism at about 2 years of age and my world changed. My husband and I channeled our grief and despair and started doing everything we could to help our child. However, despite all our efforts, things continued to get even worse. My son was experiencing severe gastrointestinal issues and was constantly sick. He began to self limit his diet and eventually stopped eating, falling rapidly off the growth charts. After seeing many specialists we ended up here at UMDNJ's Pediatric Center for Rare and Complex Disease, where we got some answers. Not only did Harrison have autism, he also had many other problems including asthma, non IgE mediated food allergy and autoimmune issues. To this day he is unable to eat most food and gets most of his nutrition from a formula prescribed by his doctor.

Studies have shown that all of the conditions my son is suffering from are increasing in prevalence. Autism alone is now occurring in 1 out of every 94 children in NJ. The number of our friends and family who have children diagnosed with autism or some related developmental delay is frightening. Not only is the autism rate a number for me personally, it's a reality that I am able to see firsthand. Autism and asthma have had many studies conducted regarding their prevalence and also studies linking them to environmental exposures. Immune disorders and food allergy are being studied in this regard as well.

The emotions I was feeling at that time are impossible to put into words. I was a person knowledgeable about the environment and exposure and I was scared that something in my child's environment could have been causing this to happen. I worried about the soap I used to bathe my son, the shampoo I used for his cradle cap, and the sealants we put on his teeth. I worried about the fact that we recently resealed our deck and that Harrison chewed on a Thomas the Tank engine toy that eventually was recalled for lead. I worried because my father and my husband's father both worked in the chemical industry here in Newark and wondered if "take home" exposures that my husband and I may have been exposed to, when we were children, were somehow involved. I worried that maybe our parents exposures prior to our being born somehow affected us.

Because of my background, I was obviously extremely sensitive to human exposure and took great care and pride in making our home environmentally friendly and safe. Our well water is tested annually and we have whole house water and air filtration systems. I use environmentally friendly cleaners and paint with no VOCs

However, even though I make every effort to keep my house safe, I have no way of knowing if the house hold products that I use or the toys my son plays with are really "safe" because the chemicals that make them up are not rigorously tested and there is little or no information regarding them. And if I, a person "well educated" in the field of human exposure to chemicals cannot be confident that I am keeping my family safe than neither can the average person.

Most parents probably don't even realize that the products they are purchasing have not undergone safety testing. Standards are needed so consumers do not have to worry about the products they use. With TSCA in its current form I still have questions and worry about the safety of the products I buy and use every day. It amazes me how products, especially children's items, can make it to the store shelf only to be later recalled. TSCA reform is needed. There is no plausible reason for any chemical that goes into a product, especially a children's item, not to be thoroughly tested prior to its use. A perfect example of how lack of such a standard was detrimental to children's health was a toy I had purchased for my son, which was later recalled. This toy was an arts and crafts type toy. However, if the small beads were accidentally ingested the

coating metabolized into GHB, or gamma-hydroxy butyrate (date rape drug) with the possibility of causing coma and seizures (CPSC November 7, 2007, Release #08-074). This toy should have never been on the shelf. Because the reaction to the ingestion of the beads was rather fast, acute, this toy was able to be identified as a hazard and pulled from the shelves. However, how about toys and products that have chemicals in them that may have more long term effects such as carcinogens, neurotoxins and endocrine disruptors, effects that we may not see for years or possibly generations.

I will always wonder if something in the environment contributed to Harrison's various health and developmental disorders. It is time to stop "field testing" chemicals on one of our most vulnerable populations, children. Please let us provide safe items for our children so another parent does not have to have the same concerns. And more importantly another child's health and development is not compromised. Please enact the Safe Chemicals Act and reform TSCA. There is no longer time to waste. Every passing moment means that another child may have to suffer like Harrison.

Thank you.