

# The Quorum

## March 2023: Protecting Youth from Fentanyl

It's been well documented that our nation has found itself gripped in a fentanyl crisis. In 2021 California had over 5700 fentanyl related deaths. Less than 10 years prior, the number of fentanyl deaths in 2012 were 82. While this crisis has hit adults the hardest, children have not been immune. During 2021 about 240 of those deaths in California were in people 19 years old or younger. Fentanyl was responsible for 1 in 5 deaths for youth ages 15-24 that year. And of course, these figures don't account for all of the young people who did not die but have struggled with substance abuse and the range of social and health impacts associated with it.

The ways in which young people are exposed to fentanyl vary. For young children, it is almost always accidental. Recently a tragic story out of Florida detailed a toddler who fatally ingested fentanyl that was left in an Airbnb by a previous guest. Many teens have been exposed after being directed via social media to websites where they either directly purchase fentanyl or where they purchase other drugs such as cocaine or pills, which turn out to be unknowingly laced with fentanyl.

As our patients, families, and communities navigate this issue, there are a couple of important bills which have been introduced to help address the problem here in California, specifically as it relates to children.

SB 10 is a school focused bill which has been introduced by Senator Dave Cortese. Among other things, this bill would mandate that schools build in an opioid prevention and treatment strategy into their school safety plans, provide for opioid antagonist training for school staff, set up a State Working Group on Fentanyl Overdose/Abuse Protection, and distribute safety information to families about opioid use.

Senator Nancy Skinner has introduced SB 287, which focuses on holding social media companies accountable for the targeted sale of fentanyl products to young people. This bill also provides protections against the targeting of youth for illegal firearm sales and other harmful mental health related media messages. These companies will be banned from the use of algorithms that lead to the sale of fentanyl and face a fee of \$250,000 per violation.

AB 219 from Assemblymember Joe Patterson would ensure that every public school has doses of Narcan available on campus. Many school districts have already begun taking this step on the local level. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) announced this past fall that they will make Narcan available at every K-12 school, and recently clarified that they will also allow youth to carry the important opioid antagonist themselves.

As these critical policy changes maneuver through the legislative and implementation process, they will need the voice of pediatricians. We will continue to seek opportunities to make our voices heard on behalf of the health and safety of children.

References:

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