

Before you paint your home ...

what every parent should know

by Steve Williams BA (Hons)

“Most people are completely unaware that the overwhelming majority of paints used to paint their homes, workplaces, hospitals and schools (both inside and out) are extremely toxic” said one influential study.

But, did you know there is now an alternative to the toxic paints we are currently putting on our walls? An alternative built on new clean, green technology.

When people hear the term natural or non toxic paint they are often unaware of the dangers of ‘conventional’ paint or they think back to the 1970’s when people looking for alternative solutions were using lime washes and traditional milk paints in the homes. Some of these finishes weren’t as long lasting or as durable as they could have been.

Technology has moved on in recent years and there is now a plethora of paints out there that are kinder to your health and the environment, and importantly outperform conventional toxic paints whilst looking stunningly beautiful.

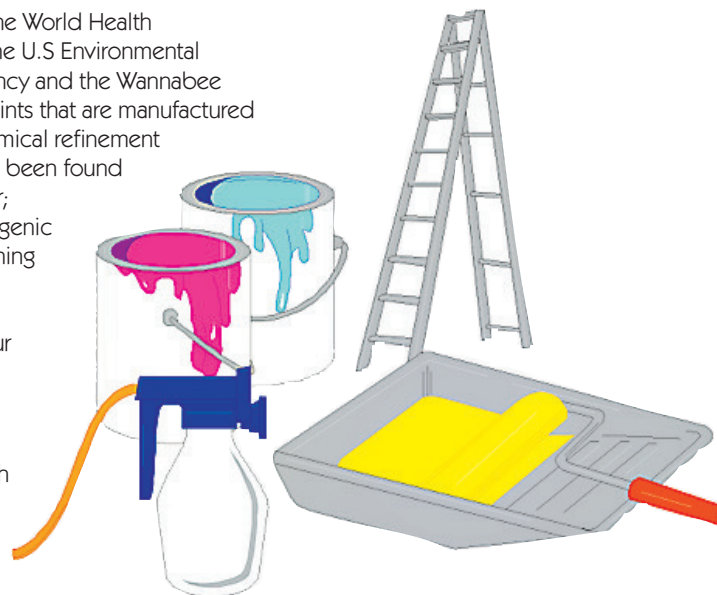
I use the term toxic paints for the vast majority of conventional paints on the market, those which contain Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC’s), a heady mix of solvents and chemicals which continue to give off fumes for three months and even up to five years after application.

According to the World Health Organisation, the U.S Environmental Protection Agency and the Wannabee Foundations paints that are manufactured using petrochemical refinement processes have been found to cause cancer; respiratory allergenic responses; birthing problems; and can lead to the poisoning of our waterways

A traditional oil based gloss, beautiful though the finish is, will release 50% of its content into the atmosphere contributing to the depletion of the ozone layer. This means that out of the four litre tin of gloss you have in your shed two litres of it will, in the form of fumes go directly into the atmosphere as greenhouse gas emissions.

Many people argue that acrylic water based paints (which also contain VOC’s) are not the solution either – especially when you look at the amount of square metres of walls and ceilings in a building that get painted.

From around the 1960’s onwards – just as we were beginning to understand the devastating affects of lead based paint and



asbestos products in the building industry, mass production of paints started. This was to satisfy the demand from not only the professional decorator but also the new DIY sector.

The paints were based on a petrochemical refinement process, a by product of the petrol we use in our cars and a similar process is still used today.

This is what gives conventional paint that paint smell, a volatile mix of solvents being released as paint dries contributing to respiratory reactions such as asthma.

Some studies have linked the chemicals found in paint to be harmful to unborn babies. Dr Judy Ford a researcher with

the Pregnancy and Lifestyle Study (PALS) recruited 585 couples who were planning families and followed them up after the baby was born or miscarriage occurred.

The results of the research found that the partners of men exposed to oil based paints were over three times more likely to miscarry compared to a control group.

When I was still using oil based paints as a painting contractor my wife suffered a miscarriage and we now wonder if paint was a contributing factor.

The good news for our families health and the planet is that there are companies in Queensland producing or importing paint that is free from VOC’s.

Their products range from completely natural – containing nothing but plant extracts, minerals, and natural oils, to synthetic paints developed by experts in paint technology producing vibrant colours which can be matched to any colour chart. Both these companies products have passed stringent Australian Standards tests and are as durable, cost effective, and colourful as their conventional counterparts.

A wonderful example is the Design Centre at the Gold Coast where the multi award winning sustainable building has been painted with zero VOC paints.

Some of the larger paint companies have recently developed ‘low odor’ ranges of paint, however for some reason they still include VOC’s in their tints (which are used



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to add colour to paint).

Some of their literature states the VOC levels not only fluctuate with sheen but their figures exclude tinting.

I would rather use a product with a guaranteed zero VOC content.

Unfortunately many of my colleagues - builders and painting contractors, refuse to recognise this leap in new technology and either refuse to use non toxic paints or worse are trying to convince their clients that the paints simply don't work.

This archaic attitude is putting their own health and that of their clients at significant risk for many years to come.

Painters have been affected for decades by what is know as 'painters syndrome', symptoms include occupational asthma, emphysema, dermatitis, and the usual suspects of headaches and nausea that many people are familiar with when exposed to paints in their homes or at work.

The solvents in oil based paints which are used to dissolve oils also happen to be fat soluble, meaning they can be absorbed through the skin and lungs.

An analogy can be drawn with disposable nappies and organic food. Ten years ago people were starting to realise the

damage these nappies were doing to the environment with some sources stating figures of over 300 years for them to break down. Now, we all know the benefits to the planet of using 'eco friendly' nappies, and disposable Eco nappies developed in the last few years are now available in supermarkets.

Also available is organic food which took ten years (and more!) of campaigning for them to stock, and which now the majority of the population recognise as an environmental positive with less chemicals in the form of herbicides and pesticides in our food and on our land.

Lets hope that the world will take less time than the next ten years to recognise the benefits of non-toxic paints and we will see a swell towards these products sold in paint shops and being used to add colour and life to our homes, workplaces, hospitals and schools.

Steve Williams owns The Natural Painting People, a Brisbane based 'eco friendly – non toxic' painting service. He completed his apprenticeship with the City and Guilds of London Institute, holds a site supervisory certificate from the Chartered Institute of Builders (UK), and holds a BA (Hons). He has worked for many years in the painting and decorating industry and is active in community and environmental awareness raising in Queensland. You can contact the Natural Painting People on 07 3269 9987 / 0405 458 594.

