

Outdoors

The Christmas gun — is everybody ready?

If Santa Claus is slated to bring a youngster in your house a real firearm for Christmas, stop and give a little thought to what it means.

It will likely be one of the most important gifts he will ever receive. It's a symbol of responsibility, showing that you believe him mature enough to be trusted with a powerful weapon. In a sense, it may be considered a first stride toward being grown-up. But it's not just his responsibility; it imposes responsibilities on his parents, too.

The question every parent wants somebody to answer, of course, is how old is old enough for a real gun? Unfortunately, no outsider can answer that. Only you can know your kid well enough to make that decision.

And there is no automatic age: I know men who received their first real

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firearm at age 6 ... and I know some around age 60 that still aren't mature enough.

I was 7 when I got the long package under the Christmas tree. In it was a bolt-action single-shot .22, made by Stevens and costing about \$5 in 1934. I still have it. I cannot begin to guess how many thousands of rounds of ammunition it has fired, but the bore is still bright and sharp and the little rifle still shoots accurately.

It was much more than just an inexpensive rifle; it was

the instrument with which I learned about the seriousness of taking an animal's life. I learned not only that I could kill, but that I could spare a life ... and that doing that sometimes made me feel good, too.

I learned about what we now call "fair chase," refusing to take unfair advantage of a game animal even when nobody was looking. I learned that there was nothing manly about inflicting suffering. To kill quickly, cleanly, and humanely became one of the driving principles of my whole life.

When I unwrapped my new Christmas gun, Dad sat me down and explained to me how my world was going to be from then on. I could keep the rifle in my closet (I was an only child), but I was not even to touch it, much less shoot it, except under supervision of one of my parents or grandparents. The penalty for disobeying

this basic rule was loss of the gun. Since it was my most prized possession, I lived in mortal terror of having it taken away forever.

Needless to say, I was painstakingly instructed in cleaning and maintaining the rifle and drilled by the hour on the fundamentals of safe gun handling.

My grandfather carried much of the burden of training me. He was Houston County sheriff for many years and was expert with any kind of firearm, and I spent a lot of time with him. He was very strict in enforcing the gun safety protocols, with a zero-tolerance policy toward carelessness or horseplay. He got through my thick young skull that a gun is not a toy, and that it must be treated with respect every second it was in my hands.

Under his tutelage, I became a skilled marksman.

A few years later I won the NRA Junior Distinguished Rifleman Award and the New England regional schoolboy smallbore championship.

I also captained my school's championship rifle team while Grandad was alive to enjoy my successes. It was he who taught me the discipline and determination to win, and, most important, he taught me that nothing can be accomplished without practice.

Nobody knew it at the time, but the most important thing that came with that little Stevens would be a long and satisfying career of using and writing about guns.

Oh, and another thing: I've owned guns — lots of guns — for more than 65 years, and because of that early training by my family I've managed to arrive at age 75 without ever having accidentally shot anybody or

anything.

The point of all this is that the first Christmas gun places at least as great a burden on you, as a parent, as it does on the youngster. If you doubt whether you have the patience and discipline to teach him what has to accompany the new firearm, maybe you might re-think the gift.

He (or she) might be ready, but are you?

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson's hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for "Shooting Times," "Rifle," "Handloader," "Guns & Ammo" and Peterson's "Hunting."