

# Eddie Eagle is Joe Camel with feathers.

The National Rifle Association (NRA) claims that it "has developed The Eddie Eagle Program to help prevent the loss of even one young life." Created in 1988, Eddie Eagle is a school-based program purporting to teach "gun safety" to children in pre-school through sixth grade. The program conveys its message in a four-part chant children are to follow when they find a gun: "Stop! Don't touch. Leave the area. Tell an adult." The namesake for the program is a bald eagle cartoon character. Research and analysis by the Violence Policy Center reveals, however, that Eddie Eagle is more gun industry salesman than "gun safety" mascot. In fact, Eddie Eagle is nothing less than Joe Camel with feathers.



**Violence Policy Center**

## Why is Eddie Eagle Joe Camel with feathers?

**Eddie Eagle strengthens the appeal of guns to kids.** Like Joe Camel, Eddie Eagle is designed to put a friendly, "cool" face on a dangerous consumer product, *never warning of the risks that guns present*. By leaving out the safety risks, and portraying guns as an "adult custom," Eddie Eagle actually *strengthens* the appeal of guns as a marker of maturity and adulthood.

**Eddie Eagle does not warn of the safety risks associated with guns.** Why? Because such an approach would undermine the NRA and gun industry's future customer base. Studies show that future shooters, like future smokers, must start by their teens, or they'll be lost to the industry forever.

## The Eddie Eagle program not only neglects to teach the hazards associated with firearms, its chant does not even include the word "gun." Eddie Eagle is Smokey the Bear *without* the forest fire.

**Like Joe Camel, Eddie Eagle is industry funded.** The funding source for Eddie Eagle is The NRA Foundation which, in a two-year period alone—1994 and 1995—received hundreds of thousands of dollars from the gun industry, as well as tens of thousands of dollars from the tobacco industry. As an article distributed as a promotional flyer by The NRA Foundation explains: "The [NRA] Foundation is a mechanism by which the firearms industry can promote shooting sports education, cultivating the next generation of shooters. Translate that to future customers."

**National Rifle Association staff admit that Eddie Eagle is a tool to recruit children.** In a moment of candor, Eddie Eagle Program Manager Kathleen Cassidy acknowledged to a reporter from the *National Journal* that Eddie Eagle is aimed at "getting youth more involved in the NRA and shooting sports, through education and safety." According to the magazine's October 10, 1998 issue, Cassidy then attempted to retract her statement.

## Why is Eddie Eagle ineffective?

**Eddie Eagle was first developed as a lobbying tool to defeat child safety legislation.** The NRA launched the Eddie Eagle program in Florida in 1988 in an effort to derail pending child access prevention (CAP) legislation. Such legislation subjects adults to criminal penalties if they fail to store their gun in a manner reasonably designed to prevent access by children and death or injury results. Eddie Eagle was offered as an alternative to the child safety measure. Since then, Eddie Eagle has been used as a lobbying tool to help defeat other state and federal child safety laws.

**Eddie Eagle never says that guns can kill.** Effective product warnings *must* include the dangers associated with the product. For example: cigarette labels warn that smoking causes cancer, alcohol warning labels tell pregnant women that drinking can cause birth defects, and toy labels warn when small parts on a toy can choke children. The Eddie Eagle program not only neglects to teach the hazards associated with firearms, its chant does not even include the word "gun." Eddie Eagle is Smokey the Bear *without* the forest fire.

**Eddie Eagle expects kids to be responsible for their own safety.** Rather than recognizing the inherent dangers guns in the home pose to children, and the often irresponsible firearms storage behavior of adults, the Eddie Eagle program places the onus of responsibility on children. In fact, academic studies of programs like Eddie Eagle conclude that "there is no evidence that safety lessons are retained by children at the critical times when they confront a loaded weapon."<sup>2</sup> Public health research finds that "gun safety" programs like Eddie Eagle are ineffective in preventing children from playing with guns. One study showed that, of children who had taken a gun safety course, nearly one out of five whose parents owned a gun had played with the weapon without their parents' knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

**Eddie Eagle has never been objectively evaluated by the NRA for effectiveness.** Instead, in its promotion of Eddie Eagle, the NRA attempts to exploit the credibility of other organizations. In particular, the NRA has misrepresented awards from the National Safety Council, which has issued a series of sharp rebukes to the NRA, including a 1997 letter by the organization's president telling the NRA to "immediately cease making reference to the National Safety Council or its youth safety award" in its "promotional or lobbying efforts" and that "public education alone is not a sufficient means to address the incidence of death and injury from firearms." The NRA has never conducted a long-term evaluation of the effectiveness of the Eddie Eagle program.

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## What are the facts about unintentional gun death and injury among kids?

**Each year in the United States, the number of kids shot and killed unintentionally could fill a commercial airliner.** In 1997 alone, 142 kids 14 years of age or younger were shot and killed unintentionally—12 children every month, one child every two and a half days.<sup>4</sup> More than seven times that number of children are treated in U.S. emergency rooms each year for nonfatal gunshot wounds.<sup>5</sup>

**The number of children and teens killed unintentionally by guns has declined, but *not* because of Eddie Eagle.** The decline in the rate of unintentional gun death among kids is more likely due to improvements in pediatric trauma care and lower gun ownership rates than to ineffective programs like Eddie Eagle. According to a recent survey by the Police Foundation, the percentage of American households that own guns has fallen from about half in 1959 to little more than a third in 1994.<sup>6</sup>

## What can I do in my community?

**Find out if Eddie Eagle is in your state.** Call the National Rifle Association in Fairfax, Virginia, and ask for a list of nearby schools that use Eddie Eagle. If the Eddie Eagle program is in your local schools, contact your local board of education, parent/teacher association, and elementary school principal and have them contact the Violence Policy Center at 202-822-8200 to receive information from our study *Joe Camel with Feathers: How the NRA with Gun and Tobacco Industry Dollars Uses its Eddie Eagle Program to Market Guns to Kids*. Information from the VPC's study can also be downloaded from our web site located at [www.vpc.org](http://www.vpc.org).

**Finally, make sure that your community leaders and local news media are aware of the controversy surrounding the Eddie Eagle program.** Often parents, educators, and community leaders concerned about gun death and injury are unaware of the full story behind the Eddie Eagle program. You can help change that.



## For information about

the NRA's Eddie Eagle program, gun industry marketing to children, and the dangers of guns in the home, contact:

### **Violence Policy Center**

1140 19th Street, NW  
Suite 600  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 822-8200

## For information about

training for youth groups who want to develop their own youth-led campaigns to bring attention to the marketing practices of the NRA and the gun industry, while advocating for policies to reduce gun death and injury, contact:

### **Alliance for Justice**

Co/Motion Gun Violence  
Prevention Initiative  
2000 P Street, NW  
Suite 712  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 822-6070

## References

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  6. Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig, *Guns in America: Results of a Comprehensive National Survey on Firearms Ownership and Use*, Police Foundation, 1996.
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