



### **The Teen Years: Access to Guns and Other Weapons**

Many adults in the United States grew up in households with guns. They were taught about gun safety by their parents or relatives. But things have changed. Easy access to guns, combined with a popular culture that glorifies violence and the use of weapons, is cause for national concern. Even families who have traditionally had guns in their homes feel a need to take more safety precautions than ever before.

In the lives of many teenagers, violence involving a gun or another weapon is a daily threat. One recent survey of inner-city students showed that as many as 40% carried a weapon outside of school. Firearm homicide is now the second leading cause of death of all youth between the ages of 15 and 19. Murder involving guns is the number one cause of death for African American youth. Guns also play a major role in suicides, which increased 39% between 1980 and 1994.

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), more youth began carrying guns as drug trafficking grew, and specifically when crack cocaine was introduced into communities. Even youth who were not involved in drugs began to feel the need to carry a weapon for protection. Parents should stay alert to signs that their teenager does not feel safe—a situation that can lead to carrying a gun. Boys, in particular, may not know how to tell their parents about their fears. They may feel that showing fear decreases their “macho” image or increases their vulnerability.

Early signs that your teen is fearful include:

- *frequent headaches or minor illnesses;*
- *frequent requests to stay home from school or refusing to go to school;*
- *changing routes to or from school;*
- *resisting participation in school functions, clubs, or activities; and*
- *discovering a weapon concealed in the teen’s room, backpack, or possessions.*

One way to start a discussion with your teenager about this sensitive topic is by sharing a newspaper article about school violence and asking if he or she has any friends who have had similar experiences. You can also work closely with school staff and community leaders to encourage safe neighborhood and safe school strategies. Working with others in the school and community will help in a variety of ways, but primarily by letting your teen see that safety matters to you.

*The information contained in this summary is taken from the Teen Years chapter of the Violence Prevention Resource Guide for Parents by Peggy Patten and Anne S. Robertson (Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2001).*

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