

Keeping Young Workers Safe on the Farm

Working on a farm can be a great experience for a young person. Farm chores and other jobs teach responsibility and help build self-esteem. Unfortunately, young people are sometimes asked to take on more than they are ready to handle, and this can lead to tragedy. Here's an example from the accident investigation files of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH):

A 12-year-old boy had been working part-time for a few months at a local cattle operation. The boy was a good student, he had read books on tractor safety, and he had been trained by the owners of the farm. One spring day, the boy was asked to drive a tractor from an implement dealership to the farm about a half-mile away. As the boy began to drive up a small hill on the country road, the tractor veered into the ditch, overturned, and the boy was killed.

According to NIOSH, more than 100 youth aged 19 and under are killed and 33,000 are injured each year on American farms. To put that into perspective, the death rate for kids on farms is more than DOUBLE the overall average occupational death rate for all other workers in the United States (12.2 deaths per 100,000 young farm workers versus 5.1 deaths per 100,000 workers overall). Some of the main hazards on farms include machinery, ponds, firearms, livestock, agricultural chemicals, grain bins, silos, and electricity. Besides youth who actually work on farms, children who live or visit there are also at high risk. In fact, children under 5 years old account for 40% of all deaths among young people on Kansas farms.

The good news is that most of these deaths and injuries can be prevented. The National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety offers a number of recommendations to help ensure that young workers are safe on the farm. For instance, young people should never be allowed to drive a tractor without roll-over protection and a seatbelt. Adults should make sure that young workers are transported safely to the field since transportation accidents are a common cause of injury. Youth should drink at least a quart of water each hour while working in the heat. Precautions should also be taken to limit exposure to the sun. Children should never be allowed to fuel equipment, and they should shut down a machine and get adult help any time an equipment malfunction occurs.

Additional recommendations can be found in the North American Guidelines for Children's Agricultural Tasks. Parents and employers of children aged 7 to 16 years can use the guidelines to determine if a young person is mature enough to do specific tasks around the farm. The Guidelines also provide tips for supervising and training children to do their work safely. The Guidelines are available on the Internet at: <http://www.nagcat.org/>

If you live on a farm with younger children who don't yet work, the National Safety Council has a list of precautions you can follow at: <http://www.nsc.org/library/facts/agrikid.htm>

Parents and employers can also find many other important sources of ag safety information at the NIOSH Agricultural Safety web page: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/injury/traumaagric.html>

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