

Faith Lemire-Baeten
Liberty Ranch High School, Galt

“I saw my uncle get killed this weekend. They shot him. He died right there. My dad got really mad.” First grader Tommy liked to conjure up far-fetched tales, like wrestling a polar bear, commandeering a tank, and fighting off wild dogs, so my mom, Tommy’s reading instructor, took his story in stride. Then he burst into tears. Inconsolable, Tommy was escorted back to his classroom where the teacher confirmed that Tommy had indeed seen his uncle shot and killed at a family gathering.

“The absence of guns from children’s homes and communities is the most reliable and effective measure to prevent firearm-related injuries in children and adolescents. Amen. The “injuries” here mean physical harm, and I agree with its analysis. Tommy experienced a different gun-related injury. When children like Tommy witness family gun violence it leaves a psychological injury like none other.

As the article addresses, the physical injuries are all too real, also. Though teenage firearm-related deaths have declined, it’s still unacceptable that the U.S. continues to have, among high-income countries, the highest rate. As a tutor for 4 years, I’m disturbed most by the fact that risk factors include poor academic performance. I’ve seen students become distraught over bad grades. Of my 30+ students, there’s a handful that’s caused me to worry: the 8th grader struggling with 3rd grade math, the depressed student whose family offers little support; the frustrated student who seldom keeps his appointments. I keep adults informed and encourage my students while they’re with me, but reading that academic stress is a risk factor in teenage violence gives me a chill. Teenagers are impulsive creatures. Unsecured firearms in a home in these situations can be deadly.

The recommendation regarding health professionals questioning parents about their children’s gun access hit home with me. When I was young, before I could visit a new friend’s home, my mom asked that friend’s parent, “Does your home have a dog, a pool, or a gun?” These items left alone weren’t dangerous, but the uneducated handling of each created a potential for serious harm. She made me keenly aware of the potential dangers. Few of my friend’s parents do the same, so I strongly agree with AAP’s recommendation that physicians question parents on this topic.

Since health care professionals may not be parents themselves, I further support their education about children’s mortality risk with firearms. Additionally, the AAP’s funding of research to better understand how to prevent firearm injury is definitely needed. And, just as there are safety regulations that require a fence around a pool and a leash on a dog, I agree with AAP’s support of regulations about access to firearms. Potentially harmful items need regulation.

Lastly, the article’s affirmation that “the most effective measure...is the absence of guns from homes and communities” cannot be strongly stated enough. The absence of a gun from Tommy’s family gathering would’ve prevented not only his uncle’s life-ending injury, but young Tommy’s psychological injury, as well.