

Secondhand Smoke:

What is it, and why is it so dangerous for children?

For Child Care Providers

What is it?

Secondhand smoke is the combination of the smoke released from the burning end of a cigarette, cigar or pipe, and the smoke exhaled by the person who is smoking.

Why is it so dangerous?

Secondhand smoke contains more than 4,000 chemicals. These chemicals include arsenic, formaldehyde, carbon monoxide and benzene - just to name a few. Overall, there are more than 60 chemicals found in secondhand smoke that are known to cause cancer. And according to the 2006 Surgeon General's report, there is no such thing as a safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. Breathing even a small amount of secondhand smoke is harmful to your health.

Why is it particularly dangerous for children?

Because their bodies are still growing and developing, inhaling the chemicals in secondhand smoke can be especially dangerous for children. Breathing secondhand smoke slows a child's lung growth and greatly increases a child's likelihood of developing ear infections, more severe and frequent asthma attacks, allergies, bronchitis and pneumonia. And infants exposed to secondhand smoke are more likely to die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Where are children breathing secondhand smoke?

Children are most often exposed to secondhand smoke inside their own homes and cars. No matter where children are breathing smoke, it's always dangerous to their health, and children who live with parents or others who smoke indoors are constantly being exposed to dangerous chemicals. According to the Surgeon General's Report, almost three million children under the age of six in the United States breathe secondhand smoke at home at least four days per week.

How can you help?

As a child care provider, you have daily contact with these children and their parents. By choosing to communicate helpful and practical information, you can be a spark that creates change and helps parents take a step toward improving their child's health.

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Be child-focused.

The health of a child is the number one motivating message you can share with parents. Even when discussing a parent's smoking habits, center everything in your conversation on the child. Make sure parents know that your concern is for their son or daughter's health is your motivation for speaking with them.

Be confident.

Just in case you're thinking that the subject of secondhand smoke and children is the last thing a parent wants to hear from you, take a look at the following facts:

- Only 19.4% of New Hampshire adults are smokers.
- 58% of New Hampshire smokers try to quit every year.
- Smokers who understand just how harmful secondhand smoke is are likely to take the steps necessary to protect their children.
- Smokers who successfully develop the habit of smoking outside have been shown to be more likely to quit smoking.

Be a conversation starter.

Asking parents questions is often a great way to approach the subject of secondhand smoke. When asking questions, be sure to use language that gets to the heart of the issue without placing blame.

Be positive.

Make sure your message to parents is caring, not attacking. Parents love their children more than anything in the world and would probably do just about anything to keep them safe and healthy. Let them know you understand that. Then focus on the good news that you can help them create a healthier place for their children.

Be sensitive.

Realizing just how dangerous secondhand smoke is to children can also make parents realize that, through their smoking, they've unwittingly harmed their children. Obviously, this can be troubling for parents to hear. Always approach this topic gently and remember to continually center your conversation on a shared concern for the wellbeing of the child.

Be understanding.

Quitting smoking isn't an easy thing to do. And for many parents, neither is stepping outside to smoke. Don't be afraid to acknowledge that. Remind parents your not asking them to quit smoking; you are encouraging them to step outside the home and car when they smoke.

**Resources for Child Care Providers:
Legacy Head Start Tobacco Cessation Initiative**
www.legacyforhealth.org/4070.aspx