

Hunting an opportunity to educate youth

Written by Kyle Arnoldy

While the nation seemed to be divided on gun-control measures taken earlier this year, one undeniable constant that remains is the need to educate the youth about gun safety.

According to a web-based injury statistics query and reporting system found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, there were 606 unintentional firearm deaths in 2010 in the United States. Victims in 134 of those accidents were children.

With hunting serving as one of the area's most enjoyable pastimes, children's access to guns only further reiterates the need for gun-safety education in rural Colorado.

Hunter safety programs help the youth understand how to properly handle firearms as well as provide instruction for safe hunting procedures. While the course is beneficial to the hunting community as a whole, many parents with guns in the house choose to begin lessons long before children are able to take and complete the classes.



Max Dirks, pictured at left, is accompanied by his grandfather Harry Brinkema, and of course his trusted hunting dog Raider, on one of his first hunts of the 2013 season.

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Holyoke Police Chief Doug Bergstrom stated that because of his job, his two sons were exposed to firearms at a young age. As they grew older and became more curious with the guns, Bergstrom said it was important to him to talk to his boys and emphasize the message that guns are not toys but a tool for his job and that they are never to be handled without his supervision.

Once his oldest son Hunter, 12, passed his hunter safety course, the two began to enjoy the sport together. The time spent together hunting allowed Bergstrom to monitor how Hunter handled the gun as well as incorporate a fun family event into their lives.

With his youngest son Tyler, 7, nearing the same age as Hunter when he got his hunter safety license, Bergstrom has already begun to shape the soon-to-be hunter's outlook on guns.

With supervised gun lessons with a BB gun, Bergstrom was able to ensure his son knows simple rules, such as never pointing the gun at people, before Tyler graduates to guns used to hunt.

He stated that from an early age, he explained to his kids that guns are not bad things like some people say they are and can be used in a number of other ways including skeet-shooting and hunting.

Hunting has long been a part of northeast Colorado culture. Many families use hunting season as a time to come together annually to spend time outdoors and feast on their prizes from the day's hunting adventure.

Max Dirks, 9, has been around hunting for most of his life. In fact, when he was born, his parents, Jeremy and Brooke Dirks, purchased him a lifetime hunting and fishing license for Nebraska, where they were living at the time.

After spending a few years accompanying his dad, his uncle Ross Brinkema and grandfather

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Harry Brinkema on hunting trips, Max is now allowed to join in on the hunting action as he passed his hunter safety test last year.

All three men said they grew up hunting with their fathers, and when Max reached the age he could join them, they wanted to make sure he had a respect for the wildlife and for the guns.

Brooke even took the hunter safety classes with Max because she really wanted him to learn the importance of what was being taught.

“That’s one of the main things for me too is that when a child his age is handling a gun, they have to know how to do it safely and respect others around them,” Jeremy added.

The first few times Max was allowed to bring a gun along for a hunting trip, it was empty, and he practiced hunter etiquette. Safety and awareness are two of the most important aspects of hunting for the family outings.

After experiencing a scary situation in the past with a young, inexperienced hunter who would wave his gun around wildly, Ross acknowledged how important adult involvement during the first years of hunting are.

He admitted that seasoned hunters tend to become lazy and don’t necessarily follow all hunting precautions, but with a young hunter in the group, there is more of a responsibility to serve as a role model.

Harry mentioned that safety is especially stressed during times where the sport is growing. He noted that he has seen more women hunting this year than he has in the past 60-plus years. With more and more people heading to the fields, even more importance is placed on hunter awareness and safety.

Children may not be the only inexperienced gun-handlers in the fields either. Harry stated that

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hunting has long been a way to showcase to people from urban areas what rural America has to offer. He said he has many times brought friends from out of town with him.

Phillips County Parks and Wildlife officer Aimee Ryel noted that it is not just children and hunters that need to be educated on gun safety.

“It’s not just the youth; every person should know how to safely unload and handle a gun, know where the safety is and know which end is the dangerous end,” Ryel stated.

Hunter safety classes are available in Phillips County a few times a year. While there is no age limit to participate, a child must be able to read and comprehend the test questions on their own in order to pass.

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