American Latex Allergy Association

JS Online Article: "Balloons Busted"

Some schools ban those made of latex because of choking hazard

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Waukesha - Spurred by concerns about the choking dangers of latex balloons among young children, some of the city?s public elementary schools have banned them from their buildings.

?We just felt it was something that was easy to do for the safety of the children,? said Hadfield Elementary School Principal Sue Powers, who notified parents of the new school rule in her February newsletter.

Powers said the decision was made by the school?s site council, which includes teachers and parents. She also said the new rule probably will affect decorations for special events more than anything else.

?Decorating for dances, parties for birthdays ? we?re not using them anymore,? Powers said.

Other schools in the Waukesha School District also have discontinued using latex balloons in their schools or, as at Meadowbrook Elementary School, are exploring the possibility of a ban.

Powers and other elementary school principals took action after viewing a videotape presented to them last year by a reporter for WITI-TV (Channel 6) who had done a report about the dangers balloons pose to children. That report highlighted how children could choke and possibly die if they inhaled parts of broken latex balloons.

A tape of the television station?s report, broadcast Feb. 29 and Sept. 10, was shown to principals and teachers in Milwaukee, Racine, Wauwatosa and Waukesha.

?We were overwhelmed by how seriously some of the school districts took the story we aired,? said Bob Segall, the reporter who worked on the story.

Official cites TV report
?That whole video brought an awareness,? said Kathy Nelson, principal at Lowell Elementary School, where latex balloons will no longer be used in the few classroom settings where they had been used before.

Four children under 12 died after choking on balloons in 1999 and far more were injured in such cases, according to the National Safe Kids Campaign. That year, two children also died from toy-related suffocation, although the campaign did not determine whether they involved balloons.

But Bridget Clementi, a coordinator for the Southeast Wisconsin Safe Kids Coalition, the campaign?s local affiliate, said she didn?t know of any schools that had banned latex balloons from their buildings as a result.

?That?s wonderful,? Clementi said when she heard that some Waukesha schools were not allowing latex balloons. ?People don?t understand that truly is a choking hazard.?

The Safe Kids Coalition does not allow latex balloons to be used in any of the events it hosts, she said.

Allergic Reactions A Concern

Several Wisconsin school districts, including Hartland-Lakeside in Waukesha County, have banned balloons as part of a larger ban against latex, said Ken Cole, executive director of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards.

But those have more to do with accommodating student and staff latex allergies than worries about suffocation, he said.

?Why have them around?? Cole said of balloons. ?We don?t need them for anything we?re doing in school.?

In fact, Waukesha principals said they doubt students or parents will miss them at all.

In her newsletter to parents, Powers pointed out that Mylar balloons are still OK.

At a recent Drug Abuse Resistance Education program graduation, crepe-paper flowers were used for decoration, Power said, ?and they were beautiful.?

Nelson said her school already was out of the habit of using balloons for special events after encountering difficulties when they got caught in the blades of gymnasium fans.

?I don?t think it was a major issue here,? she said of the decision to ban the latex balloons throughout the school.

Summit View Elementary School Principal Dennis Bissett agreed, saying parents and staff decided together they should keep latex balloons out of the school.

?It really is a risky thing,? Bissett said. ?And when you can eliminate one more thing that can cause an injury to a child, that?s an easy thing.?

Waukesha Superintendent David Schmidt said he supported the local schools? decision on whether to allow latex balloons but said no districtwide policy is in the works.

?We have a lot of things in our schools that we allow or don?t allow, and it?s based on the culture of the school,? he said.

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