



HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT FIREARMS

A Guide for Families Who Want to Learn More
About Safety and Develop a Safety-First Mindset



EDUCATION, NOT ISOLATION

When it comes to teaching children, we look to the experts on the subject: teachers. Teachers provide examples and create scenarios for children to figure out the answers. They state, restate and reiterate. And they do their best to protect children from being uninformed and unprepared.

They don't shy away from the subject and hope children discover the information all on their own. They tackle the important life topics head-on. And honestly, when it comes to important life topics, we don't really want our kids figuring this stuff out on their own.

Children learn idiosyncratically, and teachers need to provide a range of guided educational opportunities to foster true learning and to achieve a depth of knowledge and understanding rather than just breadth.

And it's the same with parenting. If we close our eyes and let our children do whatever they please, the outcome will not be favorable. We need to provide a variety of purposeful learning opportunities to help kids safely and successfully face — and manage — life's toughest challenges.

Like with any other important issue in life, no one can teach about responsible gun ownership by ignoring firearms or pretending they aren't there. That simply makes firearms taboo and even more fascinating to little ones.

It's an important topic to address — head on. Talk to children. Guide them. Teach them! You don't want them attempting to figure this out on their own.

Whether or not you choose to have firearms in your home, there's no better thing you can do for your children than to arm them with knowledge.

How to Talk to Kids About Firearms: **AN AGE-BASED APPROACH**

What makes teaching young people about guns so challenging is that it's about more than just the type and the size of the gun, the caliber of the round, the gun's recoil and the amount of experience a child has had with firearms. It's not just about stance and grip and sight picture.

For any learning experience, it's also important to consider each child individually and to think about his or her character, temperament, strengths, weaknesses, emotional intelligence, cognitive-thinking abilities and learning style.

There's much more to it than simply saying, "OK. My daughter is 8 years old. She is ready to shoot now." So, don't be afraid to really ask yourself if a child is responsible enough. And don't be frightened to ask your children their thoughts as well.

Let's look a little deeper into some of the typical developmental groups to see what we can learn about their abilities and their limitations and discover what strategies we can use to instruct youth on this important topic.



AGES 3-5

Preschoolers are a unique and challenging group, especially when it comes to teaching firearms safety and fundamentals. As we all know, kids 3 to 5 years old are very active and mobile, and they're eager and ready to learn new things and try new experiences. However, they do not have the longest attention spans. Thus, small, simple blocks of instruction — incorporated with interactive activities and lots of repetition — will work best to keep this group on track.

By age 3, most kids have a basic understanding of cause and effect, but they still need to be guided to make conclusions or generalizations. They won't typically have those "aha!" moments on their own. These little ones are also still very focused on themselves, so it's difficult for them to understand how their actions or choices affect others around them.

Learning for children in this age group is best done through hands-on, meaning-driven interactions in which children can discover before being asked to apply knowledge. For example, in a firearms learning activity, you could permit these kids to touch and interact with ammunition (or snap caps or dummy rounds) and magazines before asking them to problem-solve how ammunition is safely loaded.

Incorporating specific hand motions and gestures while teaching the universal safety rules is also very effective.

Even though this age group can memorize and recite simple concepts fairly easily (like the simplified universal safety rules listed in this guide), true understanding at this age is not about memorization but rather uncovering. And that often comes with hands-on experiences.





AGES 6-8

Children in the 6-to-8 age range typically experience a lot of academic growth in math and reading. This also means moving beyond memorization to actual problem solving and the recognition of patterns. Somewhere between 6 to 8, children can give and follow simple directions. They also have a more solid understanding of cause and effect and are beginning to discern shades of meaning and, therefore, can more easily differentiate fact from opinion. Children in this age range may be able to understand and enjoy some jokes and sarcasm, but they still need clear, firm and consistent directions and rules since they can still be quite literal.

As these children progress in school, their individual learning styles will become more apparent. And these different learning strengths and weaknesses allow children to learn different kinds of tasks with relative ease or with some level of stress or struggle. This is why some kids may quickly and easily be able to learn and apply the fundamentals of shooting, while for others, it takes more time and effort to sink in. For instance, some children may be very visual and can watch the correct way to grip a handgun and then model that behavior, while others may be more kinesthetic in their learning and have to grip the firearm themselves before it makes sense to them.

Children in this age range benefit from playing games that require them to think about numbers and shapes and exercise their problem-solving skills. They are starting to work well in groups and learn from one another. Rhymes, patterns, repetitions and colors will be very useful to get their attention, keep them engaged and help new concepts take hold.



AGES 9-11

Children in this age range are beginning to apply higher-level thinking skills to learning in new and significant ways. However, while they may be fairly good at using inductive logic (or using specific observations to make a broad conclusion), they still struggle with deductive logic (or starting with a few broad, general ideas and applying them to a specific situation).

Children's increased memory ability across this age group allows 9- to 11-year-olds to apply knowledge to new problems or situations – or, in other words, to truly learn! They are also more aware of where their individual learning styles and skills fall relative to their peers, so they notice what might be hard or easy for them. This knowledge greatly impacts how they approach learning and what challenges they might be willing to take on. Using a variety of examples and activities (and emphasizing how children are smart in various ways) will help kids more confidently strengthen weak areas and excel in strong ones.

This age group is in the prime of their elementary school years. Many children this age have become competent students and can participate very successfully in the routines and expectations of a classroom setting. But they are also becoming increasingly more independent and are constantly looking for ways to pull away from adults. For this age group, a firearms education class with other kids can be very beneficial.

But for parents and teachers alike, remember to give the 9-to-11 age group some space and opportunities to accomplish things on their own or in small groups. Nothing motivates a child of this age more than the ability to enter into “kid-only” spaces that prohibit or limit adults!





AGES
12-15

Adolescence may be a confusing time of raging hormones, unbridled emotions and considerable physical changes, but at no other time in life do children have a greater capacity to learn. Researchers believe this heightened learning capacity is due to the increased connectivity in the brain, which is related to the increase in intellectual capacities, such as memory and reading comprehension. Brain development in preteens and teens also leads to increased abstract thinking skills. Hypothetical reasoning, such as deductive logic, is a direct result of children's advancing cognition and leads to new abilities.

Of course, children — especially ages 12 to 15 — experience cognitive development at very different rates and sometimes to very different degrees. For this reason, the development of this group may seem inconsistent and erratic. For instance, one day, these teens may seem to have it all together, and the next day they simply do not.

Research shows us that as a teen's body continues to grow and change, so does his or her brain. And some of the brain's areas mature earlier and faster. These areas include the striatum, which recognizes rewards. On the other hand, the prefrontal cortex, which helps in decision-making, matures later. This means that this age group tends to find rewards super enticing, while, at the same time, they often fail to plan — especially during times of stress.

For the firearms lessons, this could mean that using games with fun competition with some rewards may get even the least interested teenager ready to participate.

AGES 16-18

Young adult learners are often an interesting mix of the older teen group's characteristics and the attributes of typical adult learners. And by age 18, most teens exhibit a lot of adultlike thinking (even though their brains are not done developing). This means that while young people in this age group may still require guidance and specific direction, they are certainly more self-directed and autonomous, and they hope – and expect – to be treated like adults. It's important to note that young adults can think abstractly.

Many of them are philosophical and idealistic as well. Because of this, 16- to 18-year-olds might appreciate more classroom discussion and more opportunities to share and learn from past experiences of the group as a whole, but they will still appreciate hands-on activities and interactions.





KIDS AND GUNS: SIMPLE STEPS TO A SAFER HOME

Talking to kids about guns can leave many parents wondering where to start. The USCCA recommends starting with the fundamentals.

Universal Gun Safety Rules

Educating children about firearms is a personal decision, and the “when” and “where” may differ for everyone. But we can agree that being consistent and vigilant is key. And with this, we know that using and modeling safety at all times is imperative. Thus, no matter the age, stage or experience level, we learn and follow the four universal gun safety rules:

1. Treat all guns as though they are loaded.

This is the golden rule of firearms. And even if someone has checked a firearm (and it's clear, with no ammunition inside), he or she should still treat the gun as if it were loaded. In fact, for kids, it's important to treat anything that looks like a gun as though it were loaded.

2. Never point your firearm at anything you are not willing to destroy.

An effective method for remembering this important rule is to ask your kids to think about the direction of their muzzles at all times. They must be cautious of the "business end" of any gun (where the bullets come out) and make sure that it's pointed in the safest direction possible at all times. And, of course, that means to NOT point a gun at people or things.



UNIVERSAL GUN SAFETY RULES

3. Keep your finger OFF the trigger and outside the trigger guard until you are on target and have made the decision to shoot.

We see this incorrect habit (a lot!) in TV shows and movies. When children grab those Nerf guns or water pistols, the first thing they typically do is put their fingers on the triggers. Instruct each child that his or her pointer finger should be off the trigger and outside the trigger guard — straight out along the side of the gun — until he or she is on target and ready to shoot.

4. Always be sure of your target, and know what's behind, in front of and around the target.

This rule is important so that children understand that they are responsible for every bullet that leaves their gun ... and they want to be sure that each bullet will go where it needs to. At the range with live-fire rounds, this should mean that the bullet ends up in a berm or backstop. At home, with dry-fire practice, you must be aware of your safe direction. You don't want to set up so you are pointing firearms or training tools at neighbors or toward rooms where people may be. Find a location, such as a fireplace or a brick wall, where you can set up and work through any drills.



Additional Gun Safety **RULES**

Furthermore, these additional safety rules are easy for any child to learn. With repetition, children can pick up on the rhythm and the pattern of these words to help them remember these important steps:

- 1) Every gun is **real**.
- 2) Every gun is **loaded**.
- 3) NO! **Don't** touch!
- 4) **Tell** an adult.

SAFELY STORE PERSONAL-PROTECTION TOOLS

So how do you store guns and keep your children safe? Balancing between having a gun available for when you might need it and keeping guns and ammo safely stored is not an easy task. From a legal standpoint, you must be fully aware of local, state and federal regulations pertaining to the safety and storage of defensive weapons in your household.

Of course, most parents would agree that there is no such thing as being too careful with children and firearms. There are too many terrible examples of young ones who have been injured or who have injured others by mistake. Thus, access to firearms in the home should be available only to those who are trained and know how and when to use them. Fortunately, there are many effective options for keeping firearms out of little hands. In addition to rigorously teaching gun safety, every parent needs to choose what method or option works best for his or her family.



Fireproof and Theftproof Gun Safe

For the majority of gun owners, a safe is the No. 1 common-sense, go-to option. After all, a good gun safe is fireproof and theftproof, and it is designed to deter the most crafty, power-tool-wielding grown-up, so there's an excellent chance that it will keep firearms out of the hands of even the most high-spirited or unruly toddler. And a safe is a practical and sensible choice, especially in homes with multiple guns to store. With that, gun safes are available in all sorts of shapes and sizes that fit varying space and budgetary needs.

While nothing is ever foolproof, a gun safe is a big deterrent for children of any age and activity level. Will guns become unnoticed and uninteresting when they are locked away? Not probable. Will a safe protect your children in every situation? Not possible. But storing firearms – unloaded and separately from ammunition – in a secure, locked safe is arguably the most effective way to protect the little ones in your home.

Firearms Hidden in Plain Sight

While not quite gun safes, there are some options that effectively store guns while keeping them well-hidden from unauthorized users. Aside from clever concealment furniture, shelves, clocks, mirrors and benches, there are books, bookshelves and hanging garment bags with hidden compartments designed specifically for firearms storage. These concealed spaces and hollowed-out areas are handy and convenient, but they don't — and won't — fool children. Kids are smarter than we give them credit for, and a gun stored in the pages of a particular book or behind an unusual mirror is likely not hidden from them at all.





Keep Guns Out of Reach

Many gun owners choose to keep guns in hard-to-reach locations, such as on top of an armoire, in the back of a drawer or up high on a shelf. Out of sight, out of mind is often the first layer of safety. For instance, a gun stored unloaded with the magazine out in a hard-shell case on a high closet shelf may be out of sight, out of mind and out of reach for children, but it's still easy enough for authorized users to access in case of a dangerous or unsafe situation. The key issue here is selecting a place that isn't tempting to kids. And never be fooled; the secret location is most likely not a secret at all.

Overall, when it comes to keeping guns out of little hands, what works best will be different for every family. Just keep in mind that children learn best by observing the adults around them. As gun-owning parents, if we consistently practice safe conduct, our actions will teach safe conduct. And ultimately, that's the most effective gun safety there is, no matter where our firearms are stored.

A black, heavy-duty gun safe is shown open, revealing a handgun resting in a custom-cut foam insert inside. The safe has a sturdy handle and a combination lock on the front. A green circle with the text 'Firearm Storage TIPS' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Firearm Storage TIPS

With safety always at the forefront, especially with children in the home, here are a few tips for making sure your firearms are safely stored:

1. Store firearms in places where they're accessible only to you or to designated members of your family.
2. Use a storage location that is out of reach of children and that can be secured with some kind of lock. Gun safes, cabinets, vaults or other storage cases are all good options.
3. Keep guns and magazines unloaded when stored.
4. Store ammunition in a separate location that is locked and out of reach of children.
5. Make sure keys or combinations are kept in a place where children and unauthorized users cannot access them.
6. Get into a set routine for securing your concealed carry firearm and go through the same motions every time.
7. Use a gun-locking device, such as a cable lock, as an extra safety precaution whenever and wherever firearms are stored.

Remember that some states and municipalities have restrictions regarding how unattended firearms and ammunition should be stored in a home, business or motor vehicle. This makes it incumbent upon you to ensure that your storage locations and access methods fall within the local guidelines to keep you out of trouble on all fronts.

CONCLUSION

Many of us would love to create a protective bubble for our children. We worry about their safety. We worry about their choices. We worry about bad people and the possible dangers all around them. And while we can try to control what happens under our own roofs, we can't just lock them up or baby-proof the rest of the world. So it's important that we are always vigilant about two things: teaching them and watching them.

Whatever works for you, be safe and consistent. When it comes to safety training, don't ever give up or give in. We certainly don't want to ignore the topic of firearms and let our kids find out about guns on their own. And we don't want them to learn everything they'll ever know about guns from TV shows, movies, video games, peers or complete strangers either.

USCCA contributor Michael Martin says:

"You can educate your kids about firearms, or you can trust their education to unreliable and questionable sources. Taking the opportunity to set the tone for your kids [and their understanding of firearms and personal defense] will not only keep them away from forming dangerous perceptions and practice but will also bring you closer together as a family."



SAFETY STARTS IN THE HOME, AND WE HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO TEACH OUR CHILDREN ABOUT GUN SAFETY.



To find a *Children's Firearms & Safety Fundamentals* class near you, scan the code or visit:

www.USCCA.com/ChildSafetyClass



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