

Inhalant abuse can be truly deadly

by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

What do glue, gasoline, paint thinner, nail polish remover, lighter fluid and some aerosol products have in common? These are all substances that give off fumes or vapors that cause a drunken feeling when they're breathed in. And — they can be deadly.

OPINION

Sniffing these substances has been known to cause permanent lung disorders, irreversible brain damage, and sometime even heart failure and instant death.

Inhalants can cause confusion and mood swings, even hallucinations. Many serious abusers have home and family problems, and children often end up dropping out of school.

Studies apparently say one of the most important factors in inhalant abuse is "peer pressure." The desire to belong is overwhelming to many children, especially those who already have low self-esteem and tend to seek escape rather than face reality.

State researchers say the use of "Inhalants" as a way to get high has increased dramatically in Alaska in the last five years. In fact, inhalants have become the substance of choice among users as young as eight years old, mainly because they are cheap, readily available and produce a quick, intense "high."

This news is scary to me — as a parent myself, and as a legislator representing a part of rural Alaska which is experiencing much of the increase in inhalant abuse.

News of this problem really grabbed my attention since I've been a member of the Governor's Interim Commission on Children and Youth. Sniffing inhalants, especially gasoline, has become a real problem in rural Alaska. And somehow this abuse problem seems to have slipped through the cracks.

No longer. Tanana Chief's Conference now has an inhalant abuse subcommittee, the Alaska Native Health Board has become involved and legislators are looking at current laws and substance abuse programs.

At first I looked at making inhalants illegal. However, because so many common household items can be abused, it would be impossible to outlaw their use.

As another approach, legislation was recently introduced which would classify children who have been sniffing hazardous substances as "children in need of aid" for purposes of treatment.

I'm glad the Legislature is concerned about this problem and is taking a serious look at ways to help combat it. We need everyone's help on this issue. However, classifying young abusers as "children in need of aid"

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means the state could in some situations remove children from their own homes. This could be controversial, especially in rural Alaska, and needs a lot of thought before final action is taken.

In talking to my constituents, I've found that most parents either don't know inhalant abuse is a problem, or are just becoming aware of its extent. That's why I'm looking at another approach in dealing with the problem of inhalant abuse and am introducing this week a resolution which asks the state

and the school districts to work with local communities in educating the public on this problem.

Parents, teachers and the children themselves need to know what kinds of products can be abused, what the adverse effects of inhalants can be and their warning signs and where they can go for help.

For example, how many parents know that typewriter correcting fluid or the non-stick cooking oil you spray on your frying pan can get your children high?

How many know that people who continue using inhalants build up tolerance so they need more and more of the substance to get the same effect?

And how many parents know what signs to look for in their children to alert them to possible substance abuse?

My guess is that not many parents, nor teachers, nor children know these things. And before we do anything else, I believe we must educate the entire public. Our children are too important to let them "sniff" their lives away. }