Keeping Children Safe: Preventing Gun Violence

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is dedicated to protecting children from gun violence. In the wake of the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, the Academy is pursuing strong federal policies to help children feel and be safe in their homes, schools, and communities. The key advocacy messages are:

- Gun safety is a public health issue that profoundly impacts children and adolescents
- Pediatricians have an important role to play in protecting children from the destructive impact of guns
- Children deserve to feel safe and to be safe in their homes, communities and schools
- Within the current gun violence debate, legislators must remember to put children first

**Gun violence is a public health issue that profoundly affects children.**
Reducing the impact of gun violence must be consistent with other initiatives that have reduced injury and mortality through research and evidence-based prevention efforts. Beginning in fiscal year 1996, Congress eliminated violence prevention funding and imposed language within the Labor, Health, and Human Services appropriations bill stating that no funds for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) could be used to “advocate or promote gun control.”

- Included as part of the White House’s recommendations, President Obama requested that Congress provide CDC with $10 million for gun violence prevention research and $20 million to expand the National Violent Death Reporting System to all 50 states.
- The AAP supports this recommendation and will continue to advocate for research funding.

**Pediatricians play a crucial role in preventing gun injury and violence.**
AAP continues to advocate for the fundamental right of physicians to provide medical counsel to their patients.

- In agreement with the AAP, President Obama clarified that the Affordable Care Act does not prohibit physicians from asking their patients about guns in the home and counseling about gun safety.
- The president and the Congress are also proposing a national responsible gun ownership campaign to encourage gun owners to use gun safes and trigger locks, store guns and ammunition separately and report lost and stolen weapons to law enforcement.

**Bipartisan efforts are needed to protect children from the destructive effects of guns.**
The AAP recommends the following gun safety measures to Congress and the White House:

- Enact a strong, effective assault weapons ban
- Eliminate the gun show loophole and require mandatory background checks and waiting periods before all firearm purchases
- Ban high-capacity magazines
- Require safe firearm storage

To date, the AAP has endorsed Sen. Dianne Feinstein’s (D-Calif.) Assault Weapons Regulatory Act of 2013 (S. 150), which would ban semiautomatic assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. The AAP is also monitoring debate within the Senate Judiciary Committee on legislation to require universal background checks, reinstate the assault weapons ban, support school safety infrastructure and strengthen criminal penalties for gun trafficking and straw purchasing.
Exposure to violence negatively affects children’s health and well-being.

Addressing the needs of children exposed to violence should be a vital consideration when addressing both the immediate and long-term impacts of gun violence. More than 60% of children and adolescents are exposed to violence each year, putting them at increased risk for future victimization, perpetration of violence and other negative health and social outcomes.

- Extensive research, including an AAP policy statement, finds that exposure to media violence also contributes to desensitization to violence, aggressive behavior, and other negative health outcomes.
- AAP advocates continued support for early childhood programs that promote purposeful parenting and help develop children’s social and emotional skills and resilience.

Children and adolescents need access to quality mental health services.

Although 1 in 5 children in the U.S. suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder, only 20 - 25% of affected children actually receive needed treatment. Treatment of many mental disorders has been deemed highly effective, but without intervention, child and adolescent psychiatric disorders frequently continue into adulthood.

- AAP has endorsed Sen. Al Franken’s (D-Minn.) Mental Health in Schools Act (S. 195), which provides grants to support comprehensive and trauma-informed mental health services in school settings.
- AAP supports President Obama’s commitment to issue final rules for the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act.
- Mental health parity laws require group health plans to guarantee that mental health or substance use coverage are not more restrictive than the insurer’s requirements and restrictions for medical and surgical benefits.

The AAP is actively engaging Congress, the White House and advocacy partners to promote a comprehensive approach to gun violence prevention in the following ways:

- Forming a health stakeholders coalition
- Meeting regularly with legislative staff and administration officials in Washington, DC
- Organizing a gun violence messaging briefing
- Participating in the White House Gun Violence Prevention Task Force’s meetings
- Submitting written testimony during the Senate Judiciary subcommittee hearing process
- Training more than 200 pediatricians in AAP’s gun violence prevention priorities and having them conduct meetings with Congress and legislative staff on Capitol Hill

For more information and resources on AAP’s gun violence prevention priorities, visit www.aap.org/federaladvocacy and go to “Keeping Children Safe: Gun Violence Prevention.”