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'Do You Keep a Gun in Your Home?'

Starting conversations about gun safety can help prevent play date tragedies.



The election season offers students such as those at BASIS Independent School in McLean an opportunity to learn about the political process. Photo Courtesy of BASIS Independent

By Marilyn Campbell
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Starting the conversation felt awkward. After all, she didn't want to offend another parent. It also felt necessary, because putting her 5-year-old son in harm's way was not

an option. After procrastinating, role-playing and even discussing it with a therapist, Sara Hayes finally initiated the dialogue. Before scheduling a play date, she wanted to know if the families of her son's friends owned guns.

"My son had started making friends in kindergarten and of course I wanted him to have playmates and go on play dates," said Hayes. "But I had this fear of him being in someone's house where there was a gun that he could get his hands on."

Statistics from the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence indicate that one out of three homes in the United States with children have guns and almost 1.7 million children live in a home with a gun that is unlocked and loaded. Child development experts say that because many children are naturally curious, the odds of a child finding and playing with a gun that is relatively accessible are high. Even if a parent has never thought to ask about guns in a home or finds the topic too uncomfortable to raise, the conversation is vital to helping parents make decisions about safety, because simply telling a child to stay away from a gun is not enough to change that child's behavior.

"Each family needs to decide what information they would like to know. Parents should be aware that children's judgment alone is not a reliable security measure," said Bethesda, Md.-based child psychologist Stacie Isenberg, Psy.D. "Way too often curiosity wins over judgment."

A study by a researcher at Eckerd College showed that educating preschool children about the potential dangers of guns didn't prevent them from playing with guns. In writing about her findings, Marjorie Hardy, Ph.D., explained, "... We brought a police officer to a class of 60 children and he told them: "Don't touch guns — they're dangerous. If you see a gun, leave the area. Go tell an adult."

After the officer's presentation, the children could repeat what they'd been taught to do when they saw a gun. "But when we left them alone with disarmed guns, they picked

Tips

The Center to Prevent Youth Violence has created a resource for parents who want to inquire if there are firearms where their children play. They offer these tips, which might make it easier to open a dialogue:

- Ask with other questions. Include the question along with other things you might normally discuss before sending your child to someone's house — such as seat belts, animals, or allergies.
- Use the facts. Over one-third of homes with children have a gun. Many of those guns are left unlocked and loaded. That is why you are asking — you just want to make sure that your child is safe.
- Don't be confrontational. Present your concerns in a respectful manner. You are simply trying to make sure your child is in a safe environment.

them up and shot everything in sight," she wrote.

Officer Roger Henriquez of the Fairfax County Police Department, Franconia District Station says that parents might consider asking a parent before a play date: "How many guns do you own, and how do you keep them stored? 'Do you have a lock box or other safety features ... like trigger locks?' 'Do you take your kids to a firing range?'"

Such questions will help parents gather information to determine whether their child's playmates' parents share their views on gun safety and storage, since parenting philosophies run the gamut from lax to strict where guns are concerned. "Some parents take their kids to a firing range and other kids are told nothing except 'Stay away from this box,'" said Henriquez.

Starting such conversations can be fraught with anxiety, and many parents are reticent to broach the subject, especially with friends. "It's uncomfortable to talk honestly with other parents about issues such as guns because they are so politically divisive," said Amy L. Best, Ph.D., professor and chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at George Mason University in Fairfax. "It's also difficult to ask other parents questions that may be taken as a judgment on [their] parenting."

To increase the chance of a smooth and amicable conversation, Best suggests that bringing up questions about possible firearms and their storage should happen well before a play date, rather than when a child is dropped off at a friend's house.

"A parent can begin with letting the hosting parent know if your child has any allergies," said Best. "This can be followed by 'I just wanted to make sure if you have guns at home, they are secured in a lock box.'"

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— Amy L. Best, Ph.D., George Mason University

A straightforward approach is an essential part of initiating these conversations. "It is important to be honest about your concerns," said Isenberg. "Parents can tell the other family that prior to a play date at a new home, they always inquire as to the presence of guns."

The statistics, say child researchers, bear out the importance of overcoming initial discomfort about a potentially controversial conversation. "I think most parents support firearm safety, if that means keeping children safe," said Best.