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Kids and guns

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By **Dr. Terence R. McAllister**

Firearms are responsible for approximately 30,000 deaths each year in the United States, 4,000 of which are children. I became aware of these concerning statistics while I was a medical resident on active duty with the U.S. Air Force in Dayton, Ohio. At that time, I initiated a research project to identify how many of my patients lived in a home with a gun, and also to see if the firearms training, which includes safety training, all members of the military receive translated into safer firearm practices at home.

The study continued in Ohio after I was transferred to a new base, and a group of nonmilitary pediatricians also surveyed the civilian families in the areas. The completed study, Children and Firearms in the Home: A Southwestern Ohio Ambulatory Research Network (SOAR-Net) Study, was published in the July-August 2007 issue of The Journal of the American Board of Family Practice. The study found that military families were more likely to have a gun in the house (28 percent compared to 18 percent of civilian families) and, despite extensive safety training, were just as likely to store it improperly (loaded or unlocked or both). We also found that pediatricians in that community were not very good about advising parents on gun safety.

Because of the risk of guns to children, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that guns be removed from homes in which children live, if possible, or be stored safely (locked and unloaded) if they must remain in the house. In nationwide surveys, it has been estimated that between 20 and 50 percent of all homes have a gun, and up to 50 percent of those weapons are stored improperly (either loaded, unlocked or both). Guns provide a great temptation to children, and even if they are taught all of the appropriate safety rules, studies show that, given the opportunity, children find it too tempting to play with guns inappropriately.

I advise all parents who have a gun in the home to keep it locked and unloaded to protect children. Even if you do not own a firearm, parents should teach weapon safety to children, since they may encounter them at a friend's house or other unsupervised location. Based on the fact that many homes with children have a gun, many of which are kept unlocked or loaded, the AAP, in collaboration with PAX (a nonprofit organization working to help bring an end to gun violence against children and families), developed the ASK (Asking Saves Kids) campaign. ASK encourages parents to ASK if there are guns in the homes where their children play. You have a right to know if your children are playing in a safe environment, and if you have any doubts about the safety of someone's home, you should politely invite the children to play at your house.

The topic of gun ownership and gun safety can be controversial with individuals holding very strong opinions about their rights to have a gun in the home. I encourage all families to consider the safety of their children and the natural curiosity of children when deciding if they need a gun in their home, and on the best way to store the weapon if they do need to have it.

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