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Senate panel hears dangers of lead in children's products

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MONTPELIER -- Katy Farber thought she was fairly vigilant about tracking products dangerous to her children. So she was alarmed to learn that the bibs she draped around her two young daughters necks and wiped their faces with had been recalled because of the lead in them.

"It was very upsetting," the Middlesex teacher said. "I wondered how many parents missed this as I did at first."

Farber, who runs a blog called "Non-Toxic Kids," testified Thursday before the Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee as it considers a law prohibiting lead in children's products.

The proposed legislation seeks to limit children's exposure to lead in such items as toys, jewelry, furniture and packaging. It would also prohibit the sale of lead in other products, including automobile wheel weights, cosmetics, tattoos and plumbing fixtures. Committee Chairwoman Virginia Lyons, D-Chittenden, said the panel will study the issue over the next couple of weeks.

The danger of lead to children should not be underestimated, two physicians told the committee. It increases their risk of reading problems, failure in school and delinquency, and even small amounts of lead decrease a child's IQ, said Dr. Bruce Lanphear, pediatrics professor at Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

Though lead has been banned from many products such as house paint and gasoline, which reduced exposure significantly, the dangers continue and are preventable, he said.

"There's no known safe level of lead for children," said Dr. Dana Best of the George Washington School of Medicine.

Farber's frustration with not knowing which products contain lead struck a chord with the committee.

"Where can I go to find out what has lead in it?" asked Sen. Diane Snelling, R-Chittenden.

"There's no place to go," Assistant Attorney General Elliot Burg responded.

Sen. Richard McCormack, D-Windsor, said his young granddaughters love inexpensive trinkets. "I can thrill them for about three or four bucks," he said. "Should I assume that's dangerous?"

"I probably would," Burg said.

The state filed a lawsuit against the Canadian company Ganz Inc. in December after finding the company's lead-laden children's jewelry in 300 Vermont stores. "None of that information was out there in the public domain," Burg said.

Burg said that by prohibiting lead in these items, Vermont would make stores, suppliers and manufacturers responsible for providing lead-free products.

Nancy Cowles, executive director of Kids in Danger, a Chicago-based organization that focuses

on children's safety, said 109 children's products were recalled last year for lead contamination, but she warned the committee that product recalls don't solve the problem, as Farber discovered.

"Too few people who have the item learn of the recall and even if they do, by that time their children have already been exposed to the hazard," Cowles said.

Those who sell the products don't necessarily oppose the legislation, but they have concerns about some of the details. The bill defines children's jewelry as that priced at less than \$20.

Tasha Wallis, executive director of the Vermont Retail Association, pulled out a catalog from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, featuring adult earrings on sale for \$17.99. The under \$20 price range casts too wide a net, she said. "We just couldn't manage that."

She suggested instead that legislators look at other states' definitions of children's products that characterize them as items marketed to those younger than 7, sized for a child or sold in children's stores.

Dan Adsit, vehicle recycling manager for Ford Motor Co., asked the committee to delay the ban on lead wheel weights from 2010 to 2011. The wheel weights in most new cars Ford produces no longer contain lead because of environmental concerns, but the company's larger trucks -- F-450s and F-550s -- require a heftier wheel weight and the company is still working on an alternative to lead, he said.

CHILDREN'S SAFETY For information on product recalls and safety advice:

CONSUMER PRODUCT SAFETY COMMISSION: www.cpsc.gov

CONSUMER WATCHDOG: www.healthytoys.org

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