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# Ohio School Shooting: Are Parents to Blame?

We cannot talk about school violence without recognizing where the violence was conceived and nurtured: at home

By Erika Christakis and Nicholas A. Christakis @NACristakis | Feb. 28, 2012

School shootings are in the news again. An Ohio teenager opened fire on five classmates, killing three students and injuring two others (see [raw video from scene at Chardon High School](#)). In Seattle, the 9-year-old boy who brought a gun to school and seriously injured a classmate when it was accidentally discharged in his backpack was released on bail, after he appeared in court wearing an orange jumpsuit, in tears.

Children are injured and murdered every day, but school violence carries a symbolic potency because we like to think of schools as safe havens from the harshness of adult life. It's horrifying to think that the institutions to which we entrust our children for hours every day could be a place of injury or even death.

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But our focus on the word *school* — and even on whether the shooter was bullied by classmates, as it appears was the case in Ohio — obscures a key issue. The shooters didn't get their guns at school. The guns weren't fashioned in woodshop. The guns came from home, and they were obtained by adults.

Politicians and taxpayers like to hold teachers accountable for their students' failures. Most of the public's dissatisfaction with education seems to circle back to what's wrong with teachers, and the assumption that drives our



David Maxwell / EPA

A state police helicopter leaves the scene following a shooting at Chardon High School in Ohio in February 2012

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endless rounds of flagellation and reform is the belief that a child's fate rests largely in the hands of the teacher in whose care he or she spends approximately 1,000 hours per year.

Yet the remaining 7,760 hours are on someone else's watch: the parents. That's right, children spend [on average only about 11% of their childhood lives in school](#).

But we rarely talk honestly about what can happen during the other eight-ninths of their waking and even sleeping hours. Children arrive at school poorly nourished and too fatigued to work. They spend too much time on television and too little on exercise. They are poorly socialized in ways that inhibit learning and kindness. They also bring unsecured weapons to school and use them on innocent people, including, sometimes, themselves.

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There's an eerie void in our discussions of school violence. Where are the adults? Where is the same cry for accountability in parents when things go wrong at home that we have for teachers when things go wrong at school? We aren't suggesting that one human being can be responsible for every misstep a child makes. Nor are we suggesting that parents shouldn't be allowed to make their own, often serious mistakes without fear of being criminalized.

But children are being injured and killed through the shameful negligence of the adults who are responsible for them. Roughly [one-third of households with children](#) report owning at least one gun. Forty-three percent of these homes report [keeping firearms in an unlocked place](#), while only 39% of these homes keep the guns locked, unloaded and separate from ammunition, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics and many gun-safety advocates. Nationally, approximately [1.7 million children](#) live in homes with loaded and unlocked firearms. And [90% of fatal firearm shootings of children ages 0 to 14](#) occur in the home.

So how can we talk about school violence without any recognition of where the violence was conceived and nurtured? Shouldn't parents who fail to secure a firearm at their home assume some responsibility for the actions of a child who uses the weapon? It was truly unnerving to see a 9-year-old being comforted by his father in court for a crime that his parents aided and abetted. How can we call the child's actions a crime when he is neurologically unable to understand the consequences of bringing a gun to school? Even teenagers can't be said to be fully responsible for their actions, though our legal system suggests otherwise; the areas of the brain that control decisionmaking and impulsivity reach maturation gradually.

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Children between ages 5 and 14 are 13 times more likely to die from an accidental firearm accident in the four states with the highest gun ownership than in the four states with the lowest gun ownership. Among children under 5, they are [17 times more likely](#). This suggests the obvious: the availability of guns is a risk factor for accidental firearm death. But we have more concern about children who bring peanuts to school than we do about bullets.

We are not saying that every time a kid does something wrong, a parent must be held responsible or be blamed. But a system that focuses its attention for kids' failings everywhere but at home is equally blind. We hold hosts liable when a driver drinks at their home and kills someone while driving drunk. Having an unlocked, loaded gun in a home with a child under 16 should be a crime.

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