

Keeping children safe from gun violence:

Children cannot be gun-proofed

Children and Guns Are a Deadly Mix



Gun-proofing children is dangerous. It makes children responsible for an adult gun owner who has broken the law

- Thabazimbi, Limpopo – 12 October 2025: an 11-year-old boy shoots and kills a farm worker while hunting guinea fowl.¹
- Mqanduli, Eastern Cape – 2 October 2025: An 8-year-old boy shoots and kills his 7-year-old cousin with his father's licensed firearm at their home in Nothintwa locality.²
- Northcliff, Gauteng – 16 July 2025: A 5-year-old boy, was shot and killed by his minor brother who was playing with a gun while seated in a car.³
- Verena, Mpumalanga – 5 April 2025: A 13-year-old boy shoots his 15-year-old cousin in the cheek whilst playing with a gun. The suspect had stolen his father's safe keys from the wardrobe and took out the firearm from the safe.⁴

¹ Solomons, Lisalee. 2025. Limpopo farm shooting: Boy, 11, accidentally kills worker, father arrested for negligence. News24, 12 October. (Online). Available at <https://www.news24.com/southafrica/crime-and-courts/limpopo-farm-shooting-boy-11-accidentally-kills-worker-father-arrested-for-negligence-20251012-0901> (accessed 13 October 2025).

² SAPS. 2025. Media Statement: Eight-year-old boy fatally shot his seven-year-old cousin. (Online). Available at <https://www.saps.gov.za/newsroom/msspeechdetail.php?nid=64279> (accessed 12 October 2025).

³ Perumal, Yoshni. 2025. Boy, 5, allegedly shot dead by brother "playing with firearm". IOL, 16 July. (Online). Available at <https://iol.co.za/news/education/2025-07-16-boy-5-allegedly-shot-dead-by-brother-playing-with-firearm/> (accessed 13 October 2025).

⁴ Moloi, Herman. 2025. Boy, 13, charged with shooting cousin in the face with dad's gun. TimesLive, 8 April. (Online). Available at <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2025-04-08-boy-13-charged-with-shooting-cousin-in-the-face-with-dads-gun/>.

Children and guns are a deadly mix

Children and guns are a lethal combination and should never be allowed to mix. By far the safest option is to not have a gun in the home (or car) when children are around.

The law is clear: Under the Firearms Control Act, a gun owner commits an offence (under section 120(8)(a)) if he does not store his unloaded gun in a locked safe when it is not under his direct control. The penalty for failing to store a firearm correctly is up to 5 years imprisonment.

Despite this legal requirement, many gun owners rely on inadequate safety measures and dangerous assumptions about their children's behaviour.



The myth of the "obedient child"

Many parents dangerously overestimate their child's ability to resist curiosity around guns. Research shows that while 74% of parents reported that their child would leave a gun that they found alone, this confidence is false. In one study, parents of boys aged 8–12 rated their son's interest in guns, whilst the boys were left to play in a room containing two toy guns and one real gun. Of boys whose parents thought they had low interest in guns, 65% handled the real gun and 35% pulled the trigger.⁵

Children are naturally curious and have likely discovered their parents' hiding places, including where safe keys are kept. No amount of instruction can overcome a child's natural curiosity or guarantee they will make safe choices in the moment.

Why "gun safety" education programmes fail

Some gun owners believe that teaching children safety messages—such as "Stop! Don't touch. Leave the area. Tell an adult"—will keep them safe. Programmes like this were developed by the National Rifle Association, the biggest gun lobby group in the USA and have been widely promoted (including in South Africa) as a solution to stop children playing with a gun they might find.

However, research clearly shows that these programmes do not work in real-life.⁶ While children can verbally repeat back the instructions they have been taught—which makes parents feel their child understands what they must do if they find a gun—these programmes consistently fail to change children's actual behaviour when they encounter a real firearm. In both controlled and real-life settings, children who received 'Eddie Eagle' training were no less likely to pick up and play with a gun than untrained children.



⁵ Jackman, Geoffrey, et al. 2001. Seeing is Believing: What do Boys do When They Find a Real Gun? *Pediatrics*. Vol. 107(6), pp. 1247-1250.

⁶ Himle, Michael; Miltenberger, Raymond; Gatheridge, Brian; and Flessner, Christopher. 2004. An evaluation of two procedures for training skills to prevent gun play in children. *Pediatrics*, Vol. 113, No. 1, pp 70-77. <https://doi.org/10.1542/PEDS.113.1.70>; Hardy, Marjorie. 2002. Teaching Firearm Safety to Children: Failure of a Program. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, Vol. 23, no. 2, pp 71-76. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004703-200204000-00002>; Kelso, Pamela; Miltenberger, Raymond; Waters, Marit; Egemo-Helm, Kristin; and Bagne, Angela. 2007. Teaching Skills to Second and Third Grade Children to Prevent Gun Play: A Comparison of Procedures. *Education and Treatment of Children*, Vol. .0, No. 3, pp. 29 - 48. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ETC.2007.0016>.

Gun-proofing makes children responsible for an adult gun owner breaking the law

The facts are clear: **"gun-proofing" children is ineffective and dangerous. It makes children responsible for an adult gun owner who has broken the law.**



The most effective way to prevent gun injuries in and by children is to remove guns from homes. If this is not possible then guns must be securely stored:

- Store all guns unloaded in a locked safe when not under direct control, as required by law
- Store ammunition separately in a locked container
- Never rely on hiding places or assume children will follow safety instructions
- Recognise that even the most well-behaved child can act unpredictably around firearms

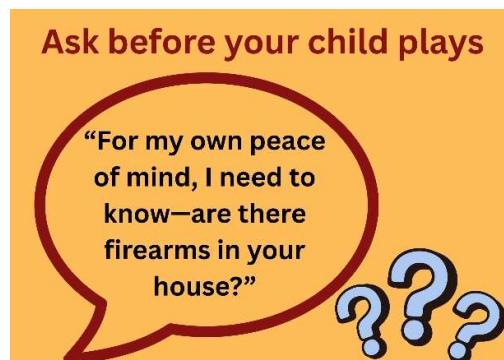
Ask before your child plays: A life-saving conversation

All too often children are shot when visiting a friend or family member. Before letting your child to play at another home, it is essential to ask whether there are guns in that household. This conversation can be uncomfortable, but it could save your child's life.

Many parents worry about seeming intrusive or judgmental when asking about guns. However, this is a legitimate safety question

What to listen for: If the answer is yes, ask specific follow-up questions:

- "Are they stored unloaded in a locked safe?"
- "Is the ammunition stored separately and locked?"
- "Where are the keys kept?"



If you are not satisfied with the answers, or if the other parent seems casual about gun storage, it is perfectly reasonable to suggest the children play at your home instead, or to arrange the playdate in a public place such as a park.

Normalising the conversation: The more parents ask this question, the more normal it becomes—and the more gun-owning parents may be prompted to look at their own storage practices.

Remember: A responsible gun owner should never be offended by this question. Any parent who takes offence at a basic safety enquiry about their home may not be taking storage seriously enough.

Your child's safety is more important than avoiding an awkward conversation.

Recent tragedies remind us that no child should ever pay the price for an adult's failure to store a gun safely. Education programmes cannot overcome children's natural curiosity or guarantee safe behaviour. The law requires secure storage for good reason—it is the only reliable way to prevent children from accessing firearms.

If you have a child, the safest option is to not have a gun in the home. If this is not possible and you own a gun, the responsibility is yours alone. Lock it up properly. Your child's life depends on it.