

Let's talk about toxins

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [December 27, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Raising Elijah

by Sandra Steingraber
Da Capo

Read our [interview](#) with Steingraber.

It's time for the talk, says Sandra Steingraber. No, not the talk about the birds and the bees—although as a parent she knows about that one too. It's time, she says, for the talk about the pollutants that are infiltrating our lives and threatening the health of all of us, especially our children. The sex ed talk is actually much like the environmental ed talk, Steingraber says:

The two tales shared a common epistemological challenge: They are both counterintuitive. In the former case, you have to accept that your ordinary existence began with an extraordinary, unthinkable act. In the latter case, you have to accept that the collective acts of ordinary objects—cars, planes, dishwashers—are ushering in things extraordinary and unthinkable.

Among the extraordinary and unthinkable things one learns from *Raising Elijah* is that the pressed wood used to construct decks and playground equipment was, up until 2004, sealed with arsenic. "We can't yet prove how arsenic causes cancer and diabetes," writes Steingraber, "but we know that it's involved. And we know that when we test the soil under our kids' playgrounds, we're measuring arsenic at unacceptable levels." Children, who are especially susceptible to toxins, pick up the poison on their hands as it dissolves in the rain.

Steingraber also tells us about mercury and how the burning of coal creates methylmercury (40 percent of industrial mercury emissions come from the burning of coal) and puts mercury into water. A 2009 survey of U.S. streams found mercury in every single fish tested. Mercury in children is associated with loss of IQ, forgetfulness, attention deficits and loss of balance. Instead of stopping production of this poison at its source, we warn pregnant women and children to limit their fish intake (especially tuna). Given the otherwise outstanding benefits of fish as a food source, asks Steingraber, why are we burning coal at all?

Steingraber's first book, *Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood* (2001), combined a chronicle of pregnancy with reports on toxicology. She continues to write about science in a way that nonscientists can appreciate, interspersing scientific material with snapshots of her family and descriptions of her own efforts to eliminate toxins from the air her children breathe and the food they eat. Her work is on a par with David Quammen's marvelous book *The Song of the Dodo* (a mix of science writing and travel writing) or the medical detective stories of Oliver Sacks. Her chapter titles suggest the liveliness of her approach: "Pizza (and Ecosystem Services)" and "Homework (and Frontiers in Neurotoxicology)."

It's still a frightening read. I was tempted to put the book down several times but kept returning because of the author's passion not only for the health of children but for the intricacies of nature, the human body and family life.

Once you've heard "the talk" from Steingraber, you can begin to sort through the befuddling mess of chemical pollution with increased confidence and courage. You'll also know how to make some immediate changes in your lifestyle. Start gardening. Air dry your clothes (a clothes dryer sends 1,369 pounds of carbon dioxide a year into the atmosphere; drying clothes indoors in winter adds humidity to the air). Switch to a manual, non-gasoline-powered lawnmower and call the work aerobic exercise. Become an advocate for the environment and fight with Steingraber for measures that reduce the toxins in our food, air, water and playgrounds.