

In the 25 years since Columbine, firearm deaths in kids have soared. This 'gun talk' can help keep them safe.

In 2019, for the first time in U.S. history, firearm injury leading to death was the leading cause of death among children from birth to age 19



ABBY MACKEY ✓

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Kim Blair was a second-year school psychologist when the contrast between classroom knowledge and real world challenges struck like never before.

On April 20, 1999, Columbine High School seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 fellow students, one teacher, themselves and, either directly or indirectly, injured another 24, permanently altering Americans' trust in schools as sacred and safe places.

At the time — 25 years ago this April 20 — it was among the deadliest mass school shootings in U.S. history, and the deadliest at a high school, prompting frenzied attempts to understand why it occurred.

As details about Harris and Klebold's habits were revealed, fingers pointed to the violent video games they played and clues left about their mental health or cognitive composition in the topics of school assignments — video production class creations including “Hitmen for Hire” and a Harris-written work titled “Guns in School” and a poem from the perspective of a bullet.

Blair, now director of UPMC Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic's Matilda Theiss Child Development Center, recalls the work schools did at the time to develop safety plans, hoping to protect students and staff from any future incident, but despite those efforts, the Columbine massacre's death toll has since been eclipsed by the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, the Parkland, Florida, high school shooting in 2018, and the Uvalde, Texas, elementary school shooting in 2022.

But those tragedies — and the 1,451 other school shootings from 1997 to 2022 — are just one category of firearm deaths among U.S. kids.

In 2019, for the first time in American history, firearm injury leading to death became the leading cause of death among children from birth to age 19.

Contributing to those numbers are unintentional firearm injury deaths — instances where kids didn't intend to hurt anyone, let alone kill them, and yet they did.

While these deaths aren't premeditated, as those at Columbine were, unintentional firearm deaths in kids are uniquely chilling, as new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that 67% of the time, they occur while children play, calling into question what kids are able to understand about firearms, what parents and caregivers should say and do to prevent these tragic outcomes, and how to foster a healthy respect for life — and firearms — that extends through adolescence and into adulthood.

Though peer-reviewed methods of firearm education in kids are lacking, the first step, Blair believes, is to strip away the don't-speak-its-name and politicized nature of the issue, allowing it to exist in the realm of must-

discuss topics among parents and children, such as bullying and reproductive health.

“We have to try our best to develop relationships with our kids where they feel like they can come to us,” Blair, also an associate professor of psychiatry at Pitt, said. “I don’t think anything should be taboo when talking to your kids. When it comes to guns or anything else, it’s all about their age and using words they understand to handle the topic in a positive, constructive way.”

Culture and responsibility

Blair doesn’t own a gun, nor does she intend to, but she’s the daughter of a former state policeman and grew up in rural Pennsylvania, where hunting was the norm.

Jack Rozel, professor of psychiatry and adjunct professor of law at Pitt with expertise in the intersection of mental health and firearms, recalls his internship at Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh, when a child presented in the emergency room with injuries caused by a hunting rifle, prompting him to question why the child wasn’t in school during the day on a Monday.

“Jack, it’s opening day of deer season. It’s a holiday to many families,” the attending surgeon said with a laugh.

According to Gallup data from October 2023, 56% of Americans are in favor of stricter gun laws. Simultaneously, firearms exist in 44% of households.

Kids and firearm-related injuries, deaths



<30 million

Number of kids living in homes with a firearm

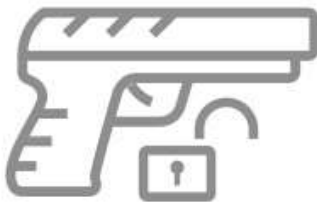
Gun-related injury was the top cause of death for ages 1-19, in 2020-21.



56%

of firearm deaths occur at home.

FIREARM STORAGE IN THE HOME



76%

of firearms involved in unintentional firearm injury deaths were stored unlocked.



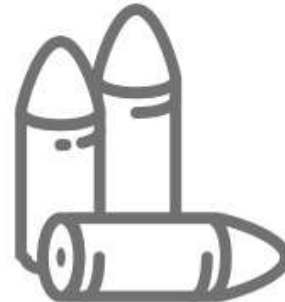
67%

of unintentional firearm injuries occurred when kids were playing with or showing the firearm to others.



83%

of unintentional firearm injury deaths occur in boys.



74%

of firearms involved in unintentional firearm injury deaths were stored loaded.

Data from CDC's National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) for 49 states, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico for 2003–2021 were analyzed.

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

James Hilston/Post-Gazette

What Blair and Rozel understand about that 44% is, in many cases, gun ownership is culture.

“I wouldn’t say remove grandma’s ashes from the bookshelf. That’s why I don’t just say get rid of the guns,” Rozel said. “Guns are a part of American

culture. Part of my responsibility to my patients is not only to address their health care issues, but to respect their legal rights.”

Though gun ownership is legally protected for most citizens, access to weapons is a known risk factor in firearm injuries and deaths, suicides and violent crime.

But overt strategies to tame access to firearms and legally protect gun ownership can co-exist.

As of January, 26 states employ child-access prevention laws that allow prosecutors to bring charges against adults who intentionally or carelessly allow children to have unsupervised access to firearms. Pennsylvania is not on that list, though the state House Judiciary Committee passed a safe storage bill in November, allowing it to move on for a full House vote.

Bethel Park business Allegheny Arms and Gun Works offers an innovative approach as the first gun store in Pennsylvania to offer voluntary firearms storage for any legal gun owner.

When weapons stay at home, however, safe gun storage should include keeping the weapons unloaded and locked, with ammunition stored separately. Based on the most recent batch of data from the CDC regarding fatal unintentional firearm injuries, however, 76% of those weapons are stored unlocked and 74% of them are loaded, placing children (and adults) at risk.

The ‘d’ words

Protecting kids from improperly stored firearms — or firearms at all, depending on a family’s preference — begins with asking questions.

The American Academy of Pediatrics — through the Asking Saves Kids (ASK) campaign — encourages caregivers to ask about the presence of guns and how they’re stored anytime their children go to another person’s home.

It’s an effective strategy, but there’s no guarantee of safety, necessitating conversations with kids.

“The gun talk, like the sex talk, is emotionally and politically loaded,” Rozel said. “It’s awkward, but the public health data is also unequivocal — that if we do it right, it can make a huge difference.”

For that conversation to have impact, the teacher (a parent or another trusted adult) needs to understand the child's developmental stage and what they're capable of understanding about the injury and death firearms can cause.

"For a very long time, we didn't think that the littler ones could understand the concepts around death," Blair said. "But there's more recent research that even these younger kids can understand, and it's OK to talk about what death is."

Per Blair, that discussion should include using the words "death" and "dying" — the "d" words — not "passed away" or notions about "going to sleep," so unnecessary anxiety about kids' own safety doesn't arise.

"You don't want kids to start worrying about whether they'll die when they go to sleep," she said. "If necessary, talk about how death is different from sleep. Talking this way will leave less room for misinterpretation."

The death talk should also include three concepts: universality (that all things die), causality (what caused the death, explained in an age-appropriate way) and non-functionality (death makes our bodies and minds stop and is final).

Kids who are exposed to death more often — such as those raised in a hunting culture or around violent crime — will have an easier time understanding these concepts, Blair says.

The next part of the conversation may also be more natural to them: talking about the weapons themselves.

Revolving barrels and conversations

Young kids, especially boys, have played cops and robbers and cowboy games since good guys and bad guys have existed.

Perhaps that's why 83% of children lost tragically to unintentional firearm injuries were boys.

"For a lot of kids, the idea of a gun, real or fake, is appealing," Rozel said. "What they really need is the judgment to say, 'I'm going to presume this firearm is loaded until I have confirmed that it is not, which is one of the cardinal rules of gun safety regardless of age.'"

But Blair points out that because of deficits in executive functioning natural to developing children, they may not be able to cognitively access those tools in the moment.

A guide for those potentially life-altering moments exists in the Eddie Eagle GunSafe program created by the National Rifle Association in 1988.

If kids come across a firearm, Eddie first tells them to “stop,” giving them time to remember all the lessons about gun safety they’ve been taught. “Don’t touch” is the next step, lessening the likelihood of discharge. “Run away” then removes children from the presence of the firearm. Last, “tell a grown-up” so they can take on the responsibility of safety.

But this isn’t a one-time conversation.

“It’s not the kind of thing that’s going to be easy to learn from a 30-minute activity and a coloring book,” Rozel said. “It’s something that requires discussions over time.”

Those discussions might lead to others, such as ones about ALICE (alert, lockdown, inform, counter, activate) active shooter training, developed just a year after the Columbine massacre, and why it is practiced in schools.

Or how beginning 25 years ago, Americans’ understanding of safety in schools changed forever.

For parents and medical and mental health practitioners, there’s no good data on exactly which mixture of conversations, mental health struggles or types of upbringing lead to healthy relationships with firearms and which lead to tragic outcomes.

The key, Blair said, is to continue talking to children about guns, just as conversations about sex, drugs and bullying are familiar refrains, and stay vigilant.

“Pay attention to what they’re doing, who they’re hanging out with and the kinds of things they’re consuming in the media,” she said. “I think that if you have a kid with gun access, plus mental health issues, plus the impulsivity that comes with being young and not having fully developed brains, that’s where you have that mix for tragedy to happen.

“If you’re worried about what’s going on with your kid, talk to their school, and if they’re struggling, find support.”

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