



by Cora Greenberg and Jackie Hilly

IS THERE A GUN

WHERE YOUR CHILD PLAYS?

A LOCAL RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY GROUP ENCOURAGES FAMILIES TO ASK.

The middle-class Maryland neighborhood where the Price family lived looks just like many of Westchester's suburbs: nice, safe, friendly. Children play in each other's homes and yards and barely anyone worries that something bad will happen. But on a summer day in 1998, something terrible did happen. Thirteen-year-old John Price and two other children were playing Nintendo at a neighbor's house when their 11-year-old friend Philip came into the room to show off a handgun he had found in one of the bedrooms. Philip thought it wasn't loaded. Philip pulled the trigger. The bullet pierced John's brain and he died instantly.

The tragedy that befell the Price family continues to occur in "nice, safe," middle-class homes throughout the country, and Westchester is no exception. In 1999, 21 Westchester residents were killed in unintentional shootings and three were children under age 19. That same year, eight Westchester children under age nine sustained gunshot injuries severe enough to require hospitalization. Nationwide between 1991 and 2000, 159 children under age 14 died in unintentional shootings, another 80 individuals—most of them kids—were injured, maimed, burned or blinded by BB guns and other air-powered guns.

Fortunately, a growing number of Westchester parents, health providers, activists and county and state legislators are now in the forefront of a nationwide public health initiative to make gun manufacture and ownership subject to consumer protection laws. Many products that don't have a history of killing an average of 20 children a year, including teddy bears, appliances, children's clothing, cars and sporting equipment, are regulated to keep children and families safe from injury or death. As an example, a few years ago, when the Consumer Products Safety Commission and the soccer industry realized that every year, one child died from injuries caused by a soccer goal that tipped over, they responded by improving safety standards for goals to reduce the risk of tipping. When it comes to firearms, some basic safety regulations

could also help make the difference between life and death, especially considering that more than 40 percent of American homes with children have a gun.

In response to vigorous advocacy by the Westchester Children's Association, domestic violence groups and concerned citizens, Westchester now has some of the most progressive gun laws in the nation. In 1995, Westchester adopted a five-year-renewable gun permit law (New York State has yet to pass a similar law). To obtain a permit, gun owners have to register their guns with the county clerk's office, a process that requires background checks and a minimum of firearms training, in addition to renewal every five years. In 1999, the administration of county executive Andy Spano discontinued gun shows at the Westchester County Center, and in 2000 the Board of Legislators passed the Westchester Gun Safety Law, requiring gun owners to store their weapons unloaded and separated from ammunition in a locked box, or to safely store the gun using a trigger lock when not in use. The safe storage law now affects an estimated 23,000 registered Westchester gun owners.

The Westchester Children's Association (WCA), a nonpartisan research and advocacy group founded in 1914, has led the campaign to raise awareness among healthcare providers, parents, teachers and young people concerning the public health issues associated with guns. WCA works with the Westchester Youth Council to engage and educate youngsters about gun violence and safe gun ownership. Under this program, dozens of teenagers from communities throughout Westchester collaborate on a series of advocacy events including publishing fact sheets about gun safety, holding a rally with empty shoes symbolizing lives lost to gun violence and convening a speak-out and sing-out featuring original writing and performances by teens urging their peers to steer clear of guns.

WCA successfully advocated for Westchester County to become a sponsor of the ASK (Asking Saves Kids) Campaign, developed by the non-profit,

gun safety group PAX. County executive Spano's office launched the campaign in 2001 with letters sent to more than 1,500 pediatricians, childcare providers, educators and others encouraging them to spread the word about ASK.

The campaign, founded by John Price's mother Carol, urges parents to ask whether there is a gun in the house where their children play. ASK also provides parents with literature, tips and resources to help them discuss the subject with friends, neighbors and their local PTA.

Since its inception nearly five years ago, ASK has inspired parents from an estimated two million households around the country to begin inquiring if guns exist where their children play. In just the past two years, the number of parents who always ASK has increased from 24 percent to 33 percent.

Physicians and mental health professionals have also begun asking this question of their patients because, in addition to the risk of unintentional death and injuries, it is now known that keeping a gun in the home is associated with higher suicide rates. Teens may be especially at risk since suicide is often an impulsive act. Some experts believe that having access to a loaded, unlocked gun in the home may contribute to why American children under the age of 14 are twice as likely as children in other industrialized nations to commit suicide.

Westchester residents concerned about gun safety largely agree that we could do more to protect our community from gun accidents. WCA continues to advocate for stronger safety measures and policies, such as a Firearm Injury Reporting System (FIRS) to obtain data about the public health consequences of gun violence. Also on WCA's wish-list are: the staff and technology to trace delinquent gun registrations, and standards for high quality safety locks. WCA hopes that eventually the design of guns, like the



teddy bear, will be regulated by the Consumer Products Safety Commission.

How to ASK

Protect your children from unintentional shootings by asking whether there's a gun in the home where they play. PAX's Web site, www.pax.com, offers tips to make asking easier, like addressing the question along with other subjects you might normally discuss, including allergies, seat belts or animals. This year, National ASK Day is scheduled for the first day of summer, Tuesday, June 21, when children are most likely to be playing in other people's homes. For information on ASK Day 2005 activities, obtaining ASK brochures and safety advisories, e-mail ask@pax.com or call (212)269-5100.

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