

## Saying No to Guns: It's Not Enough An Interview with Marjorie Hardy

### Peggy Patten

*Marjorie Hardy (MH) is a professor of psychology at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida. Parent News (PN) staff interviewed her about her research on gun safety education.*

PN: I've read summaries of your research on gun safety education with young children conducted during the mid-1990s. Can you explain how you became interested in the topic of gun education for young children?

MH: A combination of factors led to my interest. I was initially influenced by an early conversation with a mentor of mine in graduate school. We were talking about the number of parents who felt that their children would not do something simply because they were told not to. Then news of the various shootings among youth led to my interest in finding out more about parental influence in gun safety education. Were parental warnings and education about gun use enough to keep children safe?

PN: Describe the original and follow-up studies you conducted with young children on gun safety education.

MH: The first study involved 60 children who attended a day care center in Charlotte, North Carolina. The children were between 4 and 7 years of age and were mostly middle-class. We brought in an authority figure—a police officer. He spoke to the children about gun safety—the difference between real and play guns, the danger of handling real guns, and what to do if the children found a gun. We then tested the children to see if they learned the important lessons about gun safety. Despite what the children said they would do, when left alone with disarmed, but real, guns along with other novel toys, the children picked up the real guns and shot everything in sight.

We then did a separate study with a different group of children in the same setting using a more intensive education approach. In a week-long, one-hour-a-day program, the children worked on conflict-resolution skills, resisting peer pressure, practicing safety prevention, and distinguishing toys from dangerous objects. When this second group was put to the test—left in a room with real guns and other novel toys—they were just as likely to play with the real guns as those without intervention.

Despite our gun safety education efforts, of the 109 children participating in the two studies, 65% picked up, played with, and “shot” the real guns when left alone.

PN: What were some of the most surprising findings for you as a researcher and as a parent?

MH: Most surprising to me was the level of aggression seen in the children who played with the guns. The aggressive behavior went beyond simply shooting the guns at others. The actions and words of the children with the guns increased in hostility and anger. It was as if handling the guns elicited aggression in these children. The older children in the group—the 6- and 7-year-olds—could tell the guns were real and not pretend. They asked for crayons to use as bullets and then tried to put the “bullets” in the chambers of the guns.

I wasn't alone in my dismay of the children's behavior. The police officer who participated in the education program was also a parent of young children and was stunned by what he saw.

PN: How did children respond afterward to your questions about their handling real guns after learning about the dangers of doing so?

MH: In some cases, children said they played with the guns because they saw other children doing so.

In other cases—as with my own son—they lied. They said they didn’t handle the guns.

PN: Your research was conducted with children 4 to 7 years of age. How do you feel the results would differ with older children?

MH: The television program *20/20* replicated my study with children up to 10 years of age. Although I did not analyze their results, they reported similar findings. Despite gun safety education and promises not to play with guns, a majority of the children in the *20/20* study handled the real, but unloaded, guns when left alone.

PN: Many people feel that we could keep children safe from gun violence by implementing comprehensive gun education classes in the schools. Do you believe this strategy would be beneficial?

MH: We don’t know enough about the various gun violence prevention programs to know what would be beneficial. Most programs have not been evaluated to see if they make a difference in children’s behavior. There is some legitimate concern that such programs as the Eddie Eagle Gun Safety Program may in fact glorify guns and make them more enticing to children.

Despite the lack of evidence about the impact of such programs, we do know that education about the dangers of handling guns is not sufficient to keep children from using guns. Why should education alone be enough? We don’t simply educate children about the dangers of crossing the street and leave them alone to do so. We hold their hand and walk with them when they’re young. When children are older, we don’t assume that simply telling them about the dangers of drinking or having sex is enough to keep them from engaging in those risky behaviors.

PN: Do you believe schools have a role in helping to keep children safe from gun violence?

MH: I believe schools can provide an important education piece by helping children know what to do if they see others involved in dangerous activities

and how to monitor teasing and bullying behaviors, for example. But as I mentioned earlier, education is not sufficient to protect children. In addition to schools, parents, communities, and government share in the responsibility of keeping our children safe. We need to approach violence prevention from all angles.

Parents need to monitor their children so they know where they are playing and whether weapons are present in the homes of their children’s friends. In general, the more that parents get and remain involved in their children’s lives—from preschool through adolescence—the better. Our studies provided a kind of wake-up call to many of the parents in the day care program, many of whom had guns in the home that weren’t adequately secured. Many said they monitored their children more carefully as a result of what they discovered from their children’s participation in the studies.

Communities can help keep children safe by providing after-school programs so children aren’t home alone. Most of the accidental shootings are among latchkey children.

Finally, government has a role in violence prevention, which is to pass legislation that makes guns and gun ownership safer—mandatory trigger locks for guns and licensing and registration for gun owners, for instance.

PN: Where can our readers find out more about your work in the area of children’s health and gun violence?

MH: The results of one of my studies has been published in the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* (1996, volume 17, pp. 216-221). I am currently writing a chapter for a larger publication on gun violence education programs that will eventually be published by a foundation interested in this issue.

There are an increasing number of organizations dedicated to the issue of violence prevention and gun safety for children. I encourage parents to learn as much as they can about what works and what does not work in violence prevention. Most impor-

tantly, I encourage parents to be involved in their children's lives during their preschool, school-age, and adolescent years. We know that makes a difference.

## **For More Information**

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Coalition to Stop Gun Violence  
<http://www.csgv.org/content/home.html>

Preventing Juvenile Gun Violence in Schools  
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS/actguid/gunfree.html>

Join Together Online  
<http://www.jointogether.org/>

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