

Are the homes your children visit gun safe?

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By **BETSY STORM**

With back-to-school time fast approaching, it's time for parents' annual preparedness drill. Once we've dispensed with pencils and lunch boxes, let's move on to life-and-death issues — like gun ownership

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and gun safety. Consider this: 40 percent of American households with children have guns, and one out of three handguns is kept loaded and unlocked in the home.

As parents, we are compelled to ask if there are guns in the homes where our children play. We're bone weary of the all-too-numerous tragedies resulting from so-called "accidental shootings" in homes across America. Each year, more than 20,000 children and youth under the age of 20 are killed or injured by firearms in the United States, according

to the The Brady Center and the Brady Campaign United with the Million Mom March.

However, there is something we can do help ensure our children's safety. The opportunity is found in a national effort called the Asking Saves Kids Campaign. The campaign encourages parents to ask their neighbors and friends if there is a gun in the home before allowing their children to play there. Sounds simple enough, right? And it is. ASK is a comprehensive national public health campaign, developed by PAX, Real Solutions to Gun Violence, in partnership with the American Academy of Pediatricians.

Asking doesn't have to be done in a judgmental or accusing manner — quite the contrary. Raise your concern in a respectful manner, and ask with other issues that you would normally discuss before sending your child to someone's house. Parents are accustomed to talking to other moms and dads about a variety of health-and-safety concerns, with typical discussions focused on topics such as allergies, seat belts and the dangers inherent in violent media and video games. If one parent asks another whether there's a gun in the home and learns that a firearm isn't present, then great — that's one less thing to worry about. If the answer is yes, then the asking parent will want to ensure the gun is stored unloaded and locked, preferably in a gun safe, with ammunition kept in a separate location.

Many parents are displaying their commitment to ASK by working through groups, such as school parent-teacher organizations, park districts and religious organizations. For more information about ASK and how to keep our children safe from gun violence, see the Web site, AskingSavesKids.com.

To help older children prevent school violence, PAX is launching in October a SPEAK-UP campaign that urges students to tell a teacher or administrator if they're aware of a gun or threat of violence in their school. In May of this year, two Niles West high school students helped stave off yet another school shooting by cleverly thwarting the plans of a 15-year-old boy who had brought a loaded semi-automatic handgun to school. The boy had taken the gun from his friend's father. In addition to their own smarts and good judgment, the two students relied on advice they'd previously received from school administrators about the best way to handle emergency situations.

Let's help ensure that the 2002-2003 school year will be a safe one on the North Shore. I encourage people to take part in a real opportunity to prevent gun tragedies in our communities. I hope all parents will join me in a commitment to ASK if there are guns in the home where our children play and to become familiar with the components of the SPEAK-UP campaign. Information on SPEAK-UP is available at AskingSavesKids.com.