Gun Safety in the Home Initiative

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In 1988, a young woman, who was mentally ill and at the time caring for a suburban Chicago couple’s two children, shot six children indiscriminately in the bathroom of the elementary school that they attended; one of those children died as a result. The other five injured children, all of whom were approximately age 8 years, were brought to the emergency department (ED) at Evanston Hospital, where surgeons worked to stabilize them. I was called to be the pediatric intensive care physician as they came out of the operating room. I did the press conferences and talked with the families in partnership with our social workers to provide information as the children recovered.

Since that time, with every subsequent shooting involving children and adolescents (eg, Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland), I have flashbacks about caring for those five children and their families and what the families as well as ED providers who have suffered under similar circumstances in recent years and months must be experiencing.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has published a compilation of articles about aspects of gun violence and, more importantly, gun safety. There is another important article about the issues of gun safety in the magazine Healthy Children—“Is There An Unlocked Gun Where Your Children Play?” The AAP’s top priorities in federal gun violence prevention advocacy include:

1. Stronger gun laws, including stronger background checks, banning assault weapons, addressing firearm trafficking, and encouraging safe firearm storage;
2. Violence prevention programs addressing the needs of children who have risk factors and for children who are exposed to violence;
3. Funding the gun violence prevention research and public health surveillance;
4. Protecting the crucial role of the physician providing anticipatory guidance to patients about the health hazards of firearms;
5. Ensuring children and their families have access to appropriate mental health services to address the effects of exposure to violence.

I am now involved with an organization called Do Not Stand Idly By, which is a group focused on establishing new initiatives on gun safety in the home. The goal is to promote the use of new gun safety technology with the use of new bio-tech gun safety locks. The thought is that gun owners who store guns in their homes do want to ensure that their families are safe from harm and do not gain access to the guns accidently. The organization is working with those families to encourage them to use personalized gun locks that use fingerprint or other technology so that only the owner of the gun has access to it. The gun owners are not being stigmatized, but they are being asked to make their homes safer by not allowing small children and adolescents to have access to an unlocked gun.

REFERENCES