

Teaching Gun Safety Skills to Young Children

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Dr. Ray Miltenberger: Teaching Gun Safety to Young Children

Every year in the United States, hundreds of children are killed or injured by firearms they find in their homes or in the homes of a friend. This occurs because many firearms are not kept in securely locked containers out of the reach of children, and when children find guns, they treat them like toys and play with them.

The research literature has shown that programs for teaching gun safety skills to young children are often ineffective. Research on the National Rifle Association's Eddie Eagle gun safety program, for example, has shown it is not successful in reducing gun play among young children. Other programs that use active learning strategies, such as modeling, rehearsal, and feedback, are more effective for teaching gun-safety skills.

Studies have shown that young children often have difficulty learning safety skills, showing little or no improvement in knowledge and skills after participation in information-based injury prevention programs (such as the Eddie Eagle program). One reason for the lack of improvement is that, although these programs describe and model the safety skills, they do not have the children actively rehearsing the skills.

Ray Miltenberger, of the Department of Child and Family Studies, has created a gun injury prevention program that uses behavioral skills training (BST) and in situ training. The intervention helps children to demonstrate the desired safety skills in role-playing assessments and in situ assessments. The use of in situ training is a unique component of this intervention and has been shown to be very effective for teaching safety skills to children between the ages of 4 and 7 years of age.

BST teaches children the skills to use if they ever encountered a firearm. Breaking down the behavior into discrete steps (i.e., "stop, don't touch, leave the area, and tell an adult"), children are given instructions, and then shown models engaging in the correct behaviors when finding a gun. Children then rehearse the skills as they find a real (but disabled) firearm. Instructors offer praise if the child performs correctly and corrective feedback to help a child to learn how to respond. This training process is repeated as the children role-play the safety skills when they find a gun in a number of

different places. If a child is unable to perform the correct behaviors during an assessment following training, the child participates in additional in situ training sessions. Not only do the children learn the skills in just a few training sessions, the children continue to engage in gun safety behaviors during follow-up assessments weeks and months later.

Dr. Miltenberger reminds us that, although these findings have important implications for preventing firearm injuries, keeping guns out of the hands of children is still the first line of defense for preventing firearm injuries.

For more information about BST and safety skills, contact Dr. Miltenberger at miltenbe@usf.edu.

Read [Teaching safety skills to children: prevention of firearm injury as an exemplar of best practice in assessment, training, and generalization of safety skills](#) online article.