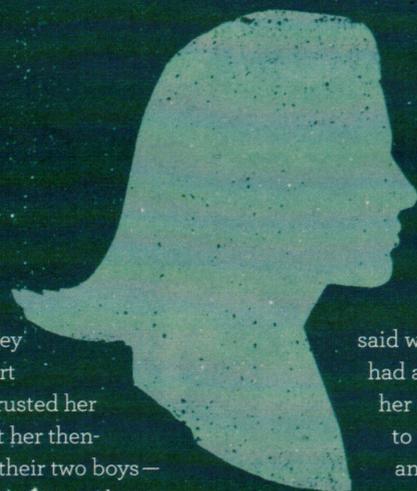


THE QUESTION EVERY MOTHER SHOULD ASK

Parents have a secret weapon they can use to protect their children from unintentional shootings: their voices. Learn about the simple conversation that can help keep your children — and the rest of your family — safe.

by TULA KARRAS



To this day, Haley Parker Rinehart wishes she'd trusted her gut and not let her then-husband take their two boys — Eli, 4, and Ethan, 1 — to their relatives' home on April 5, 2002. Haley, who lives in Bowling Green, KY, knew the relatives owned guns. Though Haley had never seen one lying around the house, like all conscientious parents she'd told her sons guns were dangerous and never to touch one. "But I never asked if they kept their guns locked up." This question might have changed everything.

That day, Haley had just come back from lunch when her phone rang. It was her husband. "All he

said was, 'You have to get here now; Eli's had an accident,'" she recalls. Haley and her parents jumped into the car and sped to the hospital. Haley called her husband and the relatives, "but they all just said to go straight to the hospital. I was thinking it was a car crash or a broken arm. It never occurred to me what the reality was."

The family was directed to the ICU, where a doctor and several police officers and chaplains were waiting. "That's when I lost it — I knew it was bad," Haley says. They brought Haley into a room with the relatives. "They were crying, saying, 'I'm sorry, Haley,' and I just lunged at them, screaming. I assumed Eli was dead." Her dad and the police held her back. One of the

illustration by RICHARD MIA



A YOUNG LIFE TAKEN

Sienna Owens at age 10 (left) and volunteering at a food drive (right) just three weeks before she was killed.

Northwestern University found that 25% of 3- to 4-year-olds and 90% of 7- to 8-year-olds had enough strength to pull most of the simulated triggers in the study using two fingers. With so many unsecured weapons that are easy to fire, it's no surprise that tragedies occur over and over, day after day.

IRREPLACEABLE LIVES

Last December 11, Danny Owens's world split into a before and after that no parent should have to experience. His 11-year-old daughter, Sienna, who lived with her mom in Decherd, TN, was visiting a school friend. At around 6 P.M., the girls walked to the home of a

day, he arrived in time to help make funeral arrangements, comfort his other kids and attend a memorial held by Sienna's soccer team. "We did the best we could as a family, but there were a lot of tears and stress and emotions," he recalls.

Danny is still reeling from the loss of his daughter, a star athlete and student who, he says, was "the peacemaker" during sibling car squabbles. He still struggles with the fact that he lived far from her. "I thought we'd have all this time to do things together. I let precious opportunities to be with her slip by, and I can't get them back," he says.

TALKING THE TALK

Because the majority of these tragedies are preventable, several medical organizations are tackling safe firearm storage as a public health issue, attempting to educate adults about ways to keep guns out of kids' hands. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association, for example, have long urged doctors to ask families during routine visits how any firearms are stored: Research shows that parents who are counseled by doctors are over twice

EVERY 32 HOURS IN THE UNITED STATES, A CHILD AGE 17 OR UNDER FINDS A FIREARM AND UNINTENTIONALLY SHOOTS HIMSELF OR ANOTHER PERSON

12-year-old middle school classmate, and the kids went into the boy's garage to hang out. According to the police report, Sienna was shot in the back and the boy's mother said her son had accidentally fired the shot. Sienna was pronounced dead on arrival at the medical center that night.

"I got the call from Sienna's mother around 10 P.M.," recalls Danny, who is divorced and studies law 300 miles away, near Memphis. "She was hysterical and just said, 'Our baby's dead—she's been shot—she's dead!' Then she hung up. My legs started shaking, and they gave out," he says. Danny was too upset to drive and spent much of the night on the phone with family members and the investigator at the scene, trying to understand how the unthinkable had happened. The next

as likely to improve their storage practices. Some 140 medical groups and public health experts have called on Congress to approve CDC funding for gun-violence prevention research. And nonpartisan groups like the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence and Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America (which formed after the Newtown school massacre) have launched campaigns aimed at making safe gun storage a normal part of dinner-table chitchat, discussed by families in the same way as are the dangers of texting and driving.

Moms Demand Action's Be SMART campaign encourages parents to ask the host how guns are stored before playdates, sleepovers and family visits. "Asking about gun storage should feel as natural as asking about pets in

STAY-SAFE DO'S & DON'TS

Try these proven tips to protect kids from unintentional shootings:

DON'T simply hide a gun: Sticking it behind books on a high shelf or taping it under a bed is not enough. According to a Harvard survey of some 200 gun owners and their children, nearly three-quarters of kids under 10 knew where the guns were; 36% of kids under 14 said they'd handled one.

DO store guns in a gun safe. Make sure they're unloaded, and keep ammunition locked up separately from the weapon.

DON'T rely on the judgment of kids, even those trained in some sort of gun safety. One study of boys ages 8 to 12 who discovered a deliberately hidden gun found that of those who handled it, more than 90% had had some prior gun-safety instruction.

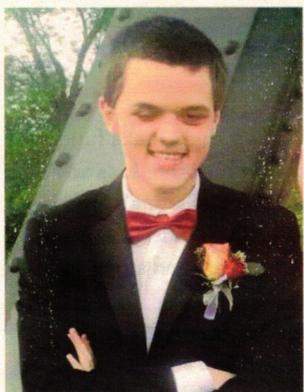
DO install a cable lock or a trigger lock.

DON'T make suicide easy. It is the second leading cause of death for youth globally, and about 43% of U.S. kids who kill themselves use a gun, according to data from the National Violent Death Reporting System.

chaplains explained that Eli had been shot. He was alive, but he was fighting for his life.

According to information pieced together later, when a relative took Ethan into the spare room to change his diaper, Eli wandered alone into the master bedroom, climbing up on the bed to look at the children's books that were kept on the headboard. There, he found a loaded gun sitting atop the books. Eli later told police and his mom that he was just going to move it, but he was curious and turned it to see if "there was a missile in it." That's when it slipped and fired, discharging a bullet into the corner of Eli's right eye. The bullet went through his brain and exited behind his right ear.

That night was unspeakable for Haley and her family. Over the course of several days, Eli had three emergency surgeries to stem



SURVIVOR STORY
Eli Parker (in 2015, before his junior prom) will always wear a prosthetic eye.

a 3-year-old visiting relatives in Irondale, AL, discovered a loaded gun in a bedroom nightstand and shot his 9-year-old sister in the head, killing her; and in March, an 11-year-old girl visiting a friend in Memphis was critically wounded when she was shot by another child playing with a loaded gun. By the

time this article goes to press, there will be dozens more cases like these. That's because 1.7 million kids under the age of 18 live in a home with at least one loaded and unlocked weapon, according to a study based on survey data from the CDC and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System.

Exactly how many people are accidentally shot by kids is challenging to determine for many reasons: Some states and local authorities classify these incidents as accidents and

71% OF KIDS 17 AND UNDER WHO'VE UNINTENTIONALLY KILLED SOMEONE WITH A GUN SINCE 2015 FOUND IT UNLOCKED AND/OR LOADED*

brain swelling, extract bone fragments and remove a damaged portion of his brain. He survived, but his optic nerve was shattered, and he lost his eye. "When Eli came out of his medically induced coma after the last surgery, the first thing he said to me was, 'Momma, I'm so sorry!'" Haley says. "I told him it wasn't his fault—I was devastated, but I was also thrilled that he remembered me. We weren't sure what sort of brain damage he'd sustained."

Now 18, Eli wears a prosthetic eye, has problems with depth perception and suffers from almost daily migraines. He's had many surgeries to refit the prosthetic as his head has grown and will need still more. "I know Eli was lucky he lived," says Haley. "But what we went through was completely preventable."

ALL TOO COMMON

This past April, a 3-year-old near Atlanta fatally shot himself in the chest after finding a loaded gun in his family's home; in February,

some as homicides, and some law enforcement officers and coroners don't report these deaths at all. "The federal government cannot require that state and local officials report unintentional shooting deaths to the CDC," says Lindsay Nichols, senior attorney with the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. What's more, she says, only hospitals report injuries to the agency, and busy ER doctors may not have time. That's why experts believe official estimates of injuries and deaths from unintentional shootings by children, which put the annual number in the hundreds, are far too low. For the last 20 years, the CDC has had very limited funds to study the issue.

What is clear is that accidental shootings by children occur in every region of the country, more frequently in suburbs and rural areas, and toddlers are more likely than older children to shoot themselves. In fact, young kids are physically capable of firing most handguns on the market: A study from →

HOW TO HAVE THE TALK ABOUT GUN STORAGE

Yes, it's awkward, but these tips will make the conversation easier:

TREAT THE TOPIC LIKE ANY OTHER.

"It should be as simple as asking if there are peanuts in the house if your child is allergic," says Shannon Watts, founder of the grassroots group Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America.

VOLUNTEER THE INFO YOURSELF.

If you own a gun, let other parents know how it's secured, suggests Watts, and then ask them what they do.

USE THE NEWS AS A WAY IN.

You can say, "I just read a heartbreaking story about a child who unintentionally shot another child" to broach the topic.

"BLAME" YOUR KID'S CURIOSITY.

If the response is "We keep it accessible and loaded in case of emergency," back out of the playdate, saying you don't trust your child to stay out of trouble, says Jennifer Hoppe, deputy director of Moms Demand Action.

DON'T CHANCE IT.

Offer to host at your home instead. If the parent declines, say thanks, but no thanks.

the home or about access to R-rated movies and the Internet,” says Jennifer Hoppe, deputy director of Moms Demand Action. Hoppe has been broaching the subject with parents of her daughters’ friends for years. She admits it can be awkward—discussions about gun safety can feel political even when they’re not meant that way—but the stakes could not be higher. Says Eli’s mom, Haley, “I’ve met a lot of parents who’ve lost their children, and they’d give anything to

some are quite lenient. [Visit everytown.org/childaccess to learn about CAP laws in your state.]

But studies show that gun laws that require safety measures and hold adults accountable can save lives. In 1989, Florida rolled out the nation’s first CAP law and a public-awareness campaign, and the decade that followed saw a 51% decrease in children killed by unintentional shootings there. CAP laws have

73% OF UNINTENTIONAL CHILD GUN DEATHS IN A YEAR INVOLVED SHOOTERS WHO WERE UNDER 15 THEMSELVES

have asked these questions and to have their child back.” [See “How to Have the Talk About Gun Storage,” page 111.]

Because the focus is on kids’ safety, people tend to be receptive to the question, says Moms Demand Action volunteer and San Antonio mom of three Angela Turner, a gun owner herself. “I’ve found that most of the gun owners in my community are already storing their guns safely,” she says [see “Stay-Safe Do’s & Don’ts,” *opposite*]. Once, she says, parents insisted their kids didn’t know where their guns were stored, which didn’t reassure Angela, so she invited their child to her home instead. “My hope is that the conversation caused them to rethink how they store guns,” she says.

CHANGING WHAT’S “NORMAL”

While everyone agrees that children need protection, the question of what laws should exist is a contentious one. Some feel strongly that it’s a gun owner’s responsibility to educate her children and to store guns as she sees fit, and there are no federal laws requiring safe gun storage in homes with kids. There are also no federal laws that impose criminal liability on adults when a child gains unsupervised access to a firearm, and only 27 states and Washington, DC, have any laws like this—they are broadly termed Child Access Prevention (CAP) laws, and

resulted in a significant drop in unintentional shooting injuries, perhaps in part because these laws began to change how people thought and behaved, says Nichols—the way laws requiring seat belts have made it automatic for most people to buckle up. Says U.S. Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), “We’ve regulated automobiles to make them safer and have stopped large numbers of deaths. We’ve labeled poisons in the home to protect children. Why shouldn’t there also be a safety framework for guns?” Unfortunately, “the discussion about gun safety has become so toxic, people aren’t listening to each other or to the facts,” she says.

That’s in part because of fears, stoked by the National Rifle Association (NRA), that any safety law, including CAP laws, is a diminishment of the Second Amendment, says U.S. Congressman David Cicilline (D-RI). “But gun-safety regulation is not about taking away a citizen’s right to own a firearm,” he says. “It’s about commonsense proposals that keep guns out of the hands of children and dangerous people.”

A frustrating factor for safety advocates and lawmakers is that a vast middle ground of citizens—Republicans, Democrats and Independents—believes such laws can keep kids safer. A 2014 survey by Everytown for Gun Safety of 600 likely voters, including 200 gun

owners, found that 77% of the gun owners favored laws requiring that parents store guns locked and unloaded. There is so much common ground, in fact, that some remain hopeful that the rhetoric can become less polarized.

But we’re not there yet. Cicilline calls the fact that House leadership has not (as of press time) allowed a vote on any gun-safety bills “a national disgrace.” Jackson Lee calls for a defense of the right of our youngest citizens to grow up safely: “Our nation’s most precious resource is our children, and they are the victims of this,” she says.

A FAMILY’S PLEA

Meanwhile, Eli’s mom, Haley, is still fighting to spare other families what hers went through. “It’s been 14 years since Eli’s shooting, and nothing has changed in Kentucky to protect innocent kids,” she says. “How can parents not want to keep children safe?”

Eli, who started college this fall, says his emotional challenges outweigh the physical ones. “What bothers me most is the stigma that people place on those with disabilities,” says Eli, who was bullied throughout his school years because of the damage to his face. “They make fun of people who look different, even though they do not know what those people have been through.”

Sienna’s dad, Danny, makes the point that the consequences of accidental shootings by children endure forever. “It’s not just the taking away of the life of the child; it’s those who are left behind,” he says. And the damage to families like Eli’s is often irreparable. Haley says her son feels the relatives at whose home the shooting took place have not shown enough remorse. “I despise them,” he says. “I have no relationship with them, and I do not ever want a relationship with them.”

Not surprisingly, Eli is a strong supporter of CAP laws. His message? “Keep your guns locked up,” he says simply. “I’m proof of what can happen if guns are left out where a child can find them—or it can be even worse.” ♦