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Allowing leaf burning cheapens kids' lives

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It is the rarest of times, a 70-degree November Saturday, and the neighborhood kids are riding bikes and shooting baskets. So what's Dallas Stallion, who is five, doing inside with Mom and Nintendo? Who put 12-year-old Tim Schmitt on home confinement?

The answer is this: Near their Chillicothe homes, somebody is burning leaves. The smoke that fills healthy heads with thoughts of fall fading into winter fills the bronchial tubes of these two boys with something more menacing.

"He has trouble breathing," says Tim's mother, Martha Schmitt. Here's what else Tim has: asthma medication to take daily, a steroid inhaler to help prevent attacks, a device his mother calls a "rescue inhaler" (the name says it all) and a machine that forces medicated air into his lungs. In the summer and winter, "we forget that he has asthma. He's a normal little boy," says Mom. She thinks he could be a normal boy in the fall and spring too, if not for the smoke in Chillicothe's air.

"It's almost like a smothering sensation" is what Dallas' mother, Jennifer Jeffries, says happens to her son when the city fires up. The extra strain of struggling harder to breathe puts dark circles under his eyes. He tires out easily. She worries about the damage being done to a fragile respiratory system. Jennifer Jeffries is the leader of a campaign to ban leaf burning in Chillicothe. She knows it won't change the ending, but she believes it can buy her son a few more happy November days.

The five-year-old takes what his mother calls "Dallas' Clean Air Act" seriously. So does Tim Schmitt. He went with his mother to last week's City Council meeting when she pleaded for passage. "I took him because I felt if they could look at the face of this child who can't play outside, that would make an impact on them," Mrs. Schmitt explained.

She says Tim's asthma appeared only after they moved from Peoria, where leaf burning isn't permitted, to Chillicothe two years ago. His doctor, Kenneth L. Arnett, who specializes in pediatric pulmonary diseases, says the link is clear; "his asthma is definitely triggered by leaf burning," and that's true for "every asthmatic out there." He says in areas where leaf-burning is

permitted, more than half and as many as 75 percent of the children he treats complain of problems when fall comes and the fires begin. They cough, they wheeze, their chests hurt, they can't suck enough oxygen in. They inhale more medicine, they do things kids shouldn't have to do, and they still struggle.

Adults with respiratory conditions, such as emphysema, have similar problems. A 1998 study done in Madison and St. Clair counties found that individuals exposed to burning yard waste were 3.1 times as likely to experience an asthma attack as those who were not. A study in the same area the previous year concluded the risk to be 3.4 times higher. The American Lung Association reports on a Des Moines, Iowa, study showing hospital admissions due to respiratory conditions fell by 50 percent in October and November after the city banned leaf burning.

"It's very serious," says Arnett. "It's not a laughing matter."

So you can understand why Mrs. Schmitt was near tears at last week's meeting, when council musings about what to do with leaves in a city park prompted Alderwoman Juanita Stone to quip that maybe the city could burn them. Everybody laughed. Stone apologized. She hadn't intended to offend.

But this is not about taking offense. It is about being healthy, and being able to play with your buddies, and being free of the awful feeling that no matter how much or how hard you breathe, it's not enough. It's about the asthma attack that might kill your child and the cystic fibrosis that surely will and how many days you will have until then.

And it's not just about Chillicothe, where at least a portion of the council seems to be taking the issue as seriously as little Dallas does. They just have to figure out what to do with the leaves. It's about Pekin, which tabled a ban last week because some council members thought the wording too broad. It's about East Peoria, which has repeatedly rejected pleas from mothers of asthmatics to halt the burning. It says it can't afford to have the leaves picked up. It's about every community in central Illinois which listens politely and finds an excuse to do nothing, year after year after year. Only Peoria and Morton enforce bans.

There are two explanations for this: Either the council members do not understand this issue. In which case they might ask Dallas or Tim to tell them. Or they do understand, and they don't care. Leaves are expensive to remove; the lives of children are cheap. In which case they probably ought not to talk to Dallas or Tim. Or their mothers.