

When a baby's in the picture, it's OK to butt in

by Sandi Dolbee

There's a part of me that will never forgive the neighbor lady for ratting me out when she saw me smoking behind the shed. I was in the eighth grade, and a lifetime later, I still cringe from the humiliation.

Maybe that's why a reader's question has stuck with me months after receiving it. She was fretting because the husband of a pregnant friend continued to smoke around the mother-to-be.

Should she say something about the dangers of secondhand smoke to an unborn child and risk alienating her friend? Or should she keep quiet and risk the birth of a baby possibly laden with the effects of that cigarette smoke?

Her worries are well-founded. Consider this from the American Lung Association: The chemicals from secondhand smoke can cross the placenta and enter the blood of your developing baby. These chemicals have been linked to premature birth, damaged immune systems, higher risk of sudden infant death syndrome. I'll stop there.

So where's the line between busybody and being our brother's and sister's keeper?

"When a child's health and well-being are at stake, we have to think about ethics differently," says Georgia Robins Sadler, who is the president-elect of the California division of the American Cancer Society.

Bottom line: "The ethical issue is the child's health is at stake," says Sadler, who directs community outreach for the Moores Cancer Center at the University of California San Diego.

She advises approaching the husband and wife separately - and gently. Be more like Katie Couric than Simon Cowell.

Go to the husband first. The conversation could go something like this: Tell him how excited you are about the pregnancy, and weave in the question about whether he knows about the dangers of secondhand smoke to unborn babies. Don't demean or lecture. "Don't make a grandstand about it," Sadler says.

Contact the American Cancer Society and get some printed information to give him (www.cancer.org or

800-227-2345). That way, she says, "it's not just her opinion, but it's scientifically proven."

Then go see your friend, the mother-to-be. "She has an equal responsibility," Sadler explains. "If he's going to smoke, then she should just walk away (while he's smoking)."

Throughout her advice, she stresses a "quiet, loving approach."

Which made me think of the neighbor lady. She wasn't particularly quiet in her approach. But loving? I suppose you could argue that she cared enough about my well-being to tell my family, rather than ignore it and watch another episode of "Gunsmoke."

Either way, I've never smoked again. I wonder how the baby is doing.

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