Guns are an unfortunate and dangerous reality in the lives of children and adolescents in the United States. More than one-third of all households with children have a firearm and despite continuing education efforts, the majority of these guns are kept loaded, unlocked and potentially accessible to children. Access to firearms is of particular concern in the evaluation and treatment of youth with psychiatric and/or substance use disorders, as well as pediatric practice. Physicians, such as child and adolescent psychiatrists, play a key role in injury prevention for children and adolescents by providing guidance to patients and parents, especially those at risk of harming themselves or others.

The Facts
- Gun violence accounts for over 3,000 deaths and over 20,000 injuries each year among children and adolescents.²
- Twenty-five percent of homes with children and guns have a loaded firearm¹ and more than 40% of gun-owning households with children store their guns unlocked.³
- Research indicates that if a gun is stored in a home, the risk of homicide increases threefold and the risk of suicide increases fivefold.⁴ In fact, 90% of fatal firearms incidents that involve children happen in the home.⁵
- Suicide was the third leading cause of death in youths 10- to 24-years old nationwide in 2007⁶, and the majority of those who make a suicide attempt have history of a psychiatric, behavioral, or substance use disorder.⁷
- Nearly 50% of youth suicides are committed with guns⁸ and more than 90 percent of suicide attempts with a gun are fatal.⁹
- Of youths who committed suicide with firearms, 82% obtained the firearm from their home, usually a parent’s firearm.¹⁰
- A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found that 6% of high-school aged youth carried a gun to school on one or more days in the 30 days preceding the survey.¹¹
- Individuals who were counseled by a physician were more likely to report adopting safe gun-storage practices.¹²
- When evaluating a child or adolescent at risk of depression or suicidal behavior, it is the standard of care to ascertain the presence of guns in the home and recommend that they be removed.¹³, ¹⁴

Take Action
Legislation to prohibit physicians from asking patients about the presence of firearms in the homes interferes with the ability of physicians to render appropriate care and puts patients’ safety at risk. It compromises physicians’ ability to use his or her medical judgment as to the information or treatment that is in the best interest of his or her patients.

We call on you to protect patient safety, particularly for children, and uphold the trust of the patient-physician relationship.

September 2011


