

School Wi-Fi Making Kids Sick, Say Ontario Parents

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Some parents in Simcoe County, 100 km north of Toronto, say the wireless Internet at 12 schools in the district is making their children sick. (Photos.com)

With the new school year about to begin, a school board in central Ontario says it will continue providing wireless Internet access in classrooms despite some parents' concerns that radiation from Wi-Fi transmissions is negatively affecting their kids' health.

A group of parents in Simcoe County formed the Simcoe County Safe School Committee earlier this year after they became suspicious that the headaches, rashes, dizziness, insomnia, and other symptoms their children were experiencing were caused by wireless transmitters in 12 schools across the board.

The parents said the symptoms abated on the weekends when their children were home but returned as soon as the school week started.

"Parents have been in doctors' offices trying to figure out why the kids have headaches but their eyes are fine. Parents have been in the cardiologist's offices trying to figure out why their kids are having these rapid, racing heart-rates only at school, passing-out at school. All this stuff has been going on," says organizer Rodney Palmer.

Palmer says his two children aged 9 and 5, who attend Mountain View Elementary School in Collingwood, experienced symptoms including fatigue, facial flushing, and moodiness that he blames on the Wi-Fi.

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He says that even though "it breaks my heart," he's not sending his kids back to Mountain View this fall.

"I think I'm blocking out the first day of school from my emotions at this point."

John Dance, the Simcoe District School Board's superintendant of education, says that after the board listened to presentations from the parents, studied the research, and consulted with an expert from the University of Toronto, the decision was made to stay with wireless.

While the parents say there's no proof that long-term exposure to electromagnetic fields from wireless transmitters is safe for young children, Dance says there's no evidence that Wi-Fi is causing the symptoms the children are complaining of.

"We'd never had any evidence in the first place that this was attributed to wireless," he says.

"I know that some scientists say wireless is not safe, but for every scientist so far that has said it's not safe there are 25 that say, 'yes, it is.' And they're not all in the industry."

There could be other reasons that the children are having these symptoms, he says, noting that Wi-Fi was installed in the schools four years ago, yet the parents' complaints only began in December 2009.

"They say that it only happened after wireless started. At the time they didn't even know when wireless was installed in the schools."

The school board complies with Health Canada's guidelines on wireless Internet—guidelines that came into question at parliamentary hearings into cellular telephones in April at which several scientists from around the world testified.

Prof. Olle Johansson of the Royal Institute of Technology in Sweden told the committee that safety standards for exposure to microwave radiation in Canada and other countries are "inadequate" and need to be updated. Health Canada's "Safety Code 6" on microwaves was written in the 1970s.

"It's obvious that your safety code is completely out of date and obsolete and that goes for any form of international or national standard body throughout the world," Johansson said.

While both cell phones and Wi-Fi operate on microwaves, critics note that exposure to radiation from wireless transmitters—especially in the case of children in school—usually occurs for hours at a time, not minutes as is the case with cell phones.

In an open letter to schools and parents last year, Magda Havas, an associate professor at Trent University and an expert on the health effects of electromagnetic radiation, warned that "it is irresponsible to introduce Wi-Fi microwave radiation into a school environment where young children and school employees spend hours each day."

She added that children are more sensitive to environmental contaminants, including microwave radiation.

Palmer points to a Royal Society of Canada study commissioned by Health Canada which found that microwaves at lower levels than the agency's own guidelines cause biological changes in cells and cross the blood-brain barrier, with children being more vulnerable.

Although parents with the Safe School Committee offered to pay to have wired Internet installed, Dance says with children moving from room to room, that would prove inconvenient.

"With wireless, we can have a laptop or a group of six laptops go where the students are, or we could have cart go in with 25 laptops. We can't have wires to connect all of these."

Some school board trustees have said the parents should lobby Health Canada if they want changes.

"Health Canada didn't install the Wi-Fi system, the school board did," counters Palmer.

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