

Discussing Gun Safety in the Pediatric Setting

By Meredith Lidard Kleeman

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of parents trust pediatricians to advise on gun safety

Firearm-related injuries are now the leading cause of death among kids and teens in the U.S., according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Alarming, a Pew Research Center analysis of CDC data found that the number of children and teens killed by firearms in the U.S. increased 50% between 2019 and 2021.

Pediatricians agree that violence prevention should be a priority in pediatric care and are eager to have discussions with families about keeping children safe from firearm injuries. A 2019 American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) survey found that 57%

of pediatricians reported gun violence as a problem in their practice community.

Despite mixed, often divisive policy efforts to enact stricter gun laws, research shows that parents are open to discussing gun safety measures with pediatricians. In fact, a 2022 study published in the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* found that most participants trusted their pediatrician to counsel them on what's best for their children's health, with 74% of parents (both gun-owning and non-gun-owning families) trusting pediatricians to advise on firearm safety.

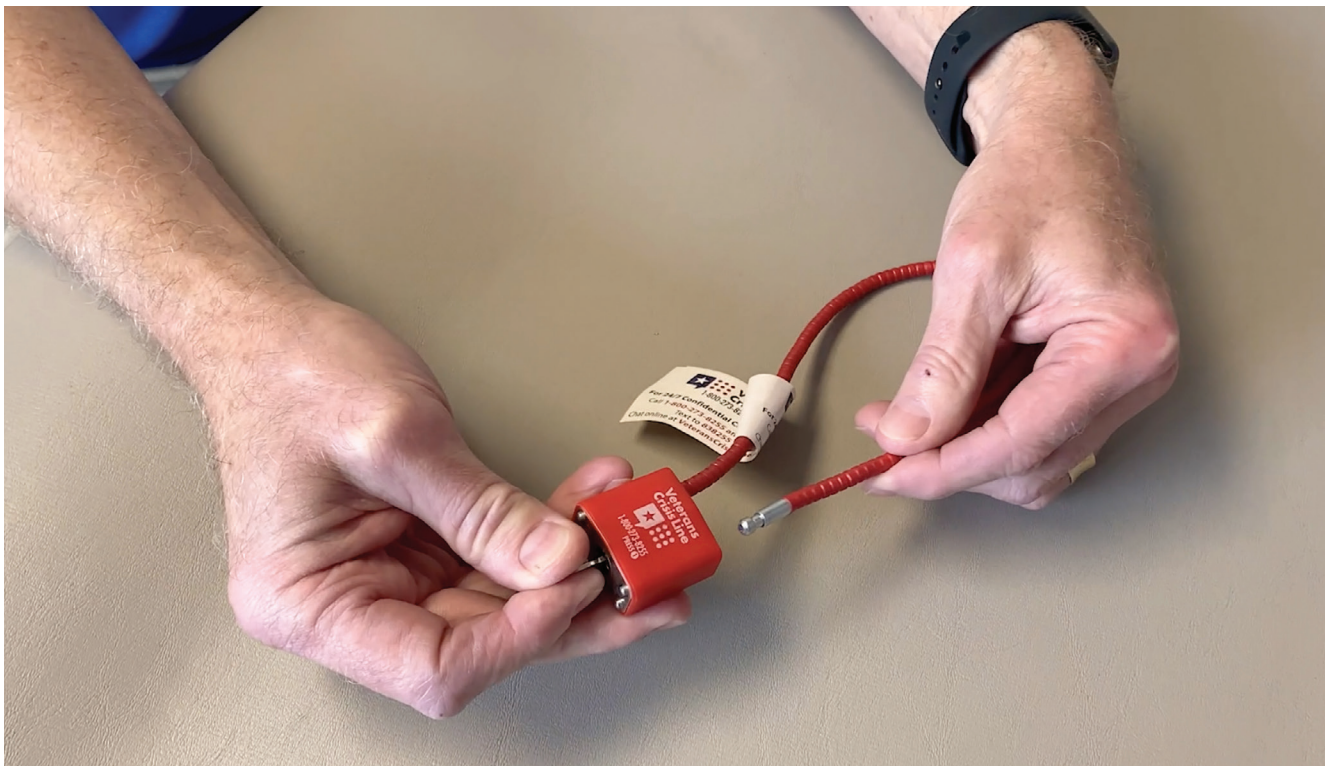


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Duke pediatrician John W. Moses Jr., MD, demonstrates how to use a gun lock.

A Trusting Relationship

Pediatricians offer invaluable care and guidance to families throughout a child's entire development, from birth to young adulthood. This level of expertise and rapport places pediatricians in a unique position to provide advice during well-child visits regarding safety in the home, which includes safe firearm storage.

"During a pediatric well visit, we'll ask about safety elements, like car seats and bicycle helmets, and if your family has a firearm at home, are you keeping it locked and stored separately from ammunition and away from the children," says Kitty O'Hare, MD, senior medical director for pediatrics with Duke Primary Care.

Some Duke Health practices have also provided free cable locks to families to ensure firearms in the home are safely and securely stored. "Discussions of safe gun storage and distribution of gun locks for families that need them is an integral part of our safety counseling," says John W. Moses Jr., MD, pediatrician with Duke Primary Care.

Dorothy R. Novick, MD, a pediatrician at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, says her patients are grateful that these discussions are happening. "Patients have enormous gratitude to providers for bringing this up and offering a safe storage device at the point of care," Novick says.

Talking to Kids

When pediatricians ask parents if there are any weapons in the home, the primary goal is to advise adults to limit access to firearms. "We know that curiosity often gets the better of children, so we try to focus on educating adults to keep that firearm in a safe place," Novick says. "When we're speaking to kids, the message is, 'If you ever see a firearm, walk away and tell a grownup—don't touch it.'"

The guidance with adolescents changes. When the pediatrician has alone time with these older patients,

the conversation goal is how the patient can encourage their older family member to lock up firearms. "If an adolescent discloses that a firearm is owned by a family member, we ask 'Is it ok to discuss this in the exam room with your parents?' Then we have that conversation with the family member about keeping firearms secure," Novick says.

Navigating Difficult Conversations

Health care providers are eager to keep children safe from gun injury and fatality but may lack the skills or comfort necessary to navigate the topic. "Most pediatricians want to be doing this work, but less than half do it in practice," Novick says.

For many years, the AAP advised pediatricians to counsel families that the safest home is one without a gun. In 2022, the AAP updated their policy statement, however, acknowledging that a multipronged approach is necessary to decrease firearm deaths and injuries. "Providing barriers to access to firearms in the home is a crucial mechanism to decrease the risks of unintentional firearm shooting as well as suicide and homicide. Removal of firearms from the home, which is the most protective measure and may be strongly advisable in some scenarios, may not be acceptable or achievable for many firearm-owning families," the statement reads.

Novick advises clinicians to consider what barriers may be keeping them from having safe firearm storage conversations with families. Some feel that firearms are too sensitive to discuss, she notes, but pediatricians speak to families about a wide range of sensitive issues and are well trained to do this in a way that feels comfortable to patients and families.

"So much of what we do is meet patients where they are to reduce the harm as much as possible," Novick says. "If we can talk about things like substance use and sexually transmitted infections, then we can talk about safe firearm storage."

Gun Safety and Injury Prevention Resources

Project ChildSafe, a program of the National Shooting Sports Foundation, offers free safety kits to individuals through their website:

FREE
SAFETY
KITS



Guidance from the AAP, including a free online course about safe firearm storage, can be found here:

AAP GUN
SAFETY
GUIDANCE



FREE FIREARM
STORAGE
COURSE

