



Guns in the Home: How to Keep Kids Safe

By: *Judy Schaechter, MD, MBA, FAAP*

Did you know that roughly a third of U.S. homes with children have guns? In fact, an estimated 4.6 million kids live with unlocked, loaded guns. That's a scary statistic when you think about the fact that even young toddlers are capable of finding unlocked guns in the home, and they are strong enough to pull the trigger.

As a parent, you may not realize what a serious risk a gun in the home is, especially for children.

Firearm Safety for Families



Studies show children are naturally curious, even about a firearm they've been warned not to touch.



Kids are safer when: Firearms are in a lockbox or safe, unloaded. Ammunition is locked away separately.



Kids are safest when: firearms are stored outside the home.



Firearms are now the leading cause of death for U.S. children and teens under the age of 18. And the reality is that having firearms in the home increases the risk of unintentional shootings, suicide and homicide. Read on to learn how to keep your child safe.

Unintentional shootings & gun injuries

Unintentional shootings happen to children of all ages. In homes with guns, the likelihood of accidental death by shooting is four times higher.

Between 2015 and 2022, there were at least 2,802 (<https://everytownresearch.org/report/notanaccident/>) unintentional shootings by children age 17 and younger. These resulted in 1,083 deaths and 1,815 nonfatal gun injuries, nearly all among other kids. And at least 895 preschoolers and toddlers managed to find a gun and unintentionally shoot themselves or someone else during this time.

Suicide risk with guns in the home

Kids and adolescents are at an increased risk for suicide (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Ten-Things-Parents-Can-Do-to-Prevent-Suicide.aspx>) when there is a gun in the home too. Suicide rates in this population are four times higher than for kids who live in homes without guns. In the past decade, 40% of the suicides committed by kids and teens involved guns. Nine out of 10 of these suicides were with guns that the victims accessed at their own homes or from a relative's home.

Guns, kids & homicides

The risk of homicide is three times higher when there are guns in the home. Not only that, but 58% of shooting deaths in children and teens are homicides.



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Keep the "safe" in firearm safety

Hiding a gun is not enough! Kids are curious, and studies show they usually know where a family keeps a gun.

Gun safes can lower the risk a curious child will be hurt:



Safe or lockbox
for handguns



Locked gun
safe for rifles



Gun trigger locks—
inexpensive and effective



Lock box
for ammo



The most effective way to keep kids safe

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) advises that the safest home for a child is one without guns. The most effective way to prevent unintentional gun injuries, suicide and homicide to children and adolescents, research shows, is the absence of guns from homes and communities.

What to do if you do keep a gun in your home

If you decide to keep guns in the home, be aware that many studies show that teaching kids about gun safety, or to not touch a firearm if they find one, is not enough. You can reduce the chances of children being injured, however, by following important safety rules:

Safe gun storage

All guns in your home should be **locked and unloaded, with ammunition locked separately** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1bWYBZSPzU&feature=youtu.be>). Make sure children and teens can't access the keys or combinations to lock boxes or gun safes. And remember not to keep loaded, unlocked guns in the car, or anywhere else on your property, either.

Safety steps when using firearms

When using a gun for hunting or target practice, keep the safety catch in place until you are ready to fire it. Before setting the gun down, always unload it. As much as a child may want to take a turn shooting, this is not a good idea. No matter how much instruction you may give about how to safely shoot a gun, children are not capable or responsible enough to handle a potentially lethal weapon.

How to keep your kids safe in other homes

More than a third of all unintentional shootings of children take place in the homes of their friends, neighbors or relatives. That's why it is also important to make sure your kids are safe when they spend time where other people live.



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Ask About Firearms Before a Playdate

If it's not safe,
invite their child over
to your home instead



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My kids are looking forward to play with your kids. A warning, Leah is allergic to strawberries.

Mine too! OK.

I always ask families where my kids go about firearms. Do you have guns at home?

Yes, we do have a gun.

Great. Jimmy is so curious, and always getting into things. How are your firearms stored?

We put the gun in a safe and lock up the ammo separately. See you at 3!



Here's how to help ensure your children and their playmates do not come across an unsecured gun while they play:

Add this question to your playdate checklist.

Even if you don't have guns in your own home, ask (</English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Is-There-A-Gun-Where-Your-Child-Plays-Asking-Can-Save-Lives.aspx>) about guns and safe storage at the other homes they visit. Just as you'd ask about pets, allergies, supervision and other safety issues before your child visits another home, add one more important question: "Is there an unlocked gun in your house?" If there is, reconsider allowing your child to play there or talk to them about keeping the guns unloaded and locked.

Talk with your children about guns.

Remind your kids that if they ever come across a gun, they must stay away from it and tell you immediately.

Guns in the media

Make sure your children understand that gun violence they may see on TV, in movies, and in video games they play at home or friends' homes is not real. They need to be told—and probably reminded again and again—that in real life, children are killed and hurt badly by guns. Although the popular media (</English/news/Pages/Virtual-Violence-Impacts-Children-on-Multiple-Levels.aspx>) often romanticize gun use, children need to learn that these weapons can be extremely dangerous.

More information

- [Is There an Unlocked Gun Where Your Child Plays? \(/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Is-There-A-Gun-Where-Your-Child-Plays-Asking-Can-Save-Lives.aspx\)](/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Is-There-A-Gun-Where-Your-Child-Plays-Asking-Can-Save-Lives.aspx)
- [Teen Suicide Risk: What Parents Should Know \(/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Which-Kids-are-at-Highest-Risk-for-Suicide.aspx\)](/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Which-Kids-are-at-Highest-Risk-for-Suicide.aspx)
- [12 Things Parents Can Do to Prevent Suicide \(/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/ten-things-parents-can-do-to-prevent-suicide.aspx\)](/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/ten-things-parents-can-do-to-prevent-suicide.aspx)
- [Gun Deaths: Urgent Public Health Crisis Affecting Children & Teens \(/English/news/Pages/firearm-deaths-spike-almost-30-percent-during-pandemic-gun-homicides-rise-35-percent-from-2019-20.aspx\)](/English/news/Pages/firearm-deaths-spike-almost-30-percent-during-pandemic-gun-homicides-rise-35-percent-from-2019-20.aspx) AAP Releases Updated Gun Violence Prevention Recommendations (</English/news/Pages/firearms-violence-prevention-demands-a-public-safety-approach-like-regulation-of-motor-vehicles.aspx>)



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- Uvalde pediatrician recounts horror of school shooting, urges gun control advocacy (<https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/news/22431/Uvalde-pediatrician-recounts-horror-of-school?searchresult=1>) (AAP News)

About Dr. Schaechter:



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