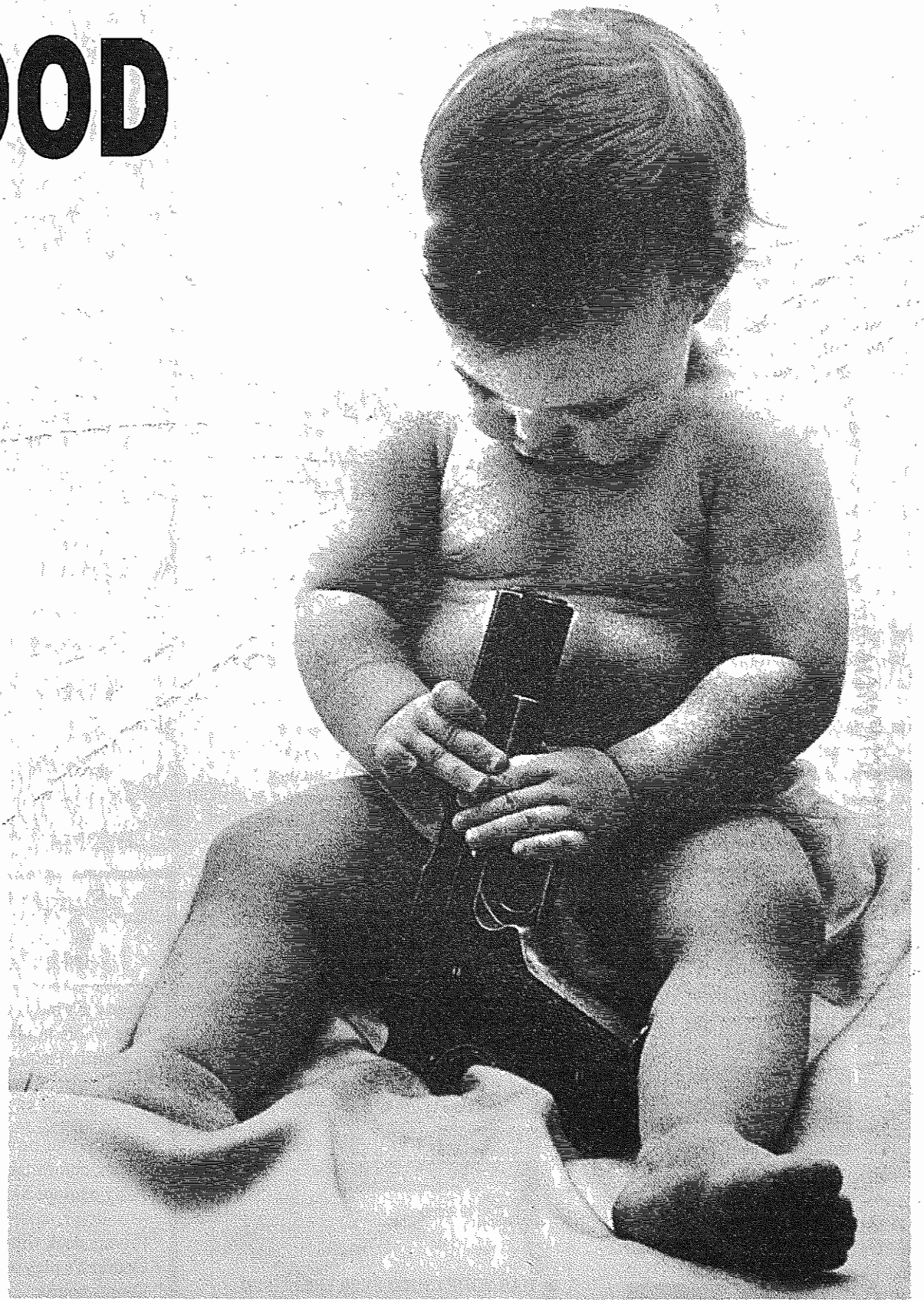


# CHILDHOOD UNDER THE GUN

By Margaret Combs

Although many parents keep handguns at home to protect their families, recent studies indicate that they are substantially increasing the risk of injury to the children in their home.



To own, or not to own, a gun?

A substantial number of Americans have already exercised their right to keep a gun in their home, many under the impression they will better protect their families. Every 20 years since the 1950s, the number of gun owners in the United States has doubled, and now nearly 50 percent of American homes have at least one gun on the property, according to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. In one out of four homes, the firearm of choice is a handgun, a weapon considered more desirable for protection than for sport.

*Graphic courtesy of The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence and The Educational Fund to End Handgun Violence.*

These figures indicate that Americans widely embrace the notion that a gun in the home or the hand will protect loved ones against intruders and crime. But a slate of childhood death statistics plus a mounting pile of new research suggest this simply isn't true.

In fact, the most recent findings from a number of scientific studies now coming to light in medical journals suggest that the nation has reached a point where gun owners should seriously reconsider whether keeping a gun in the home is worth the risk, even if the gun is kept unloaded and locked up.

In 1990, nearly 20,000 young people between the ages of 1 and 34 died as a result of gun-induced homicides, suicides and accidental shootings, according to the latest figures available from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) in Rockville, Md. The National Pediatric Trauma Registry at Tufts New England Medical Center in Boston shows that the number of children under 19 needing trauma care for gunshot wounds over the past four years has nearly doubled.

These figures place firearms as the second leading cause of death (following car accidents) for children 10 to 19 years of age.

While very young children are dying in fewer numbers than in years past, they are still at risk, mostly from accidental shootings. Last year, 200 children were killed in the United States as a result of playing with guns; 30 of them were under 5 years old, according to the National Safety Council.

Hundreds more were likely injured. A 1991 study on accidental shootings by the federal government's General Accounting Office estimated that for every one accidental gun death, there are 105 injuries, some of which permanently maim or paralyze.

For black children, the scenario is most grim. NCHS data shows that overall firearm injuries are now the leading cause of death among black male children 10 to 19 years old. And for black teens 15 and over, gun-related homicide is the single leading cause of death.

Responding to this rising tide of gun deaths among children, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta in the mid-1980s created a violence epidemiology branch and began taking an aggressive, scientific look at the role guns play in the home and in the lives of American families.

What they have found is compelling evidence against the protective role of guns in the home. Three of these studies, all published within the past three years, have established strong links between having a gun in the home and increased likelihood of a homicide or suicide occurring in that home.

## HANDGUNS AND HOMICIDE IN THE HOME

The most recent study, directed by Dr. Arthur Kellermann from the Emory Center for Injury Prevention in Atlanta, examined 420 homicides of residents in Tennessee, Washington and Ohio. Published last October in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the five-year study found that 70 percent of the homicides occurred within the home and were caused by a handgun. More significantly, the researchers found that the majority of shootings happened

### Boy accidentally kills self with gun

DALLAS - A 12-year-old boy rummaging through his parents' bedroom found a .38-caliber handgun and accidentally shot himself to death.

Antoine Hammonds died Wednesday from a single gunshot wound to the head. The boy's father had left the while he went to work and

### 4-year-old dies in gun mishap

EAST HARTFORD, Conn. - A 4-year-old boy was shot in the head and killed by his 6-year-old brother who apparently was playing with a handgun at home, police said.

Ryan Twarkine, 6:30 p.m. Tuesday Hartford

### In an accident, Conn. student, 16, shoots himself

NEW HAVEN - A 16-year-old high school student shot himself in the leg during a gym class when a gun he was carrying in his pants accidentally discharged, school officials said.

The bullet went through one of the boy's legs and landed on the floor below, Mayo said. The student was taken to Yale-New Haven Hospital. The weapon was identified as a .25-caliber automatic pistol, a small gun that is easy to conceal.

When the shooting occurred, 50 students were in the gym, other students were waiting outside. Mayo said the student was in the gym for 180 days.

## THE DELUSION OF SAFETY

Gun advocates believe that teaching gun safety rules and instructing kids to respect guns are adequate measures to protect family members against gun accidents. But how effective are these measures? Although the number of U.S. children dying from accidental shootings has dropped to half of what it was in the early 1970s, the National Safety Council reveals that 200 children still died last year.

Part of the problem may be that parents are deluded in thinking they can successfully hide a gun. "Parents sometimes believe guns are hidden more carefully than they actually are and they never expect their kid to find it," says Carrie Pekor, a trauma specialist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. "I can tell you, kids find it anyway, even if the gun is locked up high in a closet."

At the same time, many adults don't even attempt to follow basic safety rules.

A national survey published in the 1992 *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that many gun owners are either forgetting or disregarding recommended safety rules. Out of the 605 gun owners surveyed, 55 percent kept their weapons loaded and 10 percent kept them loaded, unlocked and within reach of children.

"My gut feeling is people are more interested and focused on the act of self-defense than in storage," says David Hemenway, deputy director of the Injury Control Center

at Harvard University, who analyzed the survey. Hemenway is conducting a follow-up study to find out why people keep their guns loaded. He speculates that people who buy guns for protection want to have them within reach and ready to fire, not dismantled and locked up.

Meanwhile, parents should not assume that teaching a child respect for guns ensures safety, as illustrated in the case of 15-year-old Jason Alward. Jason had grown up in the Midwest hunting with his father. He had taken a safety course and had been taught to respect firearms.

"We did everything by the rules," reflects his father, Bruce Alward, an electrical engineer who now lives in Seattle. "He knew how brutal a bullet can be."

Yet when Bruce moved out of the house after a divorce, Jason loaded up his hunting rifle and kept it under the bed, apparently to protect his mother and their house. The day Jason died, he allowed a high school friend to carry the gun across the room: loaded, cocked and with the safety disengaged. The gun went off and killed Jason instantly.

Bruce Alward no longer keeps a gun in his home.

"Anything that looks like it can help prevent something from happening again is well worth it," says Alward. "People who say accidents won't happen, haven't lost a child."

- MARGARET COMBS

between family members or intimate acquaintances in the context of a quarrel or romantic triangle. Only 15 cases involved a stranger.

"If guns were really protective and truly made homes more safe and less likely to be the scene of a homicide, then we would have found it," says Dr. Kellermann, speaking on the phone from a hospital emergency room.

After weighing other risk factors which lead

to homicide - such as alcohol and drug abuse - the study still found guns strongly and independently linked to an increased risk of homicide.

The presence of a gun in the home does not mean families are more likely to argue, explains Kellermann, but it is more likely they will use violent means to settle the argument.

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"Domestic conflict is probably occurring in many homes," Kellermann continues. "The issue is: Is that conflict going to end in the death of someone or not?"

Just as children often watch their parents argue, they also watch them shoot one another. Understandably, the impact is devastating. Trauma specialist Carrie Pekor, director of children's services at the Trauma Clinic of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, sees many patients between 2 and 6 years old who have seen a parent kill another parent with a gun. For these children, Pekor says, surviving the initial shock of a shooting is only the beginning.

"These kids are left with post-traumatic stress disorder," says Pekor, "which means they exhibit anxiety, sleep disturbances, flashbacks, hypervigilance, hyperarousal and terror. The trauma affects every aspect of their functioning."

After the symptoms stabilize, Pekor says, the children still suffer from learning disabilities, emotional problems and ongoing social conflicts with other children.

### SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON SUICIDE

The lethal link between guns and homicide in the home has similarly been established between guns and suicide, according to two other studies. Published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in August 1992, one study (again directed by Dr. Kellermann) found that,

**"If a family chooses to have a gun in their home — particularly if that gun is a handgun and is kept loaded and readily available — they are substantially increasing the chances of their family having a violent death in their household."**

**Dr. Arthur Kellermann**

**Emergency physician and epidemiologist**

## PREVENTING FIREARM INJURIES

The following are the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendations to parents to prevent childhood gunshot injuries and deaths.

- Explain to your children that guns are dangerous and that they should never touch guns or remain in a friend's home where a gun is accessible.

- Remember, young children are curious by nature and automatically explore their environments.

- Talk to your teen-ager about his or her thoughts and feelings — teens who are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, angry, depressed or feeling threatened could use guns in a dangerous manner.

out of 554 cases of suicide (a quarter of which were teens and young adults), not only was a gun most often the weapon chosen, but in four out of five of these deaths, the gun had been kept in the victim's home. After controlling for other factors such as depression and mental illness — which are greater predictors of suicide — the researchers still found guns significantly impacted whether a suicide would occur.

"If the gun didn't matter, then we should have seen a comparable level of suicide risk in homes without guns as we did in homes with guns," explains Kellermann, "But that wasn't the case."

Supporting Kellermann's findings, a smaller study, which was conducted by Dr. David Brent from the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic in Pennsylvania and published in the 1991 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, found that the availability of guns in the home increases the risk for suicides among adolescents 13 to 19 years of age. Most significantly, the study found adolescents succeeded in killing themselves regardless of whether the gun was locked and safely stored.

These findings underscore

- Even the best-behaved teen might try to handle or carry a gun from home under peer pressure or when in a bad mood.

- Police recommend the following safety steps: Always keep your gun unloaded and locked up. Lock and store bullets in a separate location.

- Talk to parents and adults where your children and teens play and visit. Urge them to take the same common sense precautions with guns.



what therapists and child counselors who deal with emotionally vulnerable children already know.

"Getting rid of the gun in the house is one of the first things that comes across your mind," says psychotherapist Judith Cook, who has a private practice in Chapel Hill and Raleigh, N.C. "It's hard for many parents to understand — they feel if they've got the ammunition separated or if the gun is locked up, that's enough. But I urge them to get it all the way out of the house."

Even parents who believe their teen-ager is not depressed would do well to rid their homes of guns. An evaluation of three youth suicide prevention programs in New Jersey in 1988 found that, unlike adults, most young people do not suffer from clinical depression when they commit suicide. Directed by Dr. David Shaffer from the New York State Psychiatric Institute, the study found that when youths killed themselves, impulsive behavior played a greater role than depression.

"The weight of the data at this point is very clear," says Kellermann. "If a family chooses to have a gun in their home — particularly if that gun is a handgun and is kept loaded and readily available — they are substantially increasing the chances of their family having a

violent death in their household."

## THE SPREAD OF GUN CULTURE

Gun advocates scoff at these studies. The National Rifle Association's research coordinator, Paul Blackman, accuses epidemiologists like Dr. Kellermann of deliberately skewing research methods to favor gun control policies (an accusation which two academic review forums have reviewed and dismissed).

In Blackman's opinion, the threat of gun violence to the average family is being blown out of proportion.

"Gun violence is limited to a very oppressed, depressed minority," says Blackman. "It's a threat to the poor person who happens to be a minority living in the big city where family values have essentially disappeared and various other problems exist. It just ought not to be a fear for the average parent."

But Dr. Kellermann counters with the fact that his homicide study did look at average families. "We didn't just focus on high-crime neighborhoods," he says. "We looked at everybody, and we identified every single case of homicide that occurred in the home of the victim regardless of neighborhood demographics, age, sex or race."

Meanwhile, evidence coming from other health-monitoring measures shows the gun culture is spreading beyond inner-city neighborhoods. Recent poll results combined with testimony by health practitioners reveal that exposure to guns and gun violence is migrating to suburban neighborhoods and even into private school settings.

"It's very clear to me this kind of violence is not confined to the inner city or to a particular family profile," says Pekor. "The kids we see come from suburbs and middle-class families, as well as inner-city families." According to Pekor, about half of the children coming into her clinic at Mass. General have either witnessed a domestic shooting or have been shot themselves after finding a gun inside or outside their home.

Child psychiatrist Lenore Terr, author of the book *Too Scared to Cry* and a clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine, regularly treats latchkey children who have been shot or who have shot someone else while home alone. "Many of them are white, upper-middle class,

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and they come from suburban homes where both parents work," testifies Terr. "These kids know how to find the guns, and they know how to point them and how to shoot them."

Supporting these observations from the field, a 1993 survey conducted for the Harvard School of Public Health found that 59 percent of middle and high school students from suburban areas said they could get a handgun if they wanted to. In addition, the survey actually found a "higher proportion of young people who go to private and parochial schools say they know how to get a gun than those who go to public schools."

"It is simply not accurate to characterize the gun problem among young people as one that is dominantly that of central cities where more ethnic minorities are concentrated," according to the Harvard report.

## PROTECTING CHILDREN

The pervasiveness of guns in the community and the epidemic of gun-injured children coming into hospitals and mental health clinics are causing the public health community to mobilize on several fronts, including that of gun control.

In a special 1992 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop joined with JAMA editor George Lundberg in arguing that there is enough compelling scientific research to justify laws requiring guns to be registered, and gun owners to be tested, licensed and monitored.

Last December's congressional passage of the Brady Bill, which establishes a five-day waiting period for handgun purchases, indicates Americans may finally be ready to accept standardized monitoring and regulation of firearms.

But at the same time, a growing number of youth-health workers believe the debate on gun control has monopolized too much attention and achieved only small, indirect gains in the fight against gun violence. With that in mind, educators and youth workers are now focusing on more direct preventative safety measures so children feel less inclined to carry guns and more able to cope with conflicts.

"Typically, kids don't come to school and

start shooting; there's something else that happens first," says Ron Stephens, director of the National School Safety Center in Westlake Village, Calif. "Part of the strategy is to help parents and teachers identify some of those early warning signs."

Getting teachers to intervene in some of the low levels of harassment and bullying that occur on school grounds is one focus, says Stephens. Another is providing lessons that help kids learn to resolve their problems in non-violent ways.

To that end, several schools around the nation are adopting what is called the Straight Talk About Risks, or STAR curriculum, a pre-K through 12th-grade program of conflict resolution skills that provides lessons in distinguishing between real-life and media violence. The program, which was developed by the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence in Washington, D.C., is now being used throughout the state of New Jersey, as well as in New York City, Portland, Ore., Dade County, Fla., and California schools in Oakland, San Diego and Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, health-care workers say it is imperative that parents begin systematically teaching their children, even preschoolers, what to do if they find a gun or are encouraged to

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play with one through peer pressure.

"Some parents are not yet comprehending what a common circumstance this is and how often their children may find themselves in this situation," says trauma specialist Pekar. She urges parents to talk proactively about gun safety strategies with their kids the same way they talk about what to do if a stranger tries to lure a child into a car.

"Be very explicit," advises Pekar. "Do role

playing and say things like, 'If you went to Billy's house and he wanted to take down the gun and show you, this is what I want you to do.'"

Getting out of the room or the friend's home and immediately getting adult help should be drilled into children's minds, Pekar adds.

For parents who have a gun in their home, the safest course of action is to follow police gun safety advice by unloading the gun and keep it locked in a location separate from the ammunition, preferably in a remote location like the garage. In addition, safety devices such as trigger locks have been found in government studies to substantially reduce accidents, especially with children 6 years old and under.

However, trauma experts warn that even these precautions are not foolproof.

"Almost any area of the house is accessible to kids, especially if they are left alone," cautions child psychiatrist Lenore Terr, who emphasizes that this is not just a problem for parents of teen-agers. "I've seen kids as young as 5 years old, who have accidentally shot someone else. And these aren't wild shots that go around the room," she adds. "Usually the kids think they can threaten the other child and get him to stop misbehaving, and they point the gun right at him."

The decision to have a gun in the home is still ultimately a matter of personal choice, a fact acknowledged by the health-care community. But what doctors are trying to make clear to parents is that no amount of precautions will ensure a child's safety if a firearm is brought into the home, and if parents buy a gun they are entering into a game of negative odds.

"Occasionally there are spectacular incidents when a homeowner or family member uses a gun in a way that may well be lifesaving, I don't dispute that for a minute," says Dr. Kellermann. "But the problem is, the attention for too long has been fastened on the big winner and distracted from the fact that there are substantially more big losers."

And many of these big losers are children, who are fatally wounded or psychologically traumatized by witnessing gun violence in

## RESOURCES

- Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, 1225 Eye St., NW, Suite 1150, Washington, D.C. 20005; 202-289-7319.
- Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, 100 Maryland Ave., NE, Washington, D.C. 20002-5625; 202-544-7190.
- National Safety Council, 1121 Spring Lake Drive, Itasca, IL 60143; 1-800-621-7615.
- National School Safety Center, 4165 Thousand Oaks Blvd., Suite 290, Westlake Village, CA 91362; 805-373-9977.
- National Rifle Association, Eddie Eagle Gun Safety Program, 11250 Waples Mill Road, Fairfax, VA 22030; 1-800-231-0752.
- Massachusetts Citizens to Prevent Handgun Violence, P.O. Box 15, Burlington, MA 01803; 617-272-6285.
- The Violence Prevention Project, Dept. of Health and Hospitals, 1010 Mass. Ave., Boston, MA 02118; will be sponsoring "Increase the Peace" Violence Prevention Week, May 15-21. Contact Kathy Gavin, 617-534-5196, for more information.

their home. Although trauma specialist Pekar stops short of dictating whether or not parents should ban guns from their home, she does issue a strong warning: "Many people feel they need to have a gun in the home, but I can certainly say from my own experience there are many times when kids' find the family gun, or family arguments escalate and the child finds himself a very tragic part of that circumstance."

Eliminating guns from the home environment, and teaching children how to avoid guns, may be two of the most essential precautions parents can take to ensure not only their child's present safety, but future health as well. According to trauma specialists and child psychiatrists, once a child has contacted gun violence in any form, whether accidental or intentional, it's likely he or she will never be the same.

Lenore Terr puts it succinctly: "It's a scar they carry for the rest of their lives."

Margaret Combs is a free-lance writer and the mother of two in Framingham.

