

(Editor's note: We take great pride in presenting op-ed pieces written by members of the first graduating class of RNs from the Bachelor of Science Nursing program run by Algonquin College and the University of Ottawa - thus the column's name, "First Class Nursing." The columns will explore health and lifestyle opportunities from a fresh perspective. We hope you enjoy them!)



Smoking in Cars With Children: Protecting Children and Youth from Second-Hand Smoke

**Special to the Observer by Melissa
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The idea of a caregiver giving their child a single cigarette to smoke would shock and appal a majority of the public. The idea of a caregiver bringing their child to a smoky bar is also shocking and appalling. Yet for some reason exposing a child to second-hand smoke while they are in a car does not generate the same response. However, smoking in a vehicle with a child should shock and appal us. We should have the same response as we do with the caregiver giving a child a cigarette. In fact, we should be more outraged. Second-hand smoke is 23 times more toxic in a car than in a house due to the fact that the toxins are more concentrated in a smaller enclosed space. In fact, for every hour a child is exposed to second-hand smoke in a car, it is the equivalent to the child smoking an entire pack of cigarettes. Within 5 minutes of having a single cigarette lit, the concentrations are similar to those in a smoky bar. Many parents falsely assume that if they smoke with the windows down, then the amount of toxins are reduced. Smoking with the windows open does not significantly reduce the toxins in the car unless tornado-like winds are generated.

In December 2007, a bill was introduced to amend the Smoke-Free Ontario Act to ban smoking in cars carrying children aged 16 and under, a move supported by many groups including the Ontario Coalition for Action on Tobacco, Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada, the Lung Association, and our local Renfrew County Council. Similar bans are in place in California, Australia, and Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

Children are even more susceptible to the effects of second-hand smoke than adults for a number of reasons. Firstly, they breathe more air relative to their body weight. This means that they absorb more toxins from exposure. Secondly, children's immune systems are less developed than adults. Finally, children have less control over their physical environments compared to adults which means they are less able to remove themselves from exposure.

The exposure of children to second-hand smoke negatively impacts their health in many ways. They have higher rates of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), a syndrome where an apparently healthy infant dies suddenly and unexpectedly, respiratory illnesses (bronchitis and pneumonia for example), asthma, and ear infections. Adults who were exposed to second-hand smoke as children have higher rates of heart disease and cancer. Second-hand smoke is considered a group A carcinogen which means it causes cancer in humans. In fact, one out of every five instances of lung cancer in non-smokers could be contributed to childhood second-hand smoke exposure. If that isn't scary enough, there is also emerging evidence that exposure to second-hand smoke impacts a child's attention, behaviour, and ability to reason and understand. It is apparent that second-hand smoke has a negative impact on health both short term and long term.

The Smoke-Free Ontario Act was designed to protect the health of Ontarians by banning smoking in enclosed workplaces and enclosed public places. As there are fewer places available to smoke, parents and caregivers may begin to view their homes and vehicles as among the few places where they are able to smoke. In theory this could increase the amount of second-hand smoke children are exposed to.

As of now, there is nothing in place to protect the children from the exposure of second-hand smoke in vehicles. Children are a vulnerable population who are generally unable to speak for themselves and have a limited ability to control their environment. By supporting Bill 11, the Protecting Children and Youth from Second-Hand Smoke in Automobiles Act, we are making an immeasurable investment into the health and wellbeing of Ontario's youth.