Discussing gun safety with young patients and their caregivers

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Clinical question
How can I promote safe firearm storage for my young patients and their caregivers?

Recommendations
It has been said that the safest home for a teenager is one without guns (Sigel 2016). But in households where there are guns, it is recommended that they be stored locked and unloaded, with the ammunition kept secured and separate from the gun.

How to have the conversation
The last thing most providers want is an angry confrontation with caregivers who might feel we are challenging their constitutional rights or questioning their judgment. But it is possible to promote behavior change around firearm safety by using brief, respectful interventions and sharing a few key statistics that illustrate the importance of the issue.

When speaking with an adult caregiver about firearm safety and storage practices, consider using language like the following:

"We ask all of our families these questions."
"I'm not questioning your right to bear arms or anything like that... but part of my responsibility as a primary care doc is to make sure my patient is staying as healthy and risk-free as possible."
"We wear seatbelts when we drive, even if we're fairly certain that we're good drivers... Why take a risk when it comes to gun storage?"
"Most things that cause teens in particular to get sick or ill, or even die, are preventable: accidents, homicide, and suicide are the top three causes of death among teens. In 2015, about 3,000 kids younger than 19 years were killed by firearms that weren't carefully and safely stored (CDC 2015)."

More gun safety statistics to share
- In unintentional firearm fatalities, 81 percent of the shooters are under age 25 (Hemenway 2010).
- Nearly all unintentional firearm fatalities in children occur in or around the home, usually when the children are unsupervised and out of school (Hemenway 2015).
- In a survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 5.3 percent of high school students (grades 9 through 12) reported carrying a gun at least one day in the past 30 days (Kann 2016).
- The majority of firearms used in school-based shootings in the United States were obtained from the homes of the perpetrators or their friends and relatives. Of these, 89 percent were handguns, and 50 percent were automatic or semi-automatic (CDC 2003).
- The risk of completed suicide was greater among individuals with access to firearms than those without (Siegel 2016).
What to recommend

The storage methods most often studied and recommended for homes with children included cable locks (Barkin 2008), gun locks (Carbone 2005), and gun cabinets (Grossman 2012). Cable locks can be purchased for $5–$15 and lock boxes average $40–$150, depending on the type (Sigel 2016). Gun clubs, certain police departments and self-storage units like personal safes are other methods of safe gun storage that can be recommended to families. The following websites offer good practical advice for safe gun storage for families who have small children or teenagers at home:

- The Cornered Cat: www.corneredcat.com/article/kids-and-guns/safe-storage-around-children

Why did we choose this topic?

While numbers have been on the decline since 1993, the United States continues to lead all other nations in firearm-related deaths in people under the age of 15 years (Gill 2016). Death by firearm is still the number one cause of death for minority youth (CDC 2013). And it is estimated that 2 to 13 percent of U.S. children under 18 years of age live in households containing loaded firearms (Powell 1998 and Connor 2005). Despite these facts, only 12 percent of providers report regularly discussing this topic with children, teens, or—most importantly—their adult caregivers (AAP 2016). Fewer than 40 percent of providers “sometimes” or occasionally speak with families about the presence of guns in the home (AAP 2015 and Barkin 1998).

How could this change my practice?

The statistics on firearm injury, while daunting, are hard to ignore, and they should be a motivating force as we converse with families who house firearms. We can broach the subject while avoiding an accusatory or hostile tone, using motivational interviewing to promote behavior change around firearm storage. We can also provide concrete information about storage options and resources.

Evidence summary

Anticipatory guidance relating to gun storage and safety has been recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP 2012) and the American Academy of Family Physicians (Weinberger 2015), among other national organizations.

Two studies published early in the last decade illustrate the dangerous allure that firearms can hold for children—even those who have received prior instruction in gun safety:

- In the first study, pairs of children aged 4–7 years were observed in a structured setting where they had access to a semiautomatic pistol. About half of the children had received firearm safety tips prior to the observation. Fifty-three percent of the pairs played with the gun, regardless of whether or not they had received the safety tips (Hardy 2002).
- In the second, 29 boys aged 8–12 years and one or two of their siblings were placed in a room where two water pistols and a handgun were concealed in separate drawers. Seventy-two percent of the boys discovered the handgun, just over 50% handled it, and about 30% pulled the trigger with enough force to discharge the firearm. Over 90% of the boys who handled the gun reported that they had received some form of gun safety instruction in the past (Jackman 2001).

Several studies have demonstrated that when providers are able not only to counsel families about the dangers of gun ownership but also provide these families with a free safe storage device, behaviors can be effectively impacted. Incentive giveaways of gun storage devices have thus far been seen only in the research setting and have not been adopted as a routine clinical practicum; however, King County recently sponsored LOK-IT-UP (www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/injury/lokitup.aspx), a program offering discounts for the purchase of safe storage devices for guns.
References


