

Ask the Pediatrician

Solving the Riddles of Parenthood

1. Ready, Set, Go!

Q: How will I know when my child is ready to start kindergarten?

A: First, get to know your state and local requirements. Each U.S. state has its own laws that govern what age a child must be to attend kindergarten that year. Check school immunization requirements as well, since they vary from state to state.

Also, assess how ready your child is for school. Many parents believe their children's thinking skills, such as counting, writing, and reading, are the only key factors in deciding whether or not they are ready to start kindergarten. While these abilities are important, teachers have said that children with the following social skills and emotional maturity are easier to teach:

1. Talks to and plays with others.
2. Follows directions — listens, asks questions, and finishes tasks.
3. Identifies and talks about feelings.
4. Handles a problem with others.
5. Asks for help when needed.



2. Separate Ways

Q: How should I handle my son's separation anxiety when he starts school?

A: Many children are anxious about and even fearful of unknown places. Starting a school year or transferring to a new school is often a main source of separation anxiety for a child. Usually, settling in to a routine and getting comfortable with classmates and teachers will make the anxiety go away. In some extreme cases, though, professional counseling is needed.

What can parents do to ease their child's fears? Here are a few tips from New York University's Child Study Center:

- **If your child is worried about starting school, visit the school with him, show him around, and introduce him to his teacher before the school year starts.**
- **Let the school personnel, especially teachers, know that your child suffers from separation anxiety and ask them to be aware of her fears.**
- **Let your child know that you understand he's anxious, and reassure him that you will see each other at the end of the day. Let him know that you look forward to hearing all about his day at school.**
- **Don't get angry, lecture, or drill her about the causes of her anxiety. Instead, encourage your child. Tell her what she can expect from school, and listen to what your child has to say.**
- **Prepare yourself: Leaving your child at school as he's crying and miserable will break your heart. Resist the temptation to give in; that will only make the situation worse.**

3. Roller Derby

Q: My 10-year-old daughter is begging me to buy her a pair of roller shoes for her birthday. They don't seem very safe to me; are they? How can I prevent her from getting injured?

A: You are right to be concerned. The popular sneakers with wheels in the heel can be extremely dangerous, especially for an inexperienced child. The Temple Street Children's University Hospital in Dublin, Ireland, conducted a study of injuries sustained over 10 weeks in the summer of 2006. Researchers found that roller shoes are hazardous, especially when children are climbing the "steep learning curve" involved in learning how to use them.

Girls were much more likely than boys to be injured from using roller shoes. The ages of injured children ranged

from approximately 6 to 15 years, with injuries to the wrists, arms, and shoulders being the most common — including fractures and dislocations. More than half of the injuries occurred the first time children used roller shoes or while learning to use them. None of the children were wearing protective gear when injured, and most said they would "roll on" after their injuries healed.

The study recommends close supervision during the learning curve and use of protective gear at all times. Because these shoes are similar to roller skates and roller blades, the same precautions should apply. Wrist guards and helmets are particularly important. "Special attention should be paid to the needs of novice skaters to avoid injuries," the report noted. "We recommend that a safe-use guide be provided with each pair of roller shoes."

4. Guns Around Children

Q: My family lives in a rural area and my husband keeps a gun in our house for protection. I am terrified, however, that our 9-year-old and 11-year-old sons are going to find it and hurt themselves or someone else. What is the best way to handle this?

A: Inadequate and improper storage of firearms is certainly a frighteningly real problem in the United States. There are between 192 and 200 million privately owned guns in the United States, and 33 percent to 40 percent of U.S. homes keep at least one gun inside. A new survey of parents of children aged 2 to 11 years bringing their children to the pediatrician for well-child care indicated that 23 percent of families reported firearm ownership, but only one-third of these reported safe firearm storage. Families were more likely to report safe storage if they owned long guns rather than handguns, if they had not been raised with firearms in the home, and if their children were 2 to 5 years old.

The study, published in the June 2007 issue of the medical journal *Pediatrics*, suggests pediatricians ask parents about gun ownership and review safety practices. "For pediatricians to inquire about guns in the home," says Dr. Shari Barkin, one of the study's authors, "is the same as reviewing other safety measures such as storing medications out of the reach of children."

"It's right to be concerned," Dr. Barkin says. "Children are curious even if they've had some sort of firearm training. That's why parents taking responsibility for safe gun storage is so essential." The important step parents can take is to make sure firearms are safely stored, which includes unloading them; locking them in cabinet, gun case, or safe, or with a trigger lock; and storing the ammunition in a separate location.