

Gun Safety

A Parent's Responsibility

In a home where guns are kept, the degree of safety a child rests squarely on the child's parents. Parents who accept the responsibility to learn, practice, and teach gun safety rules will ensure their child's safety to a much greater extent than those who do not. Parental responsibility does not end, however, when the child leaves the home.

According to federal statistics, there are guns in approximately half of all U.S. households. Even if no one in your family owns a gun, chances are that someone you know does. Your child could come in contact with a gun at a neighbor's house, when playing with friends, or under other circumstances outside your home. It is critical for your child to know what to do if he or she encounters a firearm anywhere, and it is the parents' responsibility to provide that training.

Why Teach Your Child Gun Safety

There is no particular age to talk with your child about gun safety. A good time to introduce the subject is the first time he or she shows an interest in firearms, even toy pistols or rifles. Talking openly and honestly about gun safety with your child is usually more effective than just ordering him or her to "stay out of the gun closet," and leaving it at that. Such statements may just stimulate a child's natural curiosity to investigate further.

As with any safety lesson, explaining the rules and answering a child's questions helps remove the mystery surrounding guns. Any rules set for your own child should also apply to friends who visit the home. This will help keep your child from being pressured into showing a gun to a friend.

Toys Guns vs. Real Guns

It is also advisable, particularly with very young children, to discuss gun use on television as opposed to gun use in real life. Firearms are often handled carelessly in movies and on TV. Additionally, children see TV and movie characters shot and "killed" with well-documented frequency. When a young child sees that same actor appear in another movie or TV show, confusion between entertainment and real life may result. It may be a mistake to assume that your child knows the difference between being "killed" on TV and in reality.

If your child has toy guns, you may want to use them to demonstrate safe gun handling and to explain how they differ from genuine firearms. Even though an unsupervised child should not have access to a gun, there should be no chance that he or she could mistake a real gun for a toy.

What Should You Teach Your Child About Gun Safety?

If you have decided that your child is not ready to be trained in a gun's handling and use, explain that he or she must not touch a gun in your home, unless you are present and have given permission. If your child sees a gun outside the home, teach him or her the following:

STOP!
Don't Touch.
Leave the Area.
Tell an Adult.

The initial steps of "Stop" and "Don't Touch" are the most important. To counter the natural impulse to touch a gun, it is imperative that you impress these steps of the safety message upon your child.

In today's society, where adult supervision is not always possible, the direction to "Leave the Area" is also essential. Under some circumstances, "area" may be understood to be a room if your child cannot physically leave the apartment or house.

"Tell an Adult" emphasizes that children should seek a trustworthy adult – neighbor, relative, or teacher – if a parent or guardian is not available.

Common Sense Gun Safety

Follow these three fundamental rules in any situation. Whether or not you own a gun, it is important to know these rules so that you may insist that others follow them.

- **Always keep the gun pointed in a safe direction.**

Whether you are shooting or simply handling a gun, never point it at yourself or others. Common sense will tell you which direction is the safest. Outdoors, it is generally safe to point the gun toward the ground, or, if you are on a shooting range, toward the target. Indoors, be mindful of the fact that a bullet can penetrate ceilings, floors, walls, windows, and doors.

- **Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to shoot.**

When handling a gun, people have a natural tendency to put their finger on the trigger. Do not touch the trigger unless you are actually preparing to fire the gun.

- **Always keep the gun unloaded until ready to use.**

If you do not know how to check to see if a gun is loaded, leave it alone. Carefully secure it, being certain to point it safely and to keep your finger off the trigger, and seek competent assistance.

Gun Owners' Responsibilities

Most states impose some form of legal duty on adults to take reasonable steps to deny access by children to dangerous substances or instruments. It is the individual gun owner's responsibility to

understand and follow all laws regarding gun purchase, ownership, storage, transport, etc. If you choose to own a gun, you have a responsibility to set a positive example.

If you do not know how to operate a gun, do not experiment with it. An untrained adult can be as dangerous as a curious child.

Store guns so that they are inaccessible to children and other unauthorized users.

Gun shops and sporting goods stores sell a wide variety of safes, cases, and other security devices. While specific security measures may vary, a parent must, in every case, assess the exposure of the firearm and absolutely assure that it is inaccessible to a child.

This information is not intended as a complete course in gun safety and is not a substitute for formal, qualified instruction in the handling, use, or storage of firearms. The guidelines herein should be considered options to minimize the chance of an accident occurring in the home.