

Children in cars at heart of new secondhand smoke law

By Karen Licavoli-Farnkopf

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Until now, while safety belts and car seat laws have been enforced for years, no mechanism has been in place to protect children from the permeating and potentially lethal effects of secondhand smoke in vehicles — where levels of toxic air can be up to ten times greater than the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency considers hazardous. And we're not talking about just a few kids being impacted here. In 2006, over a quarter of California youth — over 2 million — reported having been exposed to secondhand smoke while riding in cars. Their health has, in essence, been held hostage inside motor vehicles.

With approximately 165,000 young people in San Mateo County, parents, caregivers, educators and health advocates — and anyone else who cares about our youth — should be thrilled California continues to lead in its effort to combat Big Tobacco via the banning of smoking in a vehicle while a youth younger than the age of 18 is present. In fact, we are pleased that it is the most comprehensive of its kind in the nation.

As a co-chair for the San Mateo County Tobacco Education Coalition (SMC TEC) — a community-based group consisting of more than 20 voluntary organizations and community groups working to improve and protect the health of San Mateo County residents through minimizing the use of tobacco products — I can attest to the importance of this new law. The facts are clear: Children exposed to secondhand smoke are at an increased risk for acute respiratory infections, ear problems and developing asthma.

In the end, enforcement and compliance will be the integral keys to the success of this law. Over the years, that combination has worked successfully reducing smoking in bars, restaurants, parks, beaches, indoor work areas and more. As a coalition, we're also in the process locally of working to increase merchant tobacco licensing fees to help fund critical enforcement and education efforts to reduce youth access to tobacco.

A recent story on this issue mocked the new law as "nanny government." Nannies watch over children and protect them from harm, and in this case it is government's job to protect innocent children from the dangers of secondhand smoke. Unfortunately, smokers are addicted to tobacco — and that is why some need outside influence to help them control their smoking around children and others.

We also hope for more: that the new law will inspire parents and caregivers to quit smoking altogether, for their own health as well as their children's. Breathe California offers free cessation services for San Mateo residents. Those interested may contact 650/994-5868.

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