

Gun safety programs do not prevent children from handling firearms, study finds

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Children who participate in gun safety programs often ignore what they learned when encountering a real firearm, according to a Rutgers School of Nursing study.

The report, published recently in *Health Promotion Practice*, reviewed 10 studies on the effectiveness of strategies for teaching gun [safety](#) to children ages 4 to 9. The researchers found such programs do not reduce the likelihood that children will handle guns when they are unsupervised, that boys are more likely than girls to ignore gun-safety rules and that few studies exist of gun-safety programs for children beyond the fourth grade.

Included among the findings from previous studies is that 85 percent of gun-owning parents did not practice safe gun storage and 72 percent believed their young children could differentiate a toy gun from a real gun.

The gun safety training approaches studied included "just say no" in which authority figures tell children to stay away from guns; skills-building approaches, which teach children skills to resist touching guns; and knowledge-based programs in which children are provided with video or printed material about gun safety.

"Most of the studies evaluated knowledge-based learning in which children sit in a classroom and are shown videos or handed papers with activities or information to teach them rules to follow if they should

come across a gun," said study co-author Cheryl Holly, a professor at Rutgers School of Nursing. "The studies found that even children who initially followed the rules after the training did not use the safety skills they learned weeks later when placed in a room with a nonfunctional gun. This leads us to question if young children can retain the gun-safety skills they learn over time."

Holly, co-director of the Northeast Institute for Evidence Synthesis and Translation, based at the School of Nursing, is a resident of Sandy Hook, Connecticut. She was prompted to study gun violence after the elementary school shooting in her community.

"We wanted to look at [gun violence](#) from the perspective of children who were accessing guns in their homes and accidentally shooting themselves, parents and siblings," she said. "We wanted to see what educational strategies teachers and communities are using to teach gun safety to children, and how effective they really are."

Gun safety training is essential, Holly said, because children in the United States have more access to guns than those in other developed countries and because most unintentional shooting deaths by children occur in their homes or at the residence of a friend or relative. Firearm injuries are the third-leading cause of death for all children aged 1 to 17 and are responsible for thousands of children being treated for open wounds, fractures and brain and spinal injuries. In addition, children who witness firearm injury can experience psychological effects, such as fear, anxiety and elevated stress.

"Although programs that used active learning strategies, such as modeling, simulation or feedback, were slightly more effective at teaching [gun-safety](#) skills than programs that handed out literature, the majority still failed to teach the children to put what they learned into practice," said Sallie Porter, assistant professor at the School of Nursing,

who co-authored the study with Holly. "Children are very curious—especially about things that they have been warned not to handle."

Mary Kamienski, a professor at the School of Nursing, and alumna Aubrianne Lim, a registered nurse at Saint Barnabas Medical Center, also contributed to the study.

The researchers concluded that safe gun storage is the best way to protect children and adolescents from gun injuries. Their advice: Lock the guns up and make sure children cannot get the key or learn the access code, or better yet have a gun free-home.

"Gun safety education has value, but parents should not be complacent and feel comfortable that skills training alone will truly prevent their child from handling a gun," Porter said. "Parents often overestimate their [children](#)'s cognitive abilities and underestimate their physical abilities. They are wrong to think that their 4-year-old can't climb to reach the gun safe or that their child is developmentally mature enough to know not to handle a gun."

More information: Cheryl Holly et al, School-Based and Community-Based Gun Safety Educational Strategies for Injury Prevention, *Health Promotion Practice* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1524839918774571](https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839918774571)

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