

Handgun Safety

What Do Consumers Learn From Gun Dealers?

Sandra M. Sanguino, MD, MPH; M. Denise Dowd, MD, MPH;
Sean A. McEnaney, MD; Jane Knapp, MD; Robert R. Tanz, MD

Objective: To explore the type and quality of handgun safety information a typical consumer would obtain from a licensed gun dealer.

Methods: Semistructured, interactional on-site interviews were conducted with licensed handgun dealers in 2 metropolitan areas. A variety of dealers (gun shops, pawnshops, general merchandise stores, and sporting goods stores) were visited. Investigators posed as customers interested in buying a handgun. During the interview, investigators expressed concern that as the parent of a 4-year-old child, they needed suggestions about keeping their child safe with a gun in the home. Information collected included basic dealer demographics, opinions on whether a 4-year-old child could pull a handgun trigger, handgun safety advice and recommendations, and the type of safety devices and handgun safety educational materials that were available in the store.

Results: There were 96 visits made to gun dealers. The typical salesperson was a man who appeared to be older than 40 years. Trigger locks were the most common safety devices available. When asked what a consumer should know about purchasing a handgun, 85% of salespeople did not mention safe storage. Only 9 (9%) offered advice that included all of the following: keeping the gun securely locked, keeping the gun unloaded, and storing the gun separately from the ammunition. One third answered “no” or “don’t know” or “uncertain” when asked if a 4-year-old could pull the trigger. The majority (92%) did not have any handgun safe storage educational materials on site.

Conclusions: Salespeople offered potential buyers little or no education about safe storage of handguns. The information provided was often inconsistent with the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

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IN 1999, 28874 people in the United States died as a result of a firearm injury. Children younger than 20 years accounted for almost 12% of all firearm deaths.¹ Nonfatal firearm injuries in childhood and adolescence are 4 to 5 times more common than firearm fatalities.² The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that homes with children should not have guns, and if a family has a gun, proper storage requires keeping it unloaded and locked up, with ammunition locked up separately from the firearm.³

However, firearms are often stored improperly in households with children. A 1994 study found that 33% of households kept at least 1 firearm in the home or vehicle.⁴ Of those households with firearms, 21% kept at least 1 gun loaded and unlocked. In households with firearms and children, 11.1% reported having at least 1 gun loaded and unlocked. A study using 1994 National Health Interview Survey data found that 35% of homes with children

younger than 18 years (representing more than 22 million children in more than 11 million homes) reported having at least 1 firearm.⁵ Among homes with children and firearms, 43% had at least 1 unlocked firearm. Overall, 9% kept firearms unlocked and loaded, and 4% kept them unlocked, unloaded, and stored with ammunition. A total of 1.4 million homes with 2.6 million children reported storing firearms in a manner that made them potentially accessible to children.

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When children have access to firearms, they are strong enough to fire them. Naureckas et al⁶ demonstrated that 25% of 3- to 4-year-old children had the ability to pull a trigger that required a pull strength of at least 10 pounds. Fifty-nine of 64 handguns commercially available at that time required a trigger-pull strength of 10 pounds or less.

From the Department of Pediatrics, Division of General Academic Pediatrics, Children's Memorial Hospital, Chicago, Ill (Drs Sanguino and Tanz); and the Department of Pediatrics (Dr McEnaney), and the Division of Emergency Medicine (Drs Dowd and Knapp), Children's Mercy Hospital, Kansas City, Mo.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

This study used cross-sectional, semistructured, interactive interviews to assess the safety information provided by gun dealers. Licensed gun dealers in the greater Chicago, Ill, and Kansas City, Mo, metropolitan areas were included in the study. Individual stores were identified using phone book listings for firearm sales. Calls were placed to stores listed in the phone book to ask if they sold handguns. Stores were included in the study if they sold handguns. Sellers not included were hobbyists and private gun dealers not doing store-based business with the public. Approval for the study was obtained from the institutional review boards of Children's Memorial Hospital, Chicago, and the University of Missouri, Kansas City.

Three interviewers (S.M.S., S.A.M., and a research assistant), 2 women and 1 man, visited handgun sellers in 1997. Each interviewer posed as a potential first-time handgun purchaser. The interviewer expressed interest in buying a handgun for the purpose of protecting his or her family and claimed to have no knowledge of handguns and no previous ownership. During the introduction, the statement was made that the interviewer was the parent of a 4-year-old child. Visits were made between July 1, 1997, and October 31, 1997. Salespeople were unaware that they were part of a study. No store or individual salesperson identifiers were collected.

Data collected included type of store (gun/hunting shop, sports shop, general merchandise/department store, or pawnshop), sex of the salesperson, and approximate age of the salesperson by observation (<25 years, 25-40 years, 41-60 years, or older than 60 years). The safety devices available for sale in the store were identified by direct observation and inquiry. Included were trigger locks, lockboxes, and gun safes. Several open-ended questions were asked at each visit including, "What do I need to know about purchasing a handgun?" and "How should I store a handgun?" Responses to the storage question were considered to be consistent with AAP recommendations if all 3 elements of safe gun storage were mentioned: firearm unloaded, ammunition kept separate from the gun, and the gun locked with an appropriate device (lockbox or trigger lock). If the respondent answered with at least 1 element of safe storage but not all 3, the answer was considered partially consistent. The answer was considered inconsistent when the advice given contained none of the safe storage elements. Additional questions asked were "Do you think my child could pull the trigger?"; "Where can I get more information about safety?"; and "Do you have any literature in the store on safety?" Each interviewer asked all questions at each visit, although the order of asking and the exact wording used may have varied among interviewers. Responses were recorded on a standardized data collection form immediately after the interviewer left the store.

Currently, 17 states have enacted child-access prevention (CAP) laws that make gun owners criminally liable if someone is injured because a child gains unsupervised

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Gun-Selling Sites

Characteristic	No. (%) of Stores
Location	
Chicago, Ill	34 (35)
Kansas City, Mo	62 (65)
Rural	2 (2)
Suburban	88 (92)
Urban	6 (6)
Type of store	
Firearms	49 (51)
General merchandise	8 (8)
Sporting goods	20 (21)
Pawnshop	14 (15)
Other	5 (5)
Sex of salesperson*	
Male	82 (85)
Female	15 (15)
Estimated age of salesperson, y	
<25	3 (3)
25-40	35 (37)
41-60	47 (49)
>60	11 (12)

*Two salespeople (1 man and 1 woman) were interviewed in 1 store.

Table 2. Handgun Safety Devices Available in the Store

Safety Device	No. (%) of Stores
Lockboxes	
On display	25 (28)
In store, not on display	6 (7)
Not in store	60 (66)
Trigger locks	
On display	53 (56)
In store, not on display	15 (16)
Not in store	27 (28)
Other	
On display	10 (11)
Not in store	84 (89)

access to a gun. These laws are intended to prevent unintentional injury among children younger than 15 years by limiting their access to guns.⁷ There are also several health-based curricula that incorporate safe storage messages.^{8,9}

The goal of this study was to identify the type and extent of safety information available to individuals when they purchase a handgun. We also explored the degree to which the information given was consistent with the AAP recommendations.

RESULTS

A total of 96 visits to stores licensed to sell guns were completed. The majority of stores (92%) were located in suburban locations, 51% were gun/hunting shops, and 21% were sporting goods stores. Most frequently, the salesperson was male (85%) and was judged to be 41 to 60 years of age (49%). **Table 1** summarizes some of the characteristics of the stores and salespeople.

Table 2 summarizes the safety devices available in the store. Trigger locks were sold in 72% of shops and were on display and visible in 53 (56%). During 34% of

visits, the gun seller reported having a gun lockbox in the store; lockboxes were on display in 25 stores (27%). In stores where safety devices were not on display, 15 salespeople (16%) revealed that trigger locks were available, and 6 (7%) indicated that lockboxes were available. When asked the question "What do I need to know about purchasing a handgun?" 80% of salespeople recommended that the prospective consumer receive personal instruction or training in firearm handling or use. Only 15% of salespeople volunteered that knowledge of safe storage is important.

The most commonly recommended source for more information about handgun safety was a training course (78%). The National Rifle Association was mentioned as a source of information by 15% of sellers, and the police were mentioned by 7%. No seller indicated that information about handgun safety could be obtained from a physician or other health care provider. Safety literature was available in 8% of stores.

The question "How should I store my handgun?" was answered in a manner consistent with the AAP recommendations only 9 times (9%). Partially consistent answers were given 62 times (66%), and inconsistent answers were given by 21 salespeople (22%). Two respondents (2%) did not provide storage recommendations.

The ability of a 4-year-old child to pull the trigger of a handgun was recognized by 66% of respondents. The remainder did not know that young children were strong enough to pull the trigger of many handguns (14%) or said they did not know or they were uncertain (22%).

COMMENT

The present study attempted to identify the type and extent of handgun safety information provided to a potential purchaser. We have demonstrated that potential purchasers of handguns were given little or no information about the safe storage of guns from the gun sellers we visited. This is true even when the "buyers" asked about safety measures.

Firearm-related deaths and injuries continue to be a significant problem for US children. Despite the evidence suggesting that keeping a gun in the home increases the mortality risk of household members,¹⁰ many people continue to believe that keeping a gun in the home makes them more safe.¹¹ Parents also may have inappropriate expectations of their children's behaviors around guns. In a survey of 400 parents in metropolitan Atlanta, Ga, 74% of gun-owning parents believed that their 4- to 12-year-old child could tell the difference between a toy gun and a real gun, and 23% stated that their child could be trusted with a real gun.¹² A subsequent study of boys' behavior when they discover a handgun in a safe environment found that 76% handled the gun and 48% pulled the trigger.¹³ In that study, more than 90% of boys who pulled the trigger or handled the gun reported that they had previously received some sort of gun safety instruction.

Adults have the responsibility to keep children safe. Given that millions of Americans own guns and will con-

What This Study Adds

Firearm-related deaths and injuries continue to be a significant problem for US children. It is uncertain what type of safety information is provided to handgun buyers at the point of purchase. This study demonstrates that salespeople offered potential buyers little or no information about safe storage of handguns. When safety information was provided, it was often inconsistent with the recommendations of the AAP. Handgun sellers are poor sources of safety information for consumers.

tinue to do so, what can be done to protect children? One strategy has been to provide firearm injury prevention education in the office setting. Professional medical organizations such as the AAP have advocated for such counseling by primary care pediatricians.⁹ Unfortunately, the limited data thus far on the effectiveness of this intervention have been disappointing.¹⁴

Another strategy to reduce the risk of childhood firearm death has been the enactment of CAP laws. There are currently 17 states with CAP laws requiring that gun owners prevent minors from gaining access to loaded firearms. The use of CAP laws presupposes that gun buyers know how to safely store handguns and gun sellers can help consumers to do so. Prior to this study, we had hoped that gun sellers actually did provide information on safe storage. However, we have demonstrated that little or no information about the safe storage of handguns was provided by the gun sellers we visited.

There are several limitations to this study. Because we conducted semistructured interviews, there may have been inconsistencies from visit to visit and among the 3 interviewers. Illinois requires consumers to have a firearm owner identification card to purchase a gun, but the interviewer in Illinois did not have a card. This may have prevented the gun sellers from being as forthcoming with information because the seller realized that the "buyer" was not going to purchase a handgun at that time. There may also be variation by geographic area. At the time this study was conducted, neither of the states involved in this study had a CAP law in place. It may be that gun dealers in states with CAP laws provide more safety information than those in states without CAP laws. In addition, the amount of information collected was limited because of the nature of the interaction.

Nevertheless, our data indicate that handgun dealers fail to provide consumers with the proper safety information. They will need a significant amount of training if they are expected to provide safety information to prospective consumers. It seems unlikely that gun sellers would readily provide information that might discourage handgun purchase. However, it also seems evident that the point of sale represents an opportunity for the distribution of safety information. Potential partnerships between handgun safety advocacy groups and handgun dealers could be explored so appropriate safety information is provided at the point of handgun purchase. Although there may be an oppor-

tunity to provide handgun safety information at the time of purchase, the willingness of handgun sellers to provide it remains to be seen.

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Corresponding author and reprints: Sandra M. Sanguino, MD, MPH, Division of General Academic Pediatrics, Children's Memorial Hospital, 2300 Children's Plaza, Box 16, Chicago, IL 60614 (e-mail: ssanguino@northwestern.edu).

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Correction

Errors in Signature Block. In "The Pediatric Forum" letter titled "Effective Elements of Literacy Intervention: Book, Talk, or Both?," published in the May issue of the ARCHIVES (2002;156:518-519), on page 519, Iman Sharif, MD, should have been listed as first author, followed by Sarah Rieber and Philip O. Ozuah, MD, MEd.