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Leading Education, Learning Disability Advocates:
ALERT ISSUED TO PARENTS LINKING TOXIC MERCURY AND LEARNING
DISABILITIES

WASHINGTON, DC – The Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA), the National Education Association (NEA), and The Arc of the United States today released a brochure that identifies mercury pollution as one of the greatest threats facing developing fetuses, infants and young children. This publication also shows parents how exposure to this potent neurotoxicant can adversely affect their child's learning potential.

Mercury air pollution poisons the nation's lakes, rivers and oceans. Coal-fired power plants are the nation's largest uncontrolled source of mercury. Mercury contamination in fish across the U.S. is so pervasive that health departments in 45 states and U.S. territories have issued food consumption advisories for freshwater and coastal fish. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and EPA specifically warn pregnant women, women of childbearing age, nursing mothers, and young children to limit their consumption of fish.

"Mercury can impair, damage, and even destroy functioning nerve tissue – much like lead," said Dr. Larry Silver, past president of the Learning Disabilities Association of America and clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical Center. "This brochure is designed to help parents identify the causes of mercury pollution and the dangers associated with this toxic chemical."

The brochure, designed for parents, explains where mercury comes from, provides food consumption advice, offers ways to help stop mercury air pollution at its source, and helps parents identify clues to learning disabilities. The brochure is available online at www.ldaamerica.org and www.thearc.org.

"At the National Education Association Health Information Network, we recognize that health issues affect a child's readiness to learn," said Jerald Newberry, Director of the NEA Health Information Network. "That's why it's important to give parents – a child's first teacher – access to information to help them make the right decisions from the very start. This brochure provides vital information to parents – especially pregnant women – on steps they can take to prevent exposure to mercury. It also offers simple tips to help parents identify and get assistance if their child has a learning problem."

A learning disability is neurobiologically based and affects the ability to read, write, speak, and/or compute math. It also often interferes with the ability to build social relationships. A

learning disability is a life long disorder that affects the manner in which individuals with normal or above average intelligence select, retain and express information. Incoming or outgoing information may become scrambled as it travels between the senses and the brain.

"As many as 10% of the school-aged population may have learning disabilities," said Jane Browning, Executive Director of LDA. "More than 50 percent of all students in public school special education programs have been diagnosed with dyslexia, auditory processing disorders, and other learning disabilities. Even though these are smart and sometimes even gifted students, they often fail in school and must struggle with their learning disabilities throughout their entire lives."

Mercury poses the greatest hazard to the developing fetus because it passes easily through the placenta and impairs the development of the brain and nervous system. When the fetus is exposed to mercury through maternal fish consumption, neurodevelopmental effects may unfold as the child grows. Infants may appear normal during the first few months of life, but may later display subtle effects.

Children and infants may be more sensitive to the effects of mercury because their nervous systems continue to develop until about age 16. Children also have higher mercury exposures than adults because a child eats more food relative to his or her body weight than an adult does. As a result, children have a higher risk for adverse health effects.

"We know that in extreme cases mercury can cause intellectual disabilities, such as mental retardation, which can require lifelong supports," said Leo Berggreen, President of The Arc of the United States, an organization working to include all children and adults with cognitive, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. "The Arc of the U.S. will do whatever we can to get this vital information into the hands of parents-to-be. We hope the EPA can be counted on to protect all developing babies from exposure to lifelong harm. In the meantime, we intend to get information to expectant parents so they can protect their children themselves."

"In just a few short days, the Bush administration will issue its final mercury rule," said Martha Keating, Senior Scientist with the Clean Air Task Force. "Let's hope that they finally got it right and that this rule will actually protect America's children. We watched with dismay the inordinate amount of influence the big energy companies have exerted so far. We hope EPA's final rule demonstrates they have put health and science above politics."

To see the brochure immediately, go to www.mercuryhurts.org