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Child-to-Child Unintentional Injury and Death from Firearms in the United States: What can be Done?

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Children are unintentionally killing and injuring other children at an alarming rate in the United States owing to the accessibility of firearms. Firearms are found in 33–40% of American households with children. Many of those firearms are stored in an unsafe manner, loaded and unlocked, leaving children vulnerable to injury. Health care professionals dedicated to the well-being of the pediatric population must take an active role in protecting our nation's children from unnecessary injury and death owing to the unsafe storage of firearms.

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CHILDREN ARE UNINTENTIONALLY killing and injuring other children at an alarming rate in the United States owing to the accessibility of firearms. Each year, approximately 400 American children needlessly die and more than 3,500 are wounded because of unintentional firearm injuries (Cole & Johnson, 2005; Connor, 2005; Grossman et al., 2000; Jackman, Farah, Kellermann, & Simon, 2001). Child access to firearms is also a contributing factor to child suicide and school-related shootings (Connor, 2005). Most firearms used in child-to-child violence come from the home of the involved child, a friend, or a relative (Cole & Johnson, 2005). Health care professionals, particularly those involved in pediatrics, must take an active role in protecting our nation's children from unnecessary injury and death owing to the unsafe storage of firearms and ammunition.

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PREVALENCE

Firearms are found in an average of 33–40% of American households with children (Grossman et al., 2005). Among those households, between 10% and 20% contain a loaded, unlocked gun (Connor & Wesolowski, 2005; Grossman et al., 2000; Stennies, Ikeda, Leadbetter, Houston, & Sacks, 1999). Numerous studies relating the unsafe storage practices of firearms to unintentional shootings resulting in injury to or death of a child have been conducted (Cole & Johnson, 2005; Connor, 2005; Connor & Wesolowski, 2005; Grossman et al., 2000; Grossman et al., 2005; Jackman et al., 2001). More children die in the United States from shootings than in any other industrialized country (<http://www.bradycampaign.org>).

A recent study compared pediatric trauma death rates caused by firearm injuries in two North American countries, Canada, and the United States. The authors studied Ontario, Canada, and Missouri because of their similar demographics and sociological makeup and found that the likelihood of a child dying from a gunshot wound was 100 times greater in Missouri than in Ontario (Jackman et al., 2001). The dramatically significant increase was attributed to differences in societal views on firearms and gun control regulations.

There is an association between safe storage of firearms and reduction in unintentional child-to-child firearm injuries and death (Cole & Johnson,

2005; Grossman et al., 2005). Safe storage of a gun is defined as having the gun unloaded and locked, with the bullets stored separately from the gun in a secured place (Grossman et al., 2005). In addition, the use of child safety locks (trigger locks) has shown to provide added protection against the unintentional use of a firearm by a child (Grossman et al., 2005).

UNDERLYING CAUSE AND OUTCOMES

Hunting, protecting livestock, target shooting, and protection are the most often cited reasons for owning a firearm (Boylan, 2003). The use of a firearm for personal or family protection in homes with children must be weighed against the reality of unintentional harm to a child incurred from that same firearm. Unsafe firearm storage practices, combined with children's natural curiosity regarding their environment, create an increased risk for injury or death.

The thought processes of a child in the preschool age group (2–5 years) are prelogical. Fantasy and imagination play a significant role in a preschool child's interpretation of reality (Needlman, 2004). It is unrealistic to expect a child in this age group to understand the danger associated with handling a firearm. The cognitive abilities of a child in the middle school age group (6–12 years) develop with age, resulting in an increase in logical thought. However, this ability to think in a logical manner occurs at an individualized rate. Therefore, one cannot assume that all children in this age group are capable of understanding the danger associated with the handling of firearms. Peers play a significant role in the adolescent stage of development, as children separate from the family unit in an attempt to establish their own identity. Peer pressure in the adolescent population can lead to the handling of available firearms by teenagers, resulting in potentially fatal injuries (Dashiff, 2001; Needlman, 2004).

Connor and Wesolowski (2005) found in a randomized telephone survey that most parents believed that their children (defined as 5–15 years old) would not touch a firearm under any circumstance if they found one because they knew better. This finding provides insight as to why adults store firearms loaded and unlocked with children in the home. Another study looked at how boys aged 8–12 years would respond if they found a firearm (Jackman et al., 2001). In this study, water guns along with a real gun were

positioned in different drawers in an examination room. Several 8- to 12-year-old boys at a time were placed in the examination room for a determined period where they were observed through a one-way mirror. Three fourths of the parents thought that their son could determine if a firearm was real or a toy. Three fourths also thought that their son would not touch a gun if they found one. The results of the study indicated that, within 15 minutes, three fourths of the boys found and handled the real gun.

The information obtained in these studies highlight the need for a multifaceted approach to keeping children of all ages safe from firearm injury. Safety education is simply not enough. The safe storage of firearms, keeping them unloaded and locked and with ammunition stored separately, must be mandated. Legal ramifications must be in place to ensure compliance with safe storage.

WHAT HAS BEEN DONE?

The Brady Campaign is a national organization working to prevent gun violence. It began in 1974 as the National Council to Control Handguns and was renamed Handgun Control, Inc. (HCI) in 1980. In 1983, the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence was instituted as an outgrowth of the HCI. In 1985, Sarah Brady, wife of Jim Brady (press secretary to then President Ronald Reagan who was critically wounded in an attempt on the president's life in 1981), became actively involved in the pursuit of appropriate gun control laws. Acknowledging the Bradys' commitment to gun safety, the HCI was renamed the [Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence](#) in 2001. The Center to Prevent Handgun Violence became the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

Since 1974, the Brady organizations have continued their work to promote firearm safety. Because of their efforts, Congress passed a bill banning plastic handguns. Airport X-ray devices are unable to sense guns of this type, making them a safety risk. They also met with success in their lobbying efforts with Congress to ban armor-piercing ammunition. Bullets of this nature are capable of puncturing bulletproof vests routinely used by the police. They were responsible for the passage of the Brady Bill, requiring a background check and 5-day waiting period for the purchase of a firearm. The Brady organizations have sponsored numerous educational efforts aimed at children, families, and health care providers and have been

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