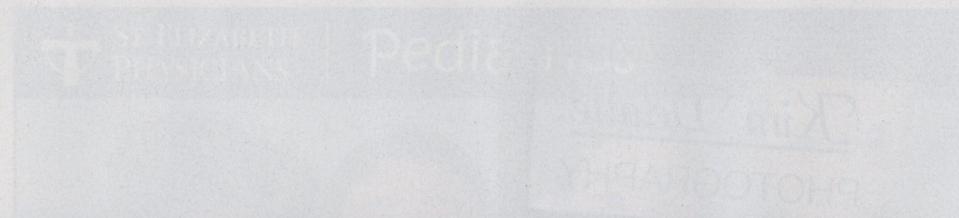


GUNS

within a Child's Reach

By Holly Bowne

It's hunting season again in Sportsman's Paradise, a statement in southeast Louisiana ingrained in our culture as steep as crawfish season and Mardi Gras. With that also comes the increased awareness that gun safety is paramount, and the most important aspect of this to parents should be the guns within a child's reach.



Setting politics aside and putting safety first, most experts agree that one of the most effective ways to avoid tragedy is by educating our children about guns and their dangers. And that education should begin in early childhood.

Children are inherently curious, and this makes them especially vulnerable to gun dangers. In the state of Louisiana, an average of two children every month are killed by the accidental discharge of firearms, and the majority of these firearms are legal. According to Captain John Lawton, certified firearms instructor, "We're heading for the time of year when people leave guns out more, a time when parents need to be more aware." Even if parents don't have guns in their own home, the reality is that guns are in many homes where their child may be.

Tips for tots

Many experts state that the first step is to take away the mystery. Rather than keeping firearms a secret, it is important to educate children on basic firearm safety. As soon as a child is capable of understanding what any gun looks like, whether the gun is real, toy, or in pictures, it is time.

Talk with your children about guns. Ensure they know what they look like and that they are not toys. Lawton states that since guns are definitely points of interest, he personally believes a parent should supervise a child's exposure to a gun that is in the home. Parenting decisions certainly differ in this regard, but the basic message agreed upon to toddlers is: Stop! Don't touch! Go tell an adult!

Corporal Don Coppola, Jr., Baton Rouge Police Department, emphasizes that we should tell our children, "If a gun

is lying there, don't touch it. A lot of toy guns are plastic, but they also make real guns with plastic coverings." Children can easily mistake a real gun for a toy.

It's elementary

It should go without saying that it is the responsibility of all gun owners to take the proper measures to render their firearms inaccessible to children and adolescents when kept at the home. If possible, the guns should be kept in a separate location from ammunition when locking them away.

Teach all children to treat a gun as if it is loaded. "Nobody can look at a gun and tell if it's loaded or not. There's no safe bet on that," says Lawton.

Consider enrolling your child in the Louisiana Law Enforcement for Gun Safety Program, a collaboration of the Baton Rouge City Constable's Office, the United States Attorney's office, and several local and state law enforcement agencies. This interactive program teaches children gun safety in order to reduce accidental firearms-related deaths. Initially geared for children in kindergarten through fifth grade, it has proven so popular that presentations have been adapted to accommodate older children and parents as well. The program even offers free gun locks to the adults who have unsecured firearms at home.

Lawton recommends that if your child will be under the care of another parent, such as at a friend's house, you need to know if they own guns and that they are safely put away. Parents must clarify the rules, even if it seems awkward with others, and gun-owning parents must be extra vigilant when their children have visitors in their home. Local mom, Roxane Voorhies, states the

first question she asks other parents if her children might be under their care at their home is, "Do you have a dog that bites or a gun?" If the parents can't ensure her child's safety, then the child simply cannot go there. While common sense should rule with those that own guns, they may not have considered that visiting children have no awareness of the same gun safety principles they have taught their own children.

This is often surprising for parents to hear. Lawton, who has conducted many of the presentations of the Gun Safety Program states, "Some of the things I ask kids is whether they know where guns are hidden in neighbors' houses, and if they have ever played with a gun when no adult was around. Hands go up. And you will see some shocked parents."

As they grow

If your child is mature enough to handle shooting, even if it's just a BB gun, Dan Zalenka, president of the Louisiana Shooting Association and attorney, believes parents should enroll their child in a familiarization course that at least includes an understanding of the firing mechanism.

Basic Gun Safety Rules

Teach your children to follow these rules if they come into contact with a gun:

Stop what you're doing immediately!

Don't touch the gun.

Leave the area where the gun is.

Tell an adult right way.

Source: NRA Eddie Eagle Program eddieeagle.nra.org

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“They don’t just go off. You pull the trigger. It is imperative that everyone have at least some basic knowledge, and you’ll probably have a lot less accidents,” says Zelenka.

Another excellent reinforcing safe practice is to install a trigger lock on a firearm. While not a foolproof safety measure, is it certainly an additional valid one.

Parental control

Experts also agree that in terms of media, parents should monitor the video games, TV, movies, and websites their children are viewing. In addition to understanding the difference between fantasy and reality, consider program content.

“Think about the TV shows you watch,” Lawton points out. “You regularly see people load guns, unload guns. You see how to manipulate them to put ammunition in them. And we learn that simply from the media.”

It is critical that parents be educated along with their children. One of the best ways to keep guns secure is using gun locks. “They’re the simplest and most effective form of protection,” says Lawton concerning the ownership of firearms. “So even if a person is able to get the gun, the weapon can’t be utilized.”

To keep weapons secure, use a gun safe if possible. “We tell parents a gun is like a Christmas present. These kids are going to go look,” says Holly Sheets, Victim-Witness and Community Outreach Coordinator for Louisiana Law Enforcement for Gun Safety.

Another tip is to store the keys for the gun and the ammunition in a differ-

ent area from where you keep household keys. No children should have access to keys or combination codes of the firearm owner.

Whether you are an owner of firearms or not, the reality is that it’s very possible that at some point your child will come into contact with a gun when you’re not around. And for many older children, guns range from a source of curiosity to one of intrigue and power. Lawton states that unlike a person’s natural fear of snakes, “We don’t have a natural fear towards guns. Because we see them in the media, we see them everywhere. They’re very attractive.” Without this natural fear, the stakes are upped for parents to teach responsibility and awareness.

For many people in Louisiana, the ownership of firearms for reasons of safety, hunting, and recreation is an important part of life. And the laws of the state supporting the rights of gun owners are some of the strongest in the country and have increased this year in state legislation. Love ‘em or hate ‘em, the time you invest in educating your child and yourself in gun safety plays a significant role in preventing firearms accidents.

There is one thing upon which we all can agree. The bottom line is to keep our children safe. ■

Free Gun Locks



For a free cable-style gunlock to secure firearms, go to our Facebook page [facebook.com/brparents] and locate the Gun Lock Giveaway status update. There you will make your request and pick up lock(s) from the *Baton Rouge Parents Magazine* office. Limit four per person and limited quantities are available. Gunlocks provided by East Baton Rouge Sheriff’s office and Project ChildSafe.

If your group or organization is interested in having a firearm safety presentation by the Louisiana Law Enforcement for Gun Safety, the program is no cost and can be adapted to any age group. For more information, call (225) 389-0443.