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Gun accidents: Does Pa. hold the secret to safety?

Kate Penn, kpenn@ydr.com 1:29 p.m. EDT October 14, 2016



For Mason-Dixon Clay Busters, a youth shooting program in Shrewsbury Township, safety is the number one priority. (Photo: Kate Penn, York Daily Record)

Lock up your guns, keep them unloaded, and keep them away from unsupervised children. That's the advice from experienced gun owners who focus on safety.



(Photo: Kate Penn, York Daily Record)

Pennsylvania is one of only 11 states with a law concerning firearm locking devices. Handguns, shotguns and rifles less than a specified barrel length sold by a dealer in Pennsylvania must be accompanied by a lock.

According to a USA TODAY Network and Associated Press investigation, Pennsylvania had the 13th lowest rate of injury or death from accidental shootings involving a minor per capita of all states in the country.

In the time period studied, Jan. 2014 to June 2016, there were 33 accidental shootings involving a minor in Pennsylvania. Two were in York County.

In June 2015, a three-year-old boy shot his mother in the foot when he gained access to an unsecured, loaded gun.

In Nov. 2015, a 12-year-old boy accidentally shot and killed himself with a handgun in his home.

Elements of both these cases mirror findings found in the USAT/AP investigation. Three-year-olds are the most common shooters and victims among young children nationwide. These accidental shootings also most often occur in the child's home on a weekend, as was the case with the 12-year-old boy.

Any preventable loss of life is tragic. But with Pennsylvania doing better than more than two-thirds of the rest of the country, maybe there are lessons to be learned on what is working, and what still can be improved.



John Elmore, one of the coaches of the Mason-Dixon Clay Busters, works with Oliver Fromm, 12, one-on-one at Glen Rock Shooting Club in Shrewsbury Township Thursday, October 14, 2016. James Fromm, Oliver's dad, says his son has always been around guns, but learned safety at a young age. Firearms are always locked up in their house, and his kids know they can talk to him and ask any questions they have about firearms. It takes the mystery out it, said Fromm, so they don't feel they need to explore guns behind his back. (Photo: Kate Penn, Kate Penn, York Daily Record)

Steve Simmons of Stewartstown started teaching his children firearm safety at an early age. You teach kids all the other safety things — not to touch a hot stove or play in the road, he said — gun safety should be included in that.

Now his two teenage daughters shoot regularly and are members of the Mason-Dixon Clay Busters, a youth sport shooting team. But he's still cautious.

"There isn't a firearm in our house that isn't locked up," Simmons said, and none of his children have the combinations to the safes. He trusts his kids, but worries what could happen if a friend was over and got their hands on a gun. They may not have had the same experience in safe handling that his kids had, and he's not willing to take that chance.

Simmons' safety practices are on the right track. As noted in the USAT/AP investigation, up to 70 percent of accidental shootings could be

prevented if parents kept their guns locked and separated from ammunition, according to research done by Everytown for Gun Safety.

Craig Goodwin, owner of Carbon and Steel Sporting Goods in West Manchester Township, said he thinks the majority of Pennsylvania residents have been around firearms throughout their lives. Maybe this exposure, starting at a young age, takes the curiosity and mystery out of guns.

"You don't have to experiment with it," he said, "you already know it."



Members of the Mason-Dixon Clay Busters, a youth sport-shooting league, shoot trap at Glen Rock Shooting Club. The Claybusters' primary focus is safety. (Photo: Kate Penn, York Daily Record)

These kids who grow up in households with guns have learned to respect firearms, Goodwin said.

When new gun owners come to his shop, he steers them to local clubs that have classes for beginners, and strongly recommends they become proficient with their firearm before carrying it.

Dan Feeser runs one of those clubs. As president of the York-Adams Fish and Game Association, Feeser worries about those people who buy guns for home protection without understanding how to operate the gun or keep it out of the hands of children.

Feeser leaves brochures for his club in gun shops and encourages new gun owners to come in and learn to use their firearm safely.

"Practice is everything," Feeser said. "If you're not proficient in using that weapon, it's going to be a detriment."

York City Police Lt. Gene Fells said he makes a concentrated effort to talk about gun safety when speaking to young people in the community. It doesn't take much strength to fire a gun, he said. So he stresses what a child should do if they find a gun — don't touch it, tell an adult — the basics.

The department also gives out gun locks, making them available to anyone who asks. At the York Fair this year, Fells estimated they gave away more than 100 gun locks.

There's no excuse not to have guns safely secured said Alma Rooney of Spring Garden Township. She grew up with guns in her house but her 17-year-old son, Sam Rooney, wasn't interested in shooting until he was 11. Rooney credits the Pennsylvania hunter safety program for teaching him how to properly handle firearms. They're tools, not toys she said, and education is key in making sure those with access to firearms understand that.

Every year Emily Simmons, 16, and her Mason-Dixon Clay Busters teammates go over safety. Proper handling of firearms is reviewed and drilled into their heads. Anyone who wants to own a gun should have to go through safety training too, she said, and take a refresher course every so often. Maybe with more education, the number of accidental shootings involving minors in Pennsylvania could be even lower.