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Firearm Safety for Families

Why should I care about gun safety?

Guns can cause serious injury or death. The number of accidental shooting deaths each year in the United States is higher than in many other countries. Children cannot always understand how dangerous guns are. For this reason, it's very important to keep them away from guns outside appropriate settings. Even if you do not have guns in your house, it's still a good idea to teach your children about them and what to do if they see one.

What are the risks of having a gun in the house?

Statistically, just having a gun in your house raises the chances of someone getting hurt or killed. In fact, most accidental shooting deaths happen in a home. Even if you think your family knows to avoid guns, or how to handle them safely, there is still a risk. Children cannot always make good decisions, even if you have talked to them about guns before. Plus, other people visiting your house could find a gun that is not safely locked away.

If I do have a gun in the house, how can I keep it safe?

If you do choose to have firearms in your home, there are some things you can do to keep them safe. First, you should be sure to follow all laws about owning a gun. The laws are different in different states.

If you have a gun, it is very important to:

- Store the gun unloaded (without bullets)
- Lock up the gun and keep the key, or lock combination, away from children
- Store bullets separate from the gun

Guns and bullets should be stored in places children cannot see or reach. You can buy special locking boxes or cabinets for this. Other safety devices for guns are also available. For example, some devices help prevent guns from being shot accidentally. Others require a code or fingerprint in order to use the gun. It's important to remember however, that the best protection is to make sure children cannot get to a gun at all.

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What if I want to teach my children to hunt?

Different states have different laws about hunting. Make sure you know what the rules are in your area about how old children have to be to hunt. Many states also require taking a course or getting a license.

Guns can lead to accidental injury or death when used for hunting. Even if it is legal for your children to hunt in your state, it's very important to teach them about safety. This includes how to use and store guns or other hunting weapons. No matter what the law says, it's also best to make sure children are with an experienced adult.

How can I teach my children about gun safety?

You can explain to your children that guns can hurt or kill. If they see a gun, these are the steps they should remember:

- Do not touch the gun
- Move away from the gun
- Tell an adult right away

Kids are curious, and they can't always tell the difference between real and toy guns. Even if you have talked to your children about gun safety, they still might be tempted to play with a gun if they find one.

What about toy guns?

Parents sometimes wonder if it's OK to let their children play with toy guns. These include things like water pistols and plastic guns that shoot soft darts. Different families set different rules about this. There is some evidence in the literature that playing with toy guns might lead to more aggressive behavior in children.

Toy guns that look like real guns should be avoided, since a child might not be able to tell the difference. Also, other people could mistake a toy gun for a real gun. If a person with a real gun thought there was danger, they might shoot to protect themselves, causing injury or death. If your child does play with toy guns, it's very important to teach them that real guns are not toys and can hurt or kill.

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Some children, especially teens, might want to play with BB guns, air guns, or paintball guns. These are often considered less dangerous than regular guns. However, they can also cause serious injuries and even death if improperly used. If these types of guns are used, an adult should make sure steps are taken to be safe. This includes using protection for the face, eyes, and, ears. It also involves being careful not to pull the trigger accidentally, and storing the guns in a safe place.

How can I help keep my children safe outside our home?

As mentioned, you can talk to your children about guns so they understand the danger. For older children, you can ask them to tell you what they would do if they saw a gun.

You can also:

- Ask about guns in places your children visit – Before you let your child visit another person's home, ask the adult if there are any unlocked guns in the house. This can be hard to do, especially if you are not used to talking about guns. Try to think of it like anything else you would do to keep your child safe, like making sure they wear a seat belt or bicycle helmet.
- Limit your child's "screen time" – Children often see violence and guns on television or in video games. This can make it hard for them to understand what is real and what is pretend. For example, they might think that guns are a common way to solve problems, or that getting shot does not lead to serious harm. It's important to be aware of what your children are watching or playing, and how much. In general, experts suggest limiting children's screen time to no more than 1 to 2 hours a day.

Taking the time to think and talk about guns can help keep your family safe. But preventing your children from having access to guns is the most important thing you can do.