

# GUNS within reach

More than 1.5 million children live in households where firearms are kept unlocked and loaded, and over 100 innocent kids are killed every year. Read this to make sure your child stays safe.

by JEANNETTE MONINGER photographs by MARCUS NILSSON

Matthew Bellamy loved to hunt with his dad, Chip, near their home in Little River, South Carolina. “We started talking to him about the dangers of guns when he was 3,” says his mom, Mylissa. Safety was a top priority for the Bellamys. They always triple-checked their weapons to make sure they were unloaded and kept them locked in a gun safe. But these precautions didn’t protect 11-year-old Matthew when he and a 12-year-old friend found a hunting rifle lying on a bed at the friend’s grandparents’ house three years ago. Assuming the gun was unloaded, Matthew’s buddy, who also hunted, picked it up. As he handed the rifle to Matthew, it fired accidentally. The bullet struck Matthew squarely in the chest. He died on the way to the hospital. “We took the right steps to keep guns

away from our kids and their friends,” says Mylissa. “It never occurred to us to ask others whether they did the same.”

With an estimated 270 million civilian-owned firearms in the U.S.—nearly one for every man, woman, and child—the odds are good that there’s a gun (if not several) located someplace where your child spends time. If that fact doesn’t give you pause, this one will: A study published in *Pediatrics* found that nearly 1.7 million children under age 18 live with a loaded and unsecured gun in the house. It could be on a closet shelf, in a drawer, or under a mattress—where a child can easily reach it. Yet few parents raise the issue of firearms before letting their kid play at someone else’s home. “Most parents who own guns are responsible about keeping them

locked, unloaded, and stowed away safely,” says Beth Ebel, M.D., a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) Council on Injury, Violence, and Poison Prevention. “Yet nearly 40 percent of gun-owning households with children have an unlocked gun to which a child might gain access.”

Understandably, the nation’s focus has been on tightening gun laws in the wake of the tragic school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, which took the lives of 20 children and six adults. However, the biggest threat to our kids’ safety likely isn’t assault rifles, a lack of school security, or weapons that fall into the hands of the mentally ill. It’s the guns that are commonly found in our own homes. Each year, nearly 140 minors are accidentally killed and more than 3,000 are injured by firearms, most often at home or while visiting a friend, relative, or caregiver. About a quarter of victims under age 14 unintentionally shoot themselves. And, according to data from the Harvard School of Public Health, these estimates are certainly low, because many unintended shootings are incorrectly labeled as homicides.

Although the AAP recommends that all kids’ environments be free of firearms, many loving families choose to own weapons. If yours is among them, it’s your job to take every possible precaution (see “The *Parents* Gun-Safety Pledge,” page 94). But you still can’t let down your guard. As the Bellamy family learned too late, other gun owners may not be as careful, so it’s crucial to protect your child.

## teach safety

Anyone who’s seen a preschooler use his thumb and index finger to “shoot” bad guys knows that weapons hold an innate fascination for little kids. “If a child finds a ball, he’ll bounce it; if he finds a gun, he’ll shoot it. The impulse is totally natural,” says Dr. Ebel, who is also director of the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center at the University of Washington, in Seattle. It

## Biden Speaks Out

The vice president has played a leading role in the White House’s gun-control legislation efforts (see box below right). Watch his *Parents* Facebook town-hall forum at [parents.com/biden](http://parents.com/biden) and check out these additional responses to our readers’ queries.

**Q. What is the White House doing to help those with mental illness get treatment before they pick up guns and act out?**

—Julie Lancaster Kennicutt

**A.** First off, I want to point out that the vast majority of Americans with a mental illness are not violent. In fact, they are more likely to be victims of violence than the perpetrators. Our priority is to identify mental-health problems and make services affordable and available, especially for young people. We can start in our schools by training teachers to recognize the signs of mental-health problems and learn ways to get help for these kids. We’re also proposing to train more than 5,000 new mental-health professionals to serve young people. And we’re putting forward regulations to expand insurance coverage of mental-health services for 62 million Americans.

**Q. On the fifth anniversary of Sandy Hook, will we be able to tell affected family members, “Your loved one did not die in vain?”**

—Sue Aleshire Delabruere

**A.** I think that horrific event changed everything. The American people are demanding action and know there is a moral price to be paid for inaction. The president and I realize that even if we succeed in passing our entire gun-safety package, we can’t save every life. We can’t guarantee that another mother won’t receive a dreaded phone call. But things will be a lot better. Fewer people will be victims. Fewer futures will be stamped out. Fewer kids will die. That’s what this fight is all about.

can also be deadly: Studies show that kids as old as 12 have a hard time distinguishing real guns from play ones. That’s why it’s never too early to talk to your child about what to do if he sees a firearm, even if he thinks it’s only a toy.

Since 1988, the National Rifle Association’s Eddie Eagle GunSafe Program has been promoting firearm safety in schools and youth groups as well as through law-enforcement agencies. Its main points: If you see a gun, 1. Stop. 2. Don’t touch. 3. Leave the area. 4. Tell an adult.

Unfortunately, research shows that most kids can’t resist the lure of handling a gun, even after they’ve been warned repeatedly not to do so. “Children can recite what to do if they find a gun and still do the wrong thing when it counts,” says Raymond Miltenberger, Ph.D., professor of applied behavior analysis at the University of South Florida, in Tampa. As proof, he cites his studies published in *Pediatrics*, which showed that 4- and 5-year-olds who participated in verbal safety training didn’t follow the correct procedure when they were left alone in a room containing a gun.

## Highlights of the White House Plan

- **Require** universal background checks for all firearm sales, including those at gun shows and through private sellers.
- **Reinstate** and strengthen the ban on assault weapons.
- **Limit** ammunition magazines to ten rounds of bullets to prevent semiautomatic weapons from causing mass violence.
- **Ensure** that each school has an emergency-response plan in place and make schools safer by adding resource officers and counselors.
- **Improve** the quality of mental-health treatment, especially for young people, to help individuals get the help they need before dangerous situations develop.



Ammo needs to be locked up separately from guns.

been shot,” says Margot Bennett, executive director of Women Against Gun Violence, a nonprofit education and advocacy organization. “There are no do-overs. Many people die.”

## Speak up

Of course, such detailed talks would seem less crucial if all guns were locked and stored securely. So even if you’ve taught your child the safety rules, you still need to be proactive to keep her surroundings free of loaded firearms.

Before allowing a playdate at someone else’s house, it’s essential to ask the parents about guns. You can’t count on all families being aware of gun safety, in part because it’s become increasingly difficult for pediatricians to counsel them about firearms as they do about car seats and seat belts. In 2011, Florida made it illegal for doctors to ask patients about guns in the home. While an injunction has prevented this legislation from being enforced (the status is still being contested in court), similar bills were considered in 2012 in Tennessee, West Virginia, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Oklahoma, though they ultimately failed. Adherents of these proposals claim that doctors’ questions are an invasion of privacy and some have even attempted to paint the queries as a threat to their Second Amendment right to bear arms.

Valerie Phillips, a mom of two in Murray, Kentucky, regularly inquires about other families’ gun practices. “Most people in our area hunt, as we do,” she says. When her then 8-year-old daughter, Ella, was invited to a sleepover at a new friend’s house, Phillips slipped in a question about firearms when she RSVP’d. “I asked about the evening’s planned activities and the morning pickup time,” she recalls. “Then I said, ‘Hey, can you tell me how you store your guns?’”

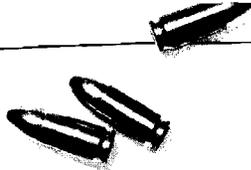
Her approach is a savvy one. Broaching a sensitive subject like gun safety is a lot easier when you make it part of a routine conversation. Granted,

Nevertheless, it’s better to have these types of conversations with your child than to ignore the issue of firearms entirely, as too many of us do. A poll on children’s health conducted by the C. S. Mott Children’s Hospital, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, found that 18 percent of gun-owning parents and 52 percent of non-gun owners have never talked to their kids about firearm safety.

Experts recommend that by the time your child turns 3, you should review regularly what to do if he discovers a firearm. Start by showing him photos of a handgun and a rifle. Tell him if he ever finds either one lying around, he is

to leave the area and find an adult at once. Emphasize that he must never touch a gun. Then quiz him. Praise him if he knows the proper way to respond, and correct him if he doesn’t.

For a child 6 or older, you should also discuss the differences between the make-believe images on TV shows or in video games and what truly happens when someone is shot. Let him know that even though they may look the same, real guns are very different from pretend ones. “Grade-schoolers need to understand that unlike in combat games or action movies, people don’t get up and keep going after they’ve



it can be a bit awkward if you don't know the host parents or you can't assume, as Phillips does, that families in your community are likely to have guns. You could bring it up in the context of your child's curious tendencies, suggests *Parents* advisor Gary A. Smith, M.D., Dr.P.H., director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital, in Columbus, Ohio. Say something like, "Jake gets into everything, and I worry that if he saw a weapon he wouldn't know it was dangerous. So I always have to ask, 'Do you have guns in your home, and if so, how are they stored?'"

There's no need to be embarrassed. "If an adult is offended by questions

## A TODDLER CAN SQUEEZE YOUR FINGER WITH THE SAME AMOUNT OF PRESSURE NEEDED TO PULL A GUN TRIGGER.

about your child's safety, you may want to consider whether that home is a place where you want your child to play," says Dan Gross, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and cofounder of the Center to Prevent Youth Violence, a national nonprofit public health and safety organization in New York City.

If you're not satisfied with the parent's answer, you might consider postponing the playdate—or inviting her child over to your house instead. Don't be swayed by assurances that a firearm, though not locked away, is in a good hiding spot. Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health found that close to 30 percent of gun-owning parents thought that their children were unaware of their weapon's location. Not only did 39 percent of those parents' kids know where to find it, but 36 percent of boys and 12 percent of girls contradicted their parents' claim that they had never handled a household gun. That's life-threatening, and not just for older kids: By age 1, a toddler can squeeze your finger with 7 pounds of pressure, approximately the same amount needed to pull a gun trigger. "The 'my-child-knows-better' attitude can be very dangerous, even deadly," says Gross.

Indeed, it's up to parents to know (and do) better. Twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia have established penalties for owners who leave firearms accessible to kids. In 12 states where such measures had been in effect for at least a year, accidental shooting deaths of children under 15 dropped by 23 percent. To find out if your state is among them, visit the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence at [smartgunlaws.org](http://smartgunlaws.org). If not, ask your local legislators to enact gun-safety laws geared toward protecting young kids.

While the Bellamys still own guns and hunt, they're now on a crusade to prevent tragedies like the one that ended their son's life. The Matthew Bellamy Project raises firearm awareness among parents and provides free gun safety locks to anyone; call 843-602-4952. "Matthew's friend has to live with what happened for the rest of his life, but he's not to blame," Mylissa says. "Even children who grow up around guns can't be trusted to do the right thing. They're still just curious kids. Adults are the ones who need to be responsible." 😊

## THE PARENTS GUN-SAFETY PLEDGE

The cycle of gun injuries stops with my child. To ensure that he or she doesn't become one more innocent victim, I promise to:

**Keep curiosity in check.** If I choose to own a gun, I will lock it, unloaded, in a stationary gun safe out of my child's sight and reach. I'll store ammunition in a separate lockbox. My child will never guess the combination or find the key.

**Take extra precautions.** Even a young child is capable of firing a gun by accident, so if I own one I'll invest in a trigger lock and, just to be sure, a cable lock (which threads through the chamber to prevent bullets from being loaded) too.

**Start a dialogue.** By the time my child turns 3, I'll explain what she needs to do if she sees a gun—leave the area without touching it and tell the nearest adult—even if she's positive it's only a toy.

**Control media messages.** I'll limit the violent TV shows my child watches and avoid shooting-focused video games, which may contribute to aggressive behavior. Plus, we'll have frank discussions about the difference between pretend gun play and the deadly nature of the real deal.

**Ask the tough questions.** Before my child goes to someone else's house I will inquire about whether the family has guns and how they are stored. If I don't like the response, I'll make other plans.

**Push for stronger childproofing regulations.** States that penalize owners who leave their firearms unlocked and accessible to kids have fewer tragic accidents. I'll let my congressman know that I support such legislation by visiting [house.gov/representatives/find](http://house.gov/representatives/find) and e-mailing him or her.



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