



Gun safety around children stressed

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DURHAM -- The Duke Gun Safety Initiative will be at the Duke Children's Primary Care clinics on Roxboro Road, the Streets at Southpoint and Pickett Road at 9 a.m. Tuesday to educate parents about gun safety.

They will be distributing educational information, free gun locks and hosting a "hands without guns" activity in which children put their handprint on a sheet of white material and write down the creative things they do with their hands.

"The whole crux of our initiative is to save children's lives," said Joanie Ross, a registered nurse and coordinator of the Durham County Gun Safety Team. "We provide gun locks for people who make the decision to own a gun, do programs on safe gun ownership and also educate people about other ways to keep their homes safe besides having a firearm."

The Durham County Gun Safety Team, established in 1999, has members who represent law enforcement, the medical professions, Durham Public Schools, UNC Department of Pediatrics, Project Safe Neighborhoods and general members of the community. They teamed up with Duke Children's Primary Care in 2006 to launch the Duke Gun Safety Initiative.

Duke Gun Safety supports the "Just Ask" initiative, designed to include questions about gun ownership and storage in normal dialogue between parents. The events at the Primary Care clinics are part of National Just Ask Week, which takes place in June because "during the summer when children are at home routines are changed and they can find things they normally wouldn't," Ross said.

Duke Pediatrics takes this one step further, asking patients about gun ownership and storage practices at each "well child" visit from when the child is 6 months old. According to the "Just Ask," this is done during an injury-prevention assessment that includes car seats, seat belts, bike helmets and other safety measures.

Physicians offer free gun locks -- provided by the Durham Gun Safety Team -- to families who need them, with a set of instructions in English or Spanish. As part of "Just Ask," physicians also encourage parents to talk to other parents, relatives and neighbors whose homes their child visits, to find out if they have guns and how they are stored.

"I think pediatricians are uniquely positioned to make an impact on helping ensure that children grow up, if not a gun-free environment, then an environment where guns are appropriately stored and kept secure," said John Moses, one of the doctors who spearheaded the partnership between Primary Care and the Gun Safety Team.

He said that since most parents are willing to at least consider the advice pediatricians give them,

it's a great way to make sure children are safe from guns.

The Initiative is not taking an anti-gun approach, Moses said, noting that about half of the homes in North Carolina have one or more guns. The goal, he said, is to educate people on the importance of storing their guns properly if they choose to have them.

"It's not terribly unlike talking to teenagers about sexual activity," he said. "Pediatricians don't promote sex; they promote safe sex and appropriate choices for teens who have decided to become sexually active."

Moses said he's concerned that more pediatricians aren't taking this opportunity to educate parents about gun safety.

A recent study published in the Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics showed that counseling about gun safety has proven to be effective in a pediatrician's office setting.

In regards to the recent gun law changes, Ross said that the "Just Ask" will keep doing what it's been doing.

"Right now I don't see where it impacts what we do because we'll continue to educate and provide gun locks and promote various ways of keeping your home safe," she said.

The Duke Gun Safety Initiative meets monthly to plan gun safety events.

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