Talking To Your Children About Guns

Every year, nearly 360 children unintentionally shoot themselves or someone else when they find unlocked, loaded guns.[1] More than 700 children in the US die by gun suicide each year.[2] One study showed that over 80 percent of children under the age of 18 who died by gun suicide used a gun belonging to a family member.[3] The Be SMART program, designed to prevent these shootings, recognizes **that secure storage by adult gun owners is essential to preventing unauthorized, unsupervised access to firearms by children.**

It is always an adult's responsibility to prevent unauthorized access to guns, not a curious child's responsibility to avoid guns. That means always keeping all firearms unloaded, locked, and stored separately from ammunition.

And yet research shows that approximately 4.6 million American children live in homes with guns that are not stored securely.[4] We recognize that until every gun is securely stored, children are still at risk of finding unsecured guns, and parents need guidance on how to talk to their children about what to do if that happens. The suggestions below, developed in collaboration with Marjorie Sanfilippo, Ph.D., a professor and expert on children's behaviors around firearms, are a good place to start:

Tips for Talking to Young Children:

- Make it part of the normal safety conversation you have with your children.
- Keep the language simple; for example: "If you see a gun, don't touch it. Tell an adult right away."
- Tell children not to touch a gun, even if it looks like a toy.
- Assure children they will not get in trouble if they tell an adult they've seen a gun.
- Repeat it on a regular basis.

Tips for Talking to Adolescents:

- Include it in your general safety conversations about topics like drugs, alcohol, and drunk driving.
- Tell them to immediately leave any situation where an unsecured gun is present.
- Tell them not to listen to a friend who says a gun is unloaded or otherwise safe.
- Give your teen strategies to get out of a situation where a gun is present—or brainstorm them together. For example, you could agree that your teen would say: "Mom just texted me that I have to get home right now."
- Assure them that it's OK to ask people about the presence of unsecured guns in other homes they may be visiting, but offer to do it for them if they don't feel comfortable.

Tips for All Ages:

- Don't have the conversation only once. Talk to them frequently, just as you would about other crucial safety issues.
- Make sure they understand that any situation where there's an unsupervised gun is a dangerous situation.

It is important to remember that **talking to children about guns is a precaution, not a guarantee of safety.** One study found that young children who go through a week-long gun safety training are just as likely as children with no training to approach or play with a handgun when they find one.[5]

This is one reason we take issue with the National Rifle Association's program to reduce unintentional shootings by children, Eddie Eagle, as it focuses solely on educating children not to touch guns without permission and to alert an adult if they find a firearm. That alone is not nearly sufficient to reduce unsupervised access to guns by children.

[1] Everytown for Gun Safety, "#NotAnAccident Index: Unintentional Shootings by Children," https://everytownresearch.org/maps/notanaccident/. Average: 2015–2023.
[2] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics, WONDER Online Database, Underlying Cause of Death. Average: 2018–2022. Ages 0–17.
[3] Renee M. Johnson et al., "Who Are the Owners of Firearms Used in Adolescent Suicides?" *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 40, no. 6 (2010): 609–11.
[4] Matthew Miller and Deborah Azrael, "Firearm Storage in US Households with Children: Findings from the 2021 National Firearm Survey," *JAMA Network Open* 5, no. 2 (2022): e2148823.
[5] Marjorie S. Hardy, "Teaching Firearm Safety to Children: Failure of a Program," *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* 23, no. 2 (2002): 71–76.

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