

A gun safety paradox: Study finds some precautions linked to riskier storage practices

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Rutgers Health researchers have found that parents who actively teach their children how to handle or shoot firearms are more likely to store loaded guns in unsecured locations.

"Some parents may believe that modeling responsible [firearm](#) use negates the need for secure storage," said Jennifer Paruk, the study's lead author and a postdoctoral researcher at the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at the Rutgers School of Public Health. "But storing firearms securely is a part of firearm safety."

The [study](#) in *JAMA Pediatrics* surveyed 870 parents in nine states, including New Jersey, with diverse firearm policies and ownership rates. The researchers asked about firearm safety practices with children and gun storage habits, then analyzed the relationship between these behaviors, controlling for factors such as location and firearm type.

"We know that if kids can access firearms inside the home, that increases the risk for child suicide and unintentional firearm deaths," Paruk said. "Storing firearms securely—locked up, unloaded, and separate from ammunition—is associated with decreased risk of firearm injury and death for kids."

Firearm-related injuries have become the leading cause of death for children and adolescents in the United States, surpassing motor vehicle crashes. A 2022 *New England Journal of Medicine* study reported that gun-related deaths among people younger than 20 [nearly doubled](#) from 2013 to 2020.

According to the Rutgers study, 17% of parents with firearms in the home reported storing at least one gun unlocked and loaded. Such practices can be illegal in some states under child access prevention laws.

Many parental strategies for keeping kids safe weren't associated with any increased tendency to store loaded guns in unsecured locations, but those who demonstrated proper firearm handling to their children were twice as likely to do so.

The same was true when adults engaged children in hands-on safety practices. Parents who had their children [practice](#) firearm handling under supervision were 2.29 times more likely to have an unsecured, loaded gun. Those who taught their children how to shoot were 2.27 times more likely to store a gun unsafely.

Simply discussing firearm safety with children showed no [significant relationship](#) with storage practices, nor did telling children to stay away from guns when unsupervised, to always stay away from guns or showing children pamphlets or videos on proper gun-handling practices.

Experts typically recommend the triple precaution of unloading guns and locking guns and ammunition in separate places because children often manage to infiltrate loaded guns that seem to be safely locked away.

"Kids are really smart," Paruk said. "We know that kids can get into things and that they observe us. Just because parents think it's locked up, it might not be. A child might know where the key is kept. That's why keeping it locked up, keeping it unloaded, and keeping the ammunition separate are all good practices for decreasing the risk of firearm suicide and child unintentional injuries."

The researchers emphasized that the need to keep guns in child-safe locations applies not just to parents but to anyone who might have children visit their home, such as grandparents or other relatives. They encouraged all gun owners to examine their storage practices and consider ways to make their firearms more secure.

While the study provides insights, the authors note several limitations. The lack of information about children's ages could influence parental approaches to firearm safety. Additionally, the self-reported nature of the survey may not capture the full complexity of real-world storage practices.

Looking forward, Paruk said she and her colleagues hope to measure the effectiveness of various firearm safety education approaches in actually reducing the risk of injury or death. They also stressed the need for more research on child access to firearms, citing a previous study where a third of children could access their parents' firearms within five minutes, even sometimes when parents believed the guns were securely stored.

More information: Parental Engagement with Children Around Firearms and Unsecure Storage, *JAMA Pediatrics* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2024.3055](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2024.3055)

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