

## **Gun Safety Is Every Parent's Responsibility**

Dr. Todd Huffman, for the Eugene *Register-Guard*

Each day in America brings the loss of eight more of our children and teenagers to gun violence, and daily nearly forty more are seriously injured.

Firearm injuries in the U.S. are the third-leading cause of death among children ages 10- to 14-years, and the second-leading cause of death for ages 15- to 24-years. Only motor vehicle accidents and cancer kill more children in the United States than firearms.

Whether you have an infant or a teenager, keeping a gun – especially a handgun – at home poses a very real danger to your family. Nearly all childhood accidental shooting deaths occur in or around the home. Half occur in the child's own home, and most others occur in the home of a friend.

Household gun use causes the death of someone known to the family 43 times more often than the user kills in self-defense. The risk of homicide is tripled and the incidence of suicide increases five times if there is a firearm in the home. Depressed preteens and teens commit suicide with guns more often than with any other method.

Four in ten American homes with children have one or more guns, and in almost half of these homes the guns are stored unsafely: unlocked, loaded, or both. Nearly 1.7 million children live in homes with unlocked, loaded firearms. We should not be surprised that nearly 3000 children – the same number of Americans as who died on September 11<sup>th</sup> – are killed every year by guns.

Such laxity about firearms stems largely from the belief held by an overwhelming number of parents that their children can tell the difference between real and toy guns. Nine of ten parents also believe, unrealistically, that their children would not play with a real gun they found.

Studies have consistently shown not only will most children play with a found gun, many will even pull the trigger. Children as young as 3 years can be strong enough to pull a trigger on a handgun.

Parents should teach children who see a gun to: “Stop! Don't touch. Leave the area. Tell an adult.” But warning children about the dangers of firearms isn't enough to keep them safe. Any parent knows that children don't always listen to what they're told.

A child's natural curiosity about a gun will all too often overwhelm any safety lesson learned about the danger of a gun. When children see a ball, they bounce it. When they see a gun, they shoot it. Numerous studies have shown that the powerful allure of a gun easily outmatches the sternest and most recent warnings. That is why it is critical to keep children away from guns.

And hiding guns is not enough. If a gun is accessible in a home, chances are good that a child will find it, and play with it. In four in ten families where parents said their children didn't know where guns were stored, the kids actually did know. And of these kids, one in five admitted having handled the gun, unbeknownst to the parents. There are countless tragic stories of kids finding guns parents thought were well-hidden.

Parents are already familiar with safety measures such as seat belts, bicycle helmets, and locking up medicines and poisons. There are similarly easy measures that can reduce the risk of gun injury in the home.

And why not? Parents tell toddlers not to run in the street, and also put up a fence. Parents tell their preteens and teens not to go to inappropriate Web sites and chat rooms, and also install Internet filters. Why wouldn't a parent institute similar safety measures with guns?

The safest home for children and teenagers is a home without guns, especially not handguns. Parents who keep loaded handguns in the home often do so hoping to defend themselves against criminals. Sadly, again, these weapons are more likely to be used unintentionally by a child, or by an adult who mistakes a friend or family member for an intruder, or in intimate partner violence.

If a gun is to be kept in the home, such as for hunting, it should be stored locked and unloaded, with the ammunition locked in a separate location. A gun safe with a combination lock is safest. If key locks are used, make certain children cannot access the keys. Studies have repeatedly shown that children often know where the keys are kept, even as the parents think they do not.

Always ask whether there are guns in a place where your child plays. Never assume that other parents think of safety the same way that you do. If you have any doubts about the safety of someone's home, invite the children to play at your home instead.

Even if you don't own a gun, educate your young children that guns are dangerous, and that children should never touch guns. Educate them that gun violence on television and in the movies is not real. Explain that in real life children and grown-ups are hurt and killed with guns. As children learn gradually, and often forget and test the rules, periodically repeat the message to stay away from guns.

Talk to your preteens and teens about ways to solve arguments and fights without guns and violence. Remember that teens are attracted to guns as symbols of power. And remember that a depressed teen is five times more likely to commit suicide if a gun is accessible in the home.

Finally, remember that nonpowder guns – such as BB guns, pellet guns, air rifles, and paintball guns – also pose a serious risk of injury, permanent disability, and even death to children. The range of muzzle velocities for nonpowder guns overlaps velocities reached by traditional firearms. Supervision, and the use of eye-protective devices, can significantly reduce the risk of injury from nonpowder guns.

Firearm injury prevention is one of the most important responsibilities of gun owners. Please contact your local police department or your child's physician if more information about firearm injury prevention is needed.