

Extension Responds: Stress and Safety

Make Educated Decisions About Safety of Children on the Farm

By Mark Purschwitz

A farm is a nice place to raise a family. It is also a hazardous workplace where children may be exposed to hazards that can inflict serious or fatal injuries. While children living on the farm are at the highest risk, visiting children also have been injured or even killed. Everyone who operates a farm must make important decisions about the safety of children on that farm.

Children are injured while in one of three basic situations:

1. Working
2. Not working, but accompanying a parent or older sibling in the workplace
3. Not working and not being supervised or watched.

In each of these situations, adults must practice caution and diligence to prevent serious injury.

Working

Children who are working must be given tasks that are appropriate for their ages and developmental levels. Each child is different. Parents must think carefully about both the physical and mental aspects of the job the child has been asked or told to do. Can the child physically do the job? Will he or she be harmed from overexertion or heavy lifting? Is the child required to climb dangerous heights or be in a position where he could have a serious fall?

If a child is operating a machine, can she reach all the controls? Is he strong enough to operate the controls smoothly and swiftly if necessary? Does she have the maturity to make critical decisions when things go wrong? Can he anticipate problems or potentially dangerous situations and take actions to avoid them? Does she understand the dangers of the machine and know not to try to make adjustments to a machine while it is running? Just because a child can reach the controls and handle a machine when things are going smoothly does not mean the child can handle malfunctions or emergencies. Like any other operator or worker, children need training and supervision.

Children in the workplace

Exercise extreme caution when you take children into working areas on the farm.

Is the child in a safe place? Riding on the fender or in the cab of a tractor is not a safe place; children have fallen from both and have been run over.

Can the child be watched continuously? Tragedies have happened when parents have tried to work and simultaneously watch a toddler. Suddenly they realized the toddler is nowhere in sight, then find the child dead due to a farm hazard. Finances and schedules may be a problem, but the wise parent will hire a babysitter or use some sort of day care to keep the child in a safe place while the parent is working.

Unsupervised children

With all the tractors, implements and trucks in motion on modern farms, a curious child might easily be run over. Younger children should not be left unwatched, so parents who work -- either on or off the farm -- should use baby sitters or daycare to make sure their children are in a safe and supervised place. All children should learn from an early age what areas of the farm are "off limits," and that they must stay away from machines.

A safe environment

Parents must be sure hazards on the farm are controlled, both for the safety of children and of adults. Guards and shields must be in place on machines. Tractors should have ROPS (Roll-Over Protective Structures). Fences and barriers must be used to keep people out of dangerous areas. Chemicals must be kept in locked storage areas.

Information is available to help you make wise decisions about the children on your farm.

Your county University of Wisconsin-Extension agriculture, 4-H/youth development, or family living agent can help you think through these decisions. The University of Wisconsin Center for Agricultural Safety and Health at <http://bse.wisc.edu/wiscash/> has farm safety information and selected links to other farm safety programs.

The National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, located in Marshfield, has published the "North American Guidelines for Children's Agricultural Tasks", which breaks down various farm jobs into individual tasks to help you decide if there are parts of a job unsuited to a certain child. You can find these materials at <http://research.marshfieldclinic.org/children/> and <http://www.nagcat.org/>.

"Farm Safety 4 Just Kids" is dedicated to preventing serious and fatal injuries to children on farms, and has a wealth of materials on line at <http://www.fs4jk.org/>

It is important for every farm family to make sure its priorities are in order. Spending time with children is important, but not in an environment where they can be seriously injured or killed. Having children develop a good work ethic is important, but not if they will get seriously injured or killed. Farming is not worth the death of a child.

For more information: Mark Purschwitz, Wisconsin Farm Safety and Health
Specialist, University of Wisconsin-Extension, 608-262-1180,
mapursch@facstaff.wisc.edu