

Triggers for Tragedy

We are living in an increasingly violent society. Newspaper and television reports daily highlight the deaths and injuries we inflict on each other. Unfortunately, our children are not immune to this mayhem and have become both the perpetrators and victims of its violence.

Children's injuries and deaths from firearms have now increased to epidemic rates. **In 1993, fatal gunshot wounds replaced vehicular accidents as the commonest cause of death for children under 19 years of age.** Each year, 20.4 billion dollars are spent for the medical care of gun related injuries and disabilities. The average cost of treating a child injured by a gun - \$14,000 - could send them to college. And that doesn't include the lifetime costs for physical and emotional rehabilitation. **Every two hours in the U.S., a child or adolescent dies in a gun homicide, suicide or unintended shooting. Of the children who are injured or killed in unintentional shootings, 88 percent are shot in their own homes or in the homes of relatives or friends.** With more than **200 million firearms in the U.S.**, American youths are more at risk today from gun violence than any previous generation.

Parents may not realize that they are inadvertently exposing their child to danger by keeping loaded, easily accessible firearms in their house. While parents protect their children from other household hazards, guns are frequently not treated as a potential threat to their children's well being. Furthermore, even if a parent does not own a gun, chances are there is a firearm in the home where their child is playing.

Gun violence toward children falls into three general categories: homicides, suicides and unintended shootings. **The presence of a gun in the home increases the risk of a domestic homicide three fold and 20 fold in a family with a history of family violence.** Further, youngsters who have access to guns in the home often carry these firearms to school and into the community. Youth homicide- children killing children- has become an even more serious problem. Disagreements between children that would have been settled with a fist fight a generation ago are now gunfights. Parents should consider access to guns as a major suicidal risk factor, just as we do drugs and alcohol. **Nine out of 10 suicides attempted with a handgun are fatal. On the average, at least one young child dies every day from an accidental hand gun shooting.** In most cases the child unintentionally shoots a playmate or sibling with a readily available loaded handgun found in an adult's bedroom. Parents must also recognize the danger of their child being shot in another person's home. **More than 40 percent of children's inadvertent shootings occur in the homes of friends or relatives.**

Yet most parents remain unaware that guns are all too often stored in places where children play or visit. Youngsters are naturally curious and have limited ability to understand the dangers of guns. Many preteens and teenagers, particularly boys, are fascinated by guns as symbols of power or manhood. The message for parents is clear: children and guns do not mix.

Obviously, the safest thing for all parents is to make their home gun free. Parents who feel it's necessary to keep a gun in the home, should empty it and lock it up. **In addition, police recommend that parents lock and store bullets in a separate place.**

There is no perfect age to begin talking with children about gun safety. **According to the National Rifle Association, the best time to introduce the subject is when a child starts acting out "gun play" or begins asking questions about firearms.** At this point, parents should answer their youngster's questions honestly and openly. Eliminating some of the mystery surrounding firearms helps remove some of a child's natural curiosity concerning guns.

The message, according to the NRA's "Eddie Eagle Gun Safety Program", is simple and direct: If their youngster sees a gun, parents should instruct their child to:

- Stop
- Don't Touch
- Leave the Area
- Tell an Adult

The initial steps of STOP and DON'T TOUCH are the most important. Because of a child's natural impulse to touch a gun, it is imperative that parents impress the first two messages on their youngsters.

Unfortunately, parents cannot count on even well-behaved children to be safe around loaded guns in the home. This is true even if parents discuss gun dangers and safety with their children and hide them out of sight. There isn't a place in a house where a naturally inquisitive child can't find a gun. We sometimes give children more credit than we should. Even the most responsible youngster will occasionally do things they shouldn't and make a mistake. Unfortunately, with a gun there may not be a second chance.

Since children constantly see guns on TV and in the movies, parents should teach their youngsters that what they are watching is not realistic. Children should be made aware of the differences between pretend and real life. Don't assume your child knows the actors on television use play guns and pretend to be wounded and die.

Parents who do not own a gun may forget that their child could discover a firearm in the home of a playmate or neighbor. Although it may seem awkward, speak with the parents' of your children's friends to find out if they keep a gun at home. If they do, urge them to empty it of bullets and lock it up.

Owning a gun is a personal decision. Our goal is to keep children from becoming statistics from gun injuries, not to enter the debate between the gun control lobby and the National Rifle Association. Suffice it to say, however, if parents choose to own a gun, it is their responsibility to treat the firearm like they would any lethal poison.

A gun is the most dangerous consumer item that can be brought into the family and should be made inaccessible for children. The safest thing for families is not to keep a gun in the home. If parents decide to possess a gun, they should empty it out and lock it up. And adults should teach their children that if they see a gun, they should stop, not touch the firearm, leave the area and tell an adult.

Parents must protect their children from guns in much the same way they safeguard their children from prescription drugs, alcoholic drinks, swimming pools and other potential household dangers. We must control the epidemic of gun injuries and deaths among American youth. **Remember, every two hours someone's child is killed with a loaded gun.**