Keeping your kids safe from guns in the home

By Teddi Nicolaus

There was a time when the biggest worry about allowing your child to have a play date at a friend's house was whether your kid would behave. Nowadays, parents have a lot more to worry about, including guns in the home.

The U.S. is home to more guns per capita than any other country. About 42% of U.S. households own at least one firearm, and a third of those homes have kids.

Gun ownership can be a controversial topic. But one thing just about everyone agrees on is the importance of keeping firearms out of the hands of kids. Unfortunately many gun owners don't safely store their weapons, even when the guns are loaded and children are in the home, research from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says. That's a scary finding, especially as gun-related injuries, suicides and other deaths among children are increasing.

"Firearms are now the leading cause of death for kids, surpassing motor vehicle crashes," says Lois Lee, MD, MPH, a pediatric emergency medicine physician at Boston Children's Hospital and chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on Injury, Violence and Poison Prevention.

Sadly, there are too many instances where children — even toddlers — find guns at home and pull the trigger, unintentionally causing harm to themselves or others.

Children of all ages are at risk for gun injuries. Research shows that most unintentional gun deaths among children occur at home, sometimes during play.

These sad facts show how important it is to safely store firearms.

Keep the "safe" in safety

"You think that you've secured your firearm, hidden it in a way that a child is not going to find it, but how many times have you hidden the holiday presents and your kids know where they are? If they want to find them, they will," Lee says.

It's important to tell your child what to do if they or a friend finds a gun, whether at home or elsewhere. They need to know that guns are very dangerous and should never be played with or passed around. Tell them not to touch the gun, walk away and tell an adult immediately.

But simply teaching kids about gun safety is not enough. Secure storage is needed too.

If you have a gun, the most secure storage option is to keep your firearm locked and unloaded, with ammunition locked separately from the firearm. At the very least, it should be in a gun lock box or safe that your child cannot access. Guns should never be stored in vehicles.

And remember, kids can be curious. So assume they probably know you have a gun and take extra precautions. Never, ever tell kids where the key is hidden or what the safe combination is.

Unfortunately, guns are one of the leading causes of suicides among children ages 10-19. Securely storing a gun can help make sure a child does not have access to it when they are feeling vulnerable. Let your kids know you are always available to talk to them about something that is troubling them.

Don't be afraid to ASK

Parents ask all sorts of questions before they allow their children to visit other children's homes. If your child is allergic to dander or peanuts, you might ask if there are pets in the home, or mention your child's nut allergy.

You should also ask if there is an unlocked gun in the house. The ASK campaign, or Asking Saves Kids, has inspired millions of people to ask that very question. A successful collaboration between the Brady Campaign and AAP, the campaign urges parents, guardians and caretakers to speak up before play dates.

It could be as simple as saying: "My kid is pretty curious, and our doctor recommended that I ask: 'Is there a gun in the house?'" If the answer is yes, ask how the gun and ammunition are stored. If you don't think it's safe, ask if their child can visit your house instead.

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