That Plastic Baby Bottle

What do you do when one arm of the government says everything is O.K. and another tells you to watch out? That is what is happening with bisphenol-A — a chemical used in many plastics and epoxy resins now found in baby bottles and liners for canned goods. The answer is a truism in every family rulebook — when in doubt, especially when it comes to children, err on the side of caution. That means it is a good idea to keep the young away from bisphenol-A, or BPA.

The Food and Drug Administration said last month that the small amounts of BPA that leach out of containers and into food or milk are not dangerous. Then this week, the National Toxicology Program, the federal agency for toxicological research, reported that their research shows “some concern” about the effects of BPA on the brain development and behavior of fetuses and young children.

A new study by the Yale School of Medicine is cause for even more concern. In tests on primates, researchers found that BPA “causes the loss of connections between brain cells” that could cause memory or learning problems and depression.

John Bucher, the associate director of the toxicology program, said there is still considerable uncertainty about whether the changes seen in animal studies are causing the same problems in humans. “But we have concluded that the possibility that BPA may affect human development cannot be dismissed.”

Scientists from the toxicology offer this advice:

¶ Watch for the numeral 7 on the bottom of plastic containers. That often means they contain BPA.

¶ Don’t microwave plastic food containers made with BPA. Better to use glass or porcelain.

¶ Watch out for canned foods for children.

¶ Search for baby bottles and other baby products that are BPA-free.

Some states are considering bills to restrict the use of BPA for the young, and Congress is assessing several possible remedies including a BPA ban in children’s products or a ban on BPA in packaging that touches food. The best effort, however, would be the Kid-Safe Chemicals Act. It would require that children’s products are proved safe before they are sold, not — as with BPA — the other way around.