

Schools Get a Failing Grade on Skin Cancer Smarts

If experts were to issue report cards on the welfare of our children, American schools would receive a big "F" in skin cancer protection and education.

Recent studies found that American schools are failing miserably when it comes to protecting students from the ultraviolet rays that cause skin cancer. It gets worse: not only are these schools failing to help protect our kids, they actually discourage those students who attempt to protect themselves.

In a study conducted a couple of years ago, schools across the United States were reviewed to see what steps were being taken to encourage students to take precautions in the sun. The somber truth is that most schools were doing absolutely nothing. A meager three percent of schools had any guidelines at all to share with their students. Suggested guidelines included outdoor activities planned during off-peak sunlight hours and offering alternate indoor activities on high UV index days. Those children taking part in outdoor activities should have been encouraged to wear hats, sleeves, and sunscreen during the peak sunlight hours of 11 am to 3 pm. Again, only a little more than three percent of schools made the grade with these protective guidelines.

Here's another frightening statistic: more than 66 percent of schools did not allow teachers to apply sunscreen on students, unless the request was accompanied by a doctor's prescription. On top of that, less than five percent of schools are prepared to provide sunscreen to students who request it. How's that for teaching kids the wrong lesson? Most schools didn't allow kids to wear hats at school, for fear of students' spreading head lice by sharing hats. Sunglasses were also banned at most schools. Worse of all, less than 20 percent of outdoor school areas provide shaded areas for kids to escape from the sun.

It seems that school principals are in need of some lessons in sun safety. At the time of this research study, nearly 70 percent of school principals felt that it was a waste of time and resources to be concerned about the outdoor safety of their students. Some claim to have had no idea that students spending a lot of time in the direct sunlight on the school playground could face an increased risk of skin cancer. A full 84 percent of principals, however, admitted that their students often spent a lot of time outdoors during peak sunlight hours.

If schools are really going to provide the protection and education that our children need and deserve, they're going to have to make some changes. The report suggested the following improvements:

- * Planting trees can beautify the schoolyard and provide necessary shade for students.
- * Structures should be built to create shaded areas, and wider overhangs could be added to all school buildings. This alone would offer protection for many students.
- * Schools should make every effort to schedule as many outdoor activities as possible before or after peak sunlight hours.
- * The use of sunscreen should not only be permitted, but also required, for all students. A doctor's note should never be a prerequisite for teachers applying sunscreen.
- * Students must be allowed to wear sunglasses and hats while spending time outdoors.
- * The health class curriculum should include lessons on skin cancer, to explain the causes, effects and prevention of this potentially deadly disease.

It's not always easy to encourage children and teenagers to make smart choices, particularly when the negative effects won't come into play until decades later. Even so, these are lessons that must be taught, and school is the sensible place to start. As parents, teachers and principals, we all share a responsibility and a duty to keep our kids well educated and safe.

Schools that discourage kids from making healthy choices are definitely failing. It seems that it's time to educate our teachers and principals, and not just our students.