Get the lead out

November 17, 2008

Last spring, the Lead Poisoning Prevention Act—requiring manufacturers to attach a label to any product used by children that has more than a trace amount of lead—passed the Illinois House with near unanimity, 105-1. The Senate? That chamber never got around to bringing the bill to a vote. It remained stuck in the Rules Committee.

Until Wednesday. On the first day of the November veto session, the bill was voted out of both the Senate's Rules Committee and its Public Health Committee. It's expected to come to a floor vote before the veto session concludes this week.

Senators, pass this bill.

Here's why: No level of lead exposure is safe for children. And consequences of lead exposure, according to recent research, may be worse than previously thought. We've long known that kids exposed to high levels of lead can suffer slowdowns in brain function, mental retardation, kidney failure and even death.

Now researchers at the University of Cincinnati suggest that it also can prompt a lifetime of violence. How? Lead damages brain function that regulates aggression and self-control. The researchers concluded that kids with high lead levels are more likely to commit crimes later in life. The converse is also true, according to Amherst College economist Jessica Wolpaw Reyes: The drop in lead exposure over the last three decades could be a factor in lower rates of violent crime.

So labeling toys that contain lead—thus allowing parents to keep those toys away from young children, who tend to gnaw on anything and everything—seems like an obvious way to protect kids.

But the measure is likely to be fought tooth and nail by the toy industry—the manufacturers, merchants and industry trade folks who worked so hard to derail it in the spring. They argued that the bill—covering everything from toys to clothes to jewelry to furniture—was too broad. Parents, they said, would suffer from information overload.

In fact, parents would welcome the opportunity to make more informed purchases.

Nor will the bill freeze product sales—at least not of the products that are lead-free.

Lawmakers need to ignore the opposition lobbyists and do right by kids. Pass the Lead Poisoning Prevention Act. It's a no-brainer.

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