

Knesset panel endorses minimizing school radiation exposure

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Members suggest setting up cellphone-free zones in schools, which would be observed by teachers as well as youngsters.

Although it has not yet been clearly proven that exposure to electromagnetic radiation (EMR) poses a danger to schoolchildren's health, a joint session of the Knesset Interior and Labor, Social Affairs and Health committees declared on Monday that a program should be launched to minimize such exposure as a cautionary measure.

The joint session, chaired by Hadash MK Dov Henin, endorsed the recommendations made recently by an interministerial committee of experts headed by Tel Aviv University Prof. Siegal Sadetzki, who conducts research at the Gertner Institute's cancer and radiation epidemiology unit.

Sadetzki, who represented the Health Ministry and is a leading expert on environmental dangers and health, headed the effort to produce recommendations, along with colleagues from the Environmental Protection and Education ministries and the Israel Electric Corporation.

Regarding cellular phones, the committee urged instituting an educational program to reduce pupils' use of the devices by teaching them the potential dangers.

According to the experts, SMS messages are preferable to making calls, and using earbuds is better than holding the phone close to the head. In addition, cellphones should not be used while driving. The devices also have a negative effect on sleep, Sadetzki said.

The program will also include monitoring of this educational initiative via pupil surveys and an interventional program.

In addition, the team recommended installing land-line phones in schools so children can contact their parents (and others) without using cellphones.

The members suggested setting up cellphone-free zones in schools, which would be observed by teachers as well as youngsters.

They also urged the Transportation Ministry to prohibit inexperienced young drivers' use of cellphones in moving vehicles – not just without hands-free headsets or speaker

systems, but speaking on cellphones at all. This has already been adopted in 21 US states.

The widespread habit, which does not involve dangerous EMR exposure, has been shown in numerous studies to reduce drivers' concentration and their ability to keep their eyes on the road. The team suggested that drivers of buses and taxis with passengers should not be allowed to use cellphones at all – a move that has been adopted in 17 US states.

Henin, who chaired the session, said that “the fact that EMR cannot be seen does not mean that it is not dangerous.

We must ensure that children [and staffers] who spend many hours a day in educational institutions are safe.”

Concern about exposure to EMR is just part of the “Healthy Educational Environment” view expressed in a bill he presented to the previous Knesset along with additional MKs, he added.