



THE OFFICIAL NEWSMAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

AAP News

Volume 35 • Number 6
June 2014
www.aapnews.org

AAP News Parent Plus

INFORMATION FROM YOUR PEDIATRICIAN

Parents advised to ask about guns in homes where children play

“Is there a gun in your home?” Asking the question may feel awkward, but the harm it could prevent is worth the discomfort.

Before their children visit other homes, parents may ask about pets in the house, discuss allergies and Internet access, and inquire whether an adult will be home. Whether children can access guns also should be part of the conversation, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).

What should a parent do if the answer to the question is yes? Make sure all guns are stored unloaded and locked, preferably in a gun safe, with ammunition locked away separately, according to the AAP. Hiding guns is not enough because children will look for and handle them. Preventing access to guns is important, because firearm injuries often are deadly.

Many deaths are caused when a child playing with a gun or showing it to a sibling or friend sets it off accidentally. This was the cause of death for 114 children under age 20, according to 2009 U.S. data.

About one out of three homes with children has a gun, many unlocked or loaded. Most injuries and deaths are caused by handguns, but shotguns and rifles are a common cause of unintentional firearm injuries and suicides in rural areas.

Research also shows that suicide deaths are higher in homes that have guns. Guns are the most common way that youth ages 15-19 have committed suicide, according to U.S. data.

Simply teaching children to stay away from guns does not help, according to research on gun avoidance programs. In fact, these children might be more likely to handle a gun.

The most effective way to reduce firearm-related injuries and death is to keep guns out of homes and communities, the AAP says. If guns cannot be removed, parents should restrict their access.

Parents who have any doubt about their child’s safety in a gun-owning home are encouraged to invite the children to play in their home instead.



— Trisha Koriath

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