



SOUTH CAROLINIANS FOR  
RESPONSIBLE GUN OWNERSHIP

# The Danger Within

## *How to Save Loved Ones from the Gun Meant to Save Them*

Heated as the debate is over guns in America, there's little argument over the need for gun safety when our children's lives are at stake. The numbers are stark:

- One third of American children and teens — about 22 million — live in homes with at least one firearm.
- In 13% of those homes, the gun is unlocked and loaded or unlocked with the ammunition at its side.
- 2.6 million children and teens live in a home where a gun and ammunition are unsecured and within reach.(1)

The risks are even greater in South Carolina. According to the SC Victim Assistance Network, about one-third of our households with children under 18 have a gun in the home, and *more than half* of these firearm owners keep their guns loaded and ready for use at least some of the time.

Most firearm accidents involving children under 15 occur within the home and nearly half involve a gun stored in the room where the shooting occurred.(2) *Guns are the second-leading cause of death among children and teens.*(3)

Keeping a gun in the home protects us, Americans say. Yet this is how thousands of American children die.

No one, on any side of any gun debate, wants this. So what can be done?

### **Talking's Not Enough**

The obvious solution — *talk to your children about guns!* — isn't as effective, on its own, as it seems. Public health agencies, medical organizations, community groups, the National Shooting Sports Federation and the National Rifle Association all have programs to help parents address these issues. The NRA has created an Eddie Eagle GunSafe program to teach kids from pre-K to third grade four important lessons should they encounter a gun: *Stop! Don't touch. Run Away. Tell a Grown-up.* The Center for the Prevention of Community Violence, meanwhile, has "Ollie the Owl" teaching a similar series of lessons. And yet . . .

In studies, parents express high levels of confidence that their kids will act wisely about guns after learning the dangers. But studies show that while these lessons are important, they don't relieve the dangers of unsecured firearms in the home.

One problem is that the lessons instill confidence in parents that their kids will not be tempted to handle or play with guns. This, unfortunately, discounts the curiosity and impulsiveness of children. Kids are attracted to guns, and when they get their hands on one, they're likely to pull the trigger. Even a three-year-old has the finger strength to do that. If his index finger can't manage that, the next urge is sometimes to try it with his thumb — which means turning the barrel to face himself. Children aged 2-4 are at the greatest risk of dying from a self-inflicted, unintentional gunshot.(4)

The appalling truth is that, in 2015, *toddlers in America shot themselves or someone else at a rate of one a week.* (5) And gun owners must take even more precaution when leaving home with a gun. In December, 2014, a two-year-old in a shopping cart unzipped his mother's purse in a Walmart in Hayden, Idaho, pulled out a gun and killed his 29-year-old mother. In Rock Hill, SC, a two-year-old in the back seat of a car found a .357 revolver in the pouch behind the passenger seat in October, 2015 and burst into tears when he accidentally fired a bullet into his grandmother's back, a wound that the woman survived.

Not as fortunate was Veronica Rutledge, a 29-year-old mother who'd been her high school's valedictorian and become a chemist at Idaho National Laboratory. She had grown up around guns, learned plenty about gun safety, and thought she was fine keeping her handgun in a purse with a zippered compartment designed specifically for a concealed weapon. As she approached the electronics department of a Walmart in Hayden, Idaho in December 2014, her two-year-old opened the zipper, pulled out the gun and killed her with a single shot to the head.

Again and again, we underestimate the magnetic allure that guns hold for children, and their itch-like urge to pull the trigger. In 2001, 29 groups of 8-12 year old boys were brought, with their parents' consent, to a room with a one-way mirror where two water pistols and a disarmed .38 caliber handgun had been placed in a drawer. Of those 29 groups:

- 21 of them found the handgun in the drawer.
- 16 groups picked it up and handled it.
- 10 groups had a member who pulled the trigger. (6)

*Significantly, parental estimates of their child's interest in guns did not predict actual behavior upon finding the gun.*

In another study, 34 children aged 4-7 participated in a week-long firearm safety program. A second group of 36 had no training. Following the training, pairs of children were placed in a room with a disabled pistol. Not only did half of the children play with the gun, *there was no difference in the amount of gun-play between those who took the instruction and those who did not.*(7)

Talking to the kids about guns, in other words, is important. But it creates an expectation of responsibility on the part of children that often doesn't exist. And it lets the adults off the hook.

## **Locked *and* Unloaded**

To remove the responsibility from the kids, there's only one answer, and that's making sure that firearms are stored away and secure. The NSSF, sponsor of Project SafeChild and the trade organization for the gun industry, is direct in its recommendations to gun owners:

- Firearms should be unloaded when not in use.
- Store your firearms in a locked cabinet, safe, gun vault or storage case when not in use, ensuring they are in a location inaccessible by children and can't be handled by anyone without your permission.
- Store your ammunition in a locked location separate from firearms.
- Always unload, clean, and place your firearms in their secure storage location immediately.

Most importantly, the NSSF urges, "*Use a gun lock that renders the firearm inoperable when not in use.*" Noting that gun locks can be pried open, the NSSF adds, "A gun lock should be used as an additional safety precaution — and not as a substitute for secure storage."

Kids Health, the Nemours website, offers essentially the same advice:

- Take the ammunition out of the gun.
- Lock the gun and keep it out of reach of kids.
- Lock the ammunition separately from the gun.
- Never leave a gun unattended.

Three out of every four children ages 5 to 14 know where firearms are kept in the home. (8) Which leaves all parents — even gun-owning ones who follow these standards explicitly in their homes — confronting an awkward question.

## **The Awkward Question**

Your child's about to visit the home of a friend or relative, and you're trying to work up the nerve to ask the host The Question that all parents need to ask: *Do you own a gun . . . and if so, is it locked and unloaded, with the ammunition stored separately?*

To ease one's discomfort, make that question part of a checklist of queries, perhaps concerning the activities planned, the timing of pickups, dietary concerns, etc. Drop all judgments, should you have them, about gun ownership. You might even preface the question by saying that you're not opposed to gun ownership or — if it's true — that you own one yourself . . . but having read so many stories about children shooting themselves or others unsettles you, and that your kids, like most, have a way of getting into everything, so you feel it's your duty to ask.

If you just can't bring yourself to do that on the phone, and there's enough lead time before the visit, do it by email — again, making it one of several remarks or questions so it feels more natural rather than posing it as a stand-alone question.

And, upon receiving the *wrong* answer, be ready with the right response: *I really appreciate your honesty about that, but I just won't be able to relax, so how about we do this over at our house?* Then, for your child's sake, don't vacillate.

The Brady Campaign encourages parents to take the ASK Pledge: a promise to ask The Question and to encourage friends and families to do the same. ASK stands for "Asking Saves Kids." Taking such a pledge can help reduce the back-and-forth internal dialogue that our discomfort can create before each visit by our children to a new home. Over 19 million parents have begun asking The Question, a fine fact to remember each time we waver.

## **Adolescent Alert**

Sadly, the parents of teens are less likely to store guns safely than the parents of younger kids . . . even as their children are entering the 15-to-24 age bracket when suicide becomes the third leading cause of death among Americans. (9) In a recent study of high school students, 60% said they had thought about killing themselves, and about 9% had tried at least once.(10)

*Studies have shown that suicide is four to 10 times more likely in homes with a gun than in those without . . . mostly because of the lethality of a firearm.*(11) Seventy-five percent of suicides take place within an hour of the decision to commit the act.(12) With those who overdose or slash their wrists, there's often still time to call out for help — those suicide attempts are fatal only 3% of the time. Suicide with a gun succeeds 85% of the time.(13)

"Adolescents often experience very strong emotions and have difficulty seeing past a temporary setback," says Dr. Denise Dowd, who has studied and written about this issue. "Their brains have not matured fully, which makes them impulsive, and relatively more likely to attempt suicide. When those attempts are made with a gun, there is little chance for them to change their minds."

*Suicide warning indicators are depression, previous suicidal behavior and substance abuse.* Family members, friends and teachers should seek immediate psychiatric help when a family member of any age speaks of life not being worth living or how much easier it would be to end it all. Families should share with the extended family information about the depression, medication or previous suicidal behavior of a troubled family member who might be in contact with them. Equally critical, since many suicidal teens live in homes with guns, is removing the guns from the house.

The argument that suicidal people will find some way to kill themselves is false. Most young survivors of a serious suicide attempt *never* try again, notes the American Academy of Pediatrics.

In fact, most survivors of suicide attempts are glad they were saved. With a gun in hand, they're unlikely to ever get that second chance.

## **Every Hour Another Youth Shot**

Fatal gun accidents have fallen over the last twenty years. So have firearm fatalities among kids under 14. That's good—but we need to do even better, because:

- Seventeen thousand kids (age 0 to 19) are still dying or being injured by guns in the U.S. every year, at a rate of more than one young person an hour.(14)
- Overall, American children are 11 times more likely to die from guns as are children in other high-income countries.(15)

To be sure, we need to keep teaching kids about gun safety. But we can't leave the burden on their shoulders. Gun owners need to make sure that guns at home are kept locked up and unloaded, and kept in a vault or elsewhere altogether when loved ones — even extended family members — appear troubled. And we need to ask The Question when our children visit others' homes.

Let's pause for a moment and absorb the enormity of such a tragedy in our own families. Let's *feel* the toll it would take: No family ever fully recovers from the loss of a child or sibling, and the consequences of a relative taking his own life can extend deep into the future, becoming a factor often associated with suicide in subsequent generations. Let's realize that most families that have suffered such a devastation — either accidental or intentional — likely felt certain beforehand that it couldn't happen within their homes.

And let's lay aside our divisions over gun laws to unify in our approach to gun safety.

# Citations

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