



CSTS podcast series

Let's Talk About Your Guns

Episode 3: Keeping Kids Safe

1.	NOTES	AUDIO
2.		DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: Nicholas Wiley was a young man in his early twenties and he was living with his grandparents along with his two year old son, Benjamin.
3.		DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: On September 12th, 2016, Nicholas and his son Benjamin were watching TV together. And this morning Benjamin wanted to watch a different show.
4.		DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: His dad, Nicholas, sent him to the back bedroom to go watch what he wanted to watch on his iPad.
5.		DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: As Benjamin was walking back to his own room, he looked in the room where Nicholas slept and he saw Nicholas's gun on the nightstand.
6.		DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: Benjamin Smith was familiar with toy guns. He had Nerf guns. He had water pistols, he had toy guns.



		<p>And because he was so familiar with the toy guns that he had, there was no barrier in Benjamin's mind that guns were dangerous.</p>
7.		<p>DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: Nicholas, who was in the other room heard this deafening boom. He rushed into his bedroom. And saw little Benjamin lying there with a hole in his chest.</p>
8.		<p>DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: Nicholas cradled Benjamin in his arms. He immediately called 911 asking how he could help his son and to have emergency responders come immediately. He tried to save his son's life. Everybody tried to save little Benjamin's life. But they were unsuccessful.</p>
9.	Transition to new beat	
10.		<p>DR WEST: An estimated 4.6 million American children live in homes with guns that are loaded and unlocked. More than 700 children die each year due to firearms.</p> <p>Matthew Weintraub is the Bucks County, Pennsylvania district attorney. He believes had Benjamin's father stored his guns safely that day, Benjamin might still be alive.</p>
11.		<p>DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: When Nicholas Wiley was asked what had happened, he swore up and down that his gun was made safe. He had stored it safely. But he was wrong. The safety was off, and the</p>



		gun was on a nightstand, which was for a two-year-old is right about chest level. And so it was a perfect calamity of terrible events that enabled young Benjamin to see the gun, grab the gun, turn it on himself and fire it.
12.	Transition to new beat	
13.		DR WEST: I'm Curt West: Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Scientist at the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. Today, in <i>Let's Talk about Your Guns</i> we'll learn how Benjamin's death led to a community-wide campaign for safe storage.
14.		DR WEST: We'll also talk to Dr Alison Tothy, a pediatrician and an advocate for child safety.
15.		DR WEST: She'll share some strategies for how to make sure your children are safe when there are firearms in the home.
16.		DR WEST: Firearm safety in the home is built around five principles. Weapons should be stored unloaded. They should be taken apart or stored with a disabling device engaged. They should be stored in locked containers, and ammunition should be stored in a separate locked container. Finally, firearm safety in the home involves having a plan for storing guns in an alternate location during times of crisis.



		<p>DR WEST: All of these principles are especially important when there are children around. Children as young as 2 years old may be strong enough to pull a trigger.</p>
17.		<p>DR WEST: Our goal today is to give you the tools to have open and honest conversations about safe storage. Conversations that may save your child's life.</p> <p>So now... <i>Let's Talk about Your Guns.</i></p>
18.	Transition to new beat	
19.		<p>DR WEST: Mr. Weintraub, Benjamin's father was ultimately convicted of involuntary manslaughter, endangering the welfare of a child and reckless endangerment.</p> <p>To the outside observer, it feels like it's very harsh that Nicholas would be prosecuted for this in light of the fact that he tragically lost his son. How hard was that for you to prosecute that case?</p>
20.		<p>DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: This was one of the toughest decisions I've ever had to make. I have children, I have two kids, and I'm a gun owner. And I really wrestled with this.</p> <p>People would say to me, well, this parent is already going to suffer a life sentence because he's responsible, whether we charge them or not, for the death of his only son, his two year old son, his pride</p>



		<p>and joy, the light in his life. And I get that. And he's still serving that moral sentence.</p> <p>But it's incumbent upon adults to make sure that these weapons are safely secured and stored.</p> <p>I think it's fair to say that children are counting on us as adults to protect them. A child should never be put in the situation where they have to make the decision whether a gun is safe to handle or not. They just should not be able to handle a gun that is unsafe. So it's an adult's responsibility to make sure that those guns are stored safely and properly so that we will never have to face another incident like the death of Benjamin Smith again.</p>
21.	Transition to new beat	
22.		<p>DR WEST: Dr Alison Tothy is a pediatric emergency physician on the south side of Chicago. She's seen cases like Benjamin's before.</p>
23.		<p>DR ALISON TOTHY: This is just such a sad story. And it's one of many. About one third of homes with kids have guns in them, and many are left unlocked and unloaded.</p> <p>Between 2015 and 2020, there were at least 2100 unintentional shootings by children that resulted in roughly 800 deaths and 1400 non-fatal gun injuries. And in fact, in 2020 alone, at least 125 toddlers under the age of five shot themselves or someone else.</p>



		<p>DR WEST: Those must be absolutely devastating injuries to a child that small.</p>
		<p>DR ALISON TOTHY: The risk of lifelong trauma is just enormous.</p> <p>Often these aren't just graze wounds. They're maiming events. So a kid picks up a gun and they have to use two hands, for instance, to pick up the gun and the gun goes off and it destroys their dominant hand, for instance, so that they grow up with one functioning hand or arm. They shoot someone else and they shoot them in the face and it doesn't cause death, but it causes blindness, for instance, or some sort of absolutely devastating injury. And so the consequences are enormous.</p>
24.		<p>DR WEST: The American Academy of Pediatrics uses the term “unintentional child shooting” and differentiates that from an accident. Can you talk a little bit about that?</p>
25.		<p>DR ALISON TOTHY: You know, an accident is a child fell off their bike while they were learning to ride and they scraped their knee but an unintentional injury is something that we can absolutely prevent. We can prevent unintentional gun gun injuries by locking up our guns separately from ammunition should we have a gun in the home. These are preventable injuries. And so when we talk about unintentional, it's the fact</p>



		that we haven't done enough to prevent our children from picking up the gun and harming themselves or harming someone else.
26.		DR WEST: So I've heard the term "attractive nuisance" to describe what firearms can be to kids. Would you agree with that?
27.		DR ALISON TOTHY: It's so true, right? It just captures exactly what a gun is to a kid. Guns are so tempting. Everyone sees them in the media and in television and in movies and on video games, whether it's cartoonified effects of it or or very realistic versions of shooting a gun and it's just so attractive to kids. Think about the kids that you've seen on the playground that maybe have never, ever come across a gun before. But yet one of the things they're doing is they're picking up a stick and they're there play pretending that it's a gun or they are, you know, making a gun sign with their hand and using it to shoot people. It is just so prevalent.
28.		DR WEST: Why would you say that hiding a gun is not a good option?
29.		DR ALISON TOTHY: Okay, well, so how many of you when you were little, did you look for a holiday gifts? Did you try to find your birthday gifts hidden? And your parents thought that they were doing a really, really great job hiding them, but you found them anyway.



		<p>And the reality is that kids, you think that they're not in your house, not wandering around your house, not looking in all the nooks and crannies, but they are. And truthfully, hiding a gun doesn't really work very well. Kids will find them.</p>
30.		<p>DR WEST: Well, I think one of the challenges is we make an assumption that we've told the kids don't do that and that they won't do that. Right. Can you say some more about why that can be an ineffective strategy in terms of safety?</p>
31.		<p>DR ALISON TOTHY: There are a lot of reasons. It's not that all children won't listen. I would never want anyone listening to this to come away with well, then I might as well not talk to my child about guns and gun safety, because we should still be having conversations with our children starting at a young age about what it means to keep yourself safe. And talking about guns, talking about not touching them, talking about walking away if someone else touches the gun. It just doesn't always work.</p> <p>Just talking to your child about the dangers of firearms is not enough. Kids are curious. They see a gun on a bed stand or a nightstand, and they'd go to pick it up.</p> <p>Both the gun and the ammunition need to be locked up where children cannot have access to it.</p>



32.		DR WEST: How would you say risk changes according to how old the child is?
33.		DR ALISON TOTHY: A lot of it has to do with developmental age. Often at the toddler age, they're incredibly curious. As you get older some of it is I want to try it out to show off to a friend. And then certainly there is a large group of teenagers that purposefully harm themselves.
34.		DR WEST: So what you're saying is that development or age actually makes a difference, although the outcomes are still tragic. Could you say more about the risk to teenagers with unsecured firearms in the home?
35.		DR ALISON TOTHY: Sure. Absolutely. So one of the biggest risks for self harm is gun violence, particularly in male teenagers, but both in female and male teenagers. It does happen and teenagers are incredibly impulsive. It is one of the things that we love about teenagers, but it's one of the things that we hate about teenagers as well. They don't always think before they make choices. And the gun violence is so quick, it's so fast. It happens in the blink of an eye that the impulsiveness of teenagers combined with that brevity of the potential for injury is super, super dangerous. And so teenagers and guns in the home really are a dangerous mix.



36.		DR WEST: I just want to clarify, was that risk primarily risk of suicide with teenagers or risk of gun violence at the hands of other teenagers, perhaps?
37.		DR ALISON TOTHY: I think that the answer is yes to both of those questions. Let me try and say it a little bit differently. Teens are impulsive and they are impulsive in some dramatic event or some event that happens to them and they decide, I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to live anymore. And having access to a gun, in those moments of impulsivity, put them at really high risk for self-harm. The flip side can also be true. They are equally dramatic in their relationships with others. And we've seen it. Kids bring guns to school, for instance. They harm others. And having access to guns in those moments of impulsivity in their frustration with someone else can cause harm to others around them.
38.		DR WEST: So far, we've been talking about the risks to children and teens in their own home. How concerned should parents be when their kids visit somebody else's house?
39.	14:09 – 14:19	DR ALISON TOTHY: There are, what, 4.6 million unlocked and available guns in households across the country. And chances are you've sent your child to a



		<p>playdate or to someone's house that there's probably a gun available.</p> <p>And we as parents need to take the responsibility on ourselves to check in with the parents of kids that were sending for playdates or our sitters, our babysitters or our other loved ones in the houses that we're sending them to. We need to be the ones to have the first conversations about whether or not there are guns in the homes that we're sending our kids to.</p>
40.		<p>DR WEST: Right now, it doesn't seem like that's the norm. Why do you think that is?</p>
41.		<p>DR ALISON TOTTHY: I think that this is such a such a challenging conversation that that we don't do it. It is incredibly uncomfortable. And it's more uncomfortable than who's watching my kids or are you going to put them in the car? Or when you put my child in the car, are you going to have a booster seat for them or make sure that they wear a seatbelt. Somehow asking about guns in the homes is this huge taboo, and it can often seem like it feels judgmental. Everyone has such personal opinions about whether or not you should own a gun, what you should be using to protect you and your family. It's just a really hard thing to ask. It's uncomfortable. And we as humans, shy away from the uncomfortable.</p>



42.		DR WEST: Now, you've actually put together an initiative to talk about having this conversation. Right. The ASK program.
43.		DR ALISON TOTHY: Yes. The American Academy of Pediatrics for a long time has recognized that gun violence is the public health epidemic that we all want to prevent. And injuries from gun violence are killing kids at a really, really high rate. And so they designed this A-S-K program and A-S-K and it is that Asking Saves Kids. And it's this idea that we ask parents when we send our kids to a playdate about firearms, we ask if there are firearms in the house. And we frame it in ways that is non-judgmental but designed to protect our children before we put them in a home with guns.
44.		DR WEST: There's lots of things that parents think about when it comes to safety and their kids going to other people's houses in particular. Are there parallels that you can draw for us about other conversations?
45.		DR ALISON TOTHY: I think that if we align it with other injury prevention initiatives or safety precautions that we might take before we send our child off to someone else's house. Examples that come to mind are allergies. If my child had a significant peanut allergy, one of the first things that I'm going to tell an adult that's going to be responsible for my kid is my kid cannot eat peanuts. Please make sure you read the



		<p>labels. And here, by the way, is the EpiPen that they might need in case. And this is what to look for. But remember, they cannot eat peanuts. And peanuts are hidden in a lot of different foods. And so, please, can you make sure before you give my kid a snack to read the label? Call me if anything happens. Right. You drop a six year old off who has just learned to swim at a pool party. You can assume that one of the things you might do is tell the person that my kid just learned to swim. Or you might ask, is there going to be a lifeguard present? And so I think that if we bundle asking about guns in the home in a normalizing way, as we would other injuries, other injury prevention techniques, then it would be easier to talk about guns. You just need to ask.</p>
46.		<p>DR WEST: So it seems to me like you should also think about how you're going to respond if it sounds like it's not safe.</p>
47.	18:09	<p>DR ALISON TOTHY: Yeah. You have to decide ahead of time. Are you going to let your child be there? What's the conversation? If you decide that you're not going to let your child go to that person's house, what's the conversation you're going to have with your child? What's the conversation you're going to have with the with that family or the parents? Are you going to tell them the truth? You know, I don't want my kid in a home that has a gun. Are you going to fudge the truth</p>



	18:36	<p>a little bit and say, you know, how about we just have a play date here and not give the reason why?</p> <p>For every possible answer that they might give, you need to think about how you're going to respond. Because it's not about the judgment of whether or not you believe that someone should have a gun in their home.</p> <p>And you can always follow up with, I'm not judging you. I really just want to know because I want to be able to keep my child safe.</p> <p>The more attention that we can place on making this normalized, the better.</p>
48.	Transition to new beat	
49.		<p>DR WEST: In Pennsylvania, District Attorney Matthew Weintraub couldn't forget Benjamin Smith's accidental death. He started a firearm safety campaign in the toddler's honor.</p>
50.		<p>DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: I'm thinking to myself, there has to be a way to prevent the next one. And so I started just researching it. And as it turns out, there is a Project Child Safe, which will allow law enforcement access to free gun locks and frankly, as many as you can order.</p> <p>We partnered with some agencies in Bucks County, some stakeholders here. And I thought we're going to get these gun locks into the hands of as many people</p>



		<p>as we can. I can't make people use them, but I can educate them that these gun locks are very easy to use. They can be used on revolvers, nine millimeters or semiautomatics. They can be used on long guns. And they're very, very simple.</p> <p>We partnered with our victim services group. Nova We partnered with our Child Protective Services Agency. The sheriff's department agreed to give them to every person that applies for a concealed carry permit we've given them out at. County fairs or and the like, we've given them to our local legislators to have in a basket. As you walk in. We just want to make them so prevalent that it becomes the norm rather than the exception.</p>
51.		DR. WEST: And how do people respond?
52.		DA MATTHEW WEINTRAUB: People are are stunned when you personalize it as a tragedy that actually took the life of a little two year old boy, Benjamin Smith. So once you grab their attention with that personalization, there people are much more readily acceptable of this. It's not like you're imposing your will on them. You're just giving them a way to prevent the next Benjamin Smith from getting killed in their house. And so the the the public's acceptance has been really great. <p>I'm glad that the program has has taken off. And I know that we've saved lives.</p>



53.	Transition to new beat	
54.		DR WEST: We all want our children to grow up healthy and safe. Keeping kids safe requires being sure they don't have access to unsecured firearms. This means having conversations with family members, friends, even other parents, and encouraging safe storage.
55.		DR WEST: Thank you to Bucks County District Attorney Matthew Weintraub and Dr Alison Tothy for participating in today's discussion.
56.		DR WEST: You've been listening to Let's Talk about Your Guns. This podcast is made possible by The Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine Incorporated and is produced by the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at the Uniformed Services University in collaboration with Podville Media.
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