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### **ASK Day: Protect Kids from Firearms Injury**

With the school year quickly approaching its end and another summer beginning, children and teenagers will spend more time with their friends either at home or at a friend's house. Many parents will enroll their children in swimming lessons and instruct them to wear personal floatation devices to keep them safe in the water, but it does not occur to most parents to ask a simple question about the homes their children will spend considerable time in over the next two months – is there a gun in the house?

Whatever side of the gun debate a person falls on, nearly everyone agrees that children should be protected from firearms injuries. So in 2000, the ASK (Asking Saves Kids) campaign began. Numerous sources point out that in the United States, over 40% of homes (6.6 million homes) with children have a gun, and many of those households fail to lock the guns and leave them loaded at all times. (A National Survey conducted by the Police Foundation found 20% of all gun owners keep their guns unlocked and loaded, while 30% of all handgun owners do the same. In fact, 57% of all handguns are stored unlocked, and 55% are kept loaded. Approximately 1.6 million American homes have at least 1 unlocked, loaded firearm on the premises.) It is no wonder that the National Center for Injury and Prevention Control report that 9 children are killed by guns in the U.S. every day, and another 37 children and adolescents are seriously injured daily in this country by firearms. With the easy accessibility of guns in this country, the Centers for Disease Control reports that America's young people are "16 times more likely to be murdered with a gun, 11 times more likely to commit suicide with a gun, and 9 times more likely to die from a firearm accident than their peers in the 25 other industrialized countries combined."

ASK Day is June 21<sup>st</sup>, the first day of summer. Parents are urged to ask whether there are guns in the homes of their neighbors and relatives before allowing their children to spend time there. Even though some parents do discuss gun safety with their children, most children nonetheless will play with a gun if one is found. When surveyed, 53% of the participating parents reported "it had never occurred to them to ask if there was a gun where their child played," and 72% admitted they would be concerned if they found out there were guns where their children played. According to the non-profit organization Common Sense About Kids and Guns, most fatal firearm accidents and suicides occur when unlocked and/or unloaded guns are discovered by children and teenagers.

Once parents understand that they have a right to ensure the safety of their children no matter whose house is involved, the more comfortable they will feel asking about guns in the homes their children spend time in. Parents do not hesitate to find out what is being served at a party if their child has a food allergy, they should not feel ill-at-ease asking about firearms. In fact, 97% parents who owned guns reported in a survey that they would not feel uncomfortable if asked about the presence of a gun by another parent.

If there is a gun where the child would visit, ask how it is stored. If the gunowner or other adult refuses to provide information about how the firearms are secured and stored, or if you are uncomfortable permitting your child to spend time there, invite the other child to your house instead.

Gun owners have a responsibility to ensure no visiting child or adolescent will have access to a gun or ammunition. Gun owners should

- Unload and lock up all guns.
- Lock and store ammunition in a separate place.
- Hide keys to guns and ammunition in places where children will not find them.

In addition to asking about the presence of firearms in the homes where their children play, parents need to talk with their children about gun safety. Children must be taught that if they see a gun, they are not to touch it and should leave the area immediately and report this information to an adult.

People who own guns can contact their local police department about proper locking devices that are available, as well as to discuss how to dispose of an unwanted weapon. Further information about gun safety is available through PAX at [www.paxusa.org](http://www.paxusa.org) (1-800-983-4275), the National Education Association Health Information Network at [www.neahin.org](http://www.neahin.org), Common Sense about Kids and Guns at [www.kidsandguns.org](http://www.kidsandguns.org) (202-546-0200), or the Safe Kids Coalition at [www.safekids.org](http://www.safekids.org) (202-662-0600). For information about other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at [www.ccthd.org](http://www.ccthd.org) (860-721-2822.)