Gun Violence Prevention: A Training Program for Elementary Children

At least two people a day are killed in the U. S. by a mishandled gun. Too often, the victims are young children. The United Methodist Women of Broadmeadow UMC in Jackson wants to make a difference in our community by teaching children what to do if they come across a gun. We decided to partner first with our neighborhood elementary school (grades 1 through 5) to provide this training.

The classroom teachers, principal, and our participating UMW members for our pilot training program this spring (2018) thought the training was enjoyable for the children and communicated the message well. We plan to expand the program to other grades and schools as we are able.

**Here is what we did for our initial training program:**

1. We decided on the scope and objective for the training.

Our objective was to teach children in the elementary grades how to respond if they found or saw an unattended firearm, to help prevent tragic accidental shootings. After doing some internet research, our members determined that most programs with this objective focus on a four-step safety message: stop; don’t touch; leave the area; and tell a respected adult. (Similar to the stop, drop, and roll message young children are taught regarding fire.)

1. We researched materials available online for this type training.

The primary gun accident prevention program available for young children is the Eddie Eagle GunSafe® program designed for pre-K through 4th grade. The program’s objective matched ours: teaching children how to stay safe if they ever come across a gun. This program was developed by the NRA, which was a problem for some of our members. However, it was also the most age-appropriate and up-to-date material we found. Here is a statement from the FAQ section of the Eddie Eagle program page at [eddieeagle.nra.org](http://eddieeagle.nra.org/):

Eddie Eagle’s sole purpose is to give children crucial information about what to do if they ever come across a gun. With firearms found in about half of all American households, it’s a message that makes sense. Eddie is never pictured holding or even touching a gun.

We also reviewed McGruff the Crime Dog’s gun safety training material. The video listed the same four basic steps as the Eddie Eagle program but was longer and looked dated. The McGruff video would be more suitable for older elementary children and we may use it when we pilot this training in grades 4 and 5. We did use a McGruff handout for the children to take home (see additional information below).

1. We met with the school’s principal and assistant principal to explain our objectives and suggested approach and to see if this type of safety training were of interest to them.

We explained our planned approach and asked for their input. We made sure to mention that the video was developed by the NRA to get their feedback on whether that would be a problem at their school. The school administration was extremely supportive and enthusiastic about our plans.

We decided on a week for the training and planned for the initial round to be for every first and second grade class in the school (8 total). Our school has smart boards in each room, and we were assured that the classroom teacher would help us pull up the YouTube video from the URL for the Eddie Eagle program site.

1. We prepared training materials and the training schedule.

The Eddie Eagle program will provide children’s activity booklets to schools at no charge. These materials, along with a parent/instructor guide are also available on the internet at <https://eddieeagle.nra.org/program-resources/program-materials/>. The only reference to the NRA in the activity booklets is on the final page, in a message to parents about gun safety. However, some UMW members were reluctant to provide the children with written material that referenced the NRA, so we used a McGruff gun safety handout for the children to color and take home. The McGruff handout also included a pledge the children could sign, promising to stay away from guns.

We also made copies of a Parent’s Pledge for the children to take home. Our research showed that even children who have received this training will still often touch or pick up a gun if they find one. The Parent’s Pledge is intended to raise the parents’ awareness of the need to always ask about guns in the home when a child goes to another child’s house for the first time. The pledge provides suggestions about how to ask the difficult questions regarding gun safety. This handout also addresses appropriate security practices for parents who have guns in their own homes.

One of our UMW members drafted a script as a starting point for introducing and following up on the video in each classroom. The script provided suggested language for discussing safety in general and for making sure the children could recite the four gun safety steps after the video.

1. We recruited volunteers for the week of the training and prepared the training schedule and material.

The school had given us three 30-minute time slots each weekday as convenient times to be in the classrooms. We could have as many simultaneous sessions as we wanted, since the training was classroom by classroom. We provided a calendar to our members so they could sign up for training time slots. We generally had a pair of members available for each class, although several sessions had a single member as trainer, which worked fine.

We gave volunteers a copy of the script and left the other printed materials in the school office in bundles by class size for the trainers to pick up on their way to the class. Printing was done using our church copy machine, with the UMW providing the paper and reimbursing the church for the click charges on the copier. Copies of the children’s handout (one-sided) and Parent Pledge (2-sided) for the 8 classrooms cost approximately $70.

Printed materials included:

* the URL for finding the Eddie Eagle video (large type: one per class, for the teacher and trainer)
* a packet of coloring sheets with the children’s pledge, one for each child in the class, to be handed out by the teacher after the training
* a packet of Parents’ Pledge sheets, printed two-sided, for the teacher to hand out to each child to take home

We sent the schedule to the school administration so they could match the eight sessions with specific teachers and classrooms.

1. We conducted a pilot training session the day before other training was to begin.

Three members conducted a pilot session in a first-grade class, based on our script, then talked with the teacher to get her feedback and suggestions. The pilot class was successful and the feedback was positive. The children were very attentive to the video, participated well in the discussion before and after the video, and could all recite the four gun safety rules that were covered.

The teacher suggested that, instead of just having the children recite the four safety rules after the video, we have them stand and pantomime the rules. We implemented this suggestion in the other sessions and the children really got into the gestures and movement!

1. We completed the training for the remaining first and second grade classrooms.

Our members all enjoyed the training and being with the students and teachers. The sessions seemed particularly timely, as they were conducted just a few weeks before the beginning of summer vacation. We asked the children at the end of each session: “Will you remember these rules if you ever find a gun?” “Would you be able to tell a friend what to do if they find a gun?”

Lessons Learned:

* Don’t assume anything! Even though we had a training calendar approved by the principal and the school office had a schedule of which class we were to train during each time slot, no one had told the teachers we were coming! The teachers were very gracious in each case when we showed up in their classrooms.
* The Smartboard in one classroom was not working.  The teacher brought up the YouTube video on her laptop and the children crowded around.  We want to emphasize to the administration that the teachers not only need to be informed we are coming but also that we need a working internet large screen.  If a classroom's internet screen is not working or the school does not have large screens in each classroom, perhaps sessions could be scheduled in a media room/library.
* We thought it was positive to work with a smaller, class-sized group so each child could participate in the discussion if they wished. Some schools may not have the computer resources to present the video in the classroom, however.
* The teacher feedback was that this information was timely and appropriate, something they were glad to see delivered to their students.
* The children were very attentive to the video and seemed entertained by the characters. We want to see how this video is received by third and fourth graders. Fifth graders would probably find it “too baby!”