

On The Farm, Child Safety Is an Adult Responsibility

The very nature of farming activities is what makes them so dangerous to children. On the one hand, a farm is an industrial workplace, filled with a bewildering variety of dangers. Yet, it may also be a home, or a special place to visit. Children can not be kept completely away from the workplace, as is the case in other industries. Instead, farm families must identify the many hazards and find ways of dealing with them.

THE MAJOR HAZARDS

Hazards encountered on a farm are extremely varied. They range from electrical shock to poisoning to bad tempered livestock. The exposures may change on a daily basis. For example, a stubble field may be a good, safe place for a walk. A few days earlier, during harvesting, the same field would have been filled with danger.

MACHINERY

Most children killed or injured on farms are victims of machinery accidents. Many of these tragedies occur when an operator starts a machine without even knowing a child is in the area. In other cases, the neglect is more obvious -- for example when a child falls from an implement or a tractor fender.

HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

A majority of farm chemicals are hazardous, and pose a danger in the hands of children. The same is true of more commonplace items, such as gasoline and matches.

BUILDING AND OTHER FACTORS

Buildings can be designed to be safe, and should be fixed if they are unsafe. However, poor housekeeping can defeat the safest design. For example, a tractor wheel leaning against a wall could fall and crush a child trying to climb it. Baler twine hanging from a beam could catch a child around the neck.

LIVESTOCK

Even good-tempered animals may become dangerous. A toddler could be knocked down and trampled by cattle that would hardly notice the child's presence. Even the quietest animals can become dangerous if they feel threatened, particularly if they have their young with them.

PROTECTING CHILDREN: THE BASICS

Accidents involving children can be prevented through attention to details, based on a good understanding of some of the fundamental principles.

MAKE EQUIPMENT AND BUILDINGS SAFE

Anything that is hazardous to you -- for example, a hole in a barn floor or a protective shield left off a machine -- is also a danger to children. Making a farm safe to adults is not enough; children are extremely curious, but lack adult judgment. They may also be small enough to get past some protective barriers and shields designed for adults.

DANGEROUS EQUIPMENT SHOULD BE UNACCESSIBLE

Anything children might use to harm themselves or others should always be kept out of reach. Guns and pesticides are obvious examples.

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KNOW WHERE CHILDREN ARE AT ALL TIMES

This is difficult on a modern farm, since both parents often have to join in the work. However, young children *must* be supervised. If both parents are working, day care or some other form of adult supervision is essential.

PRACTICE

How often do you set something down for a moment, then get distracted and leave it for a long period? If it's a container of pesticide, for example, it's readily accessible to a child. The best planning and intentions are negated by a moment's carelessness.

SET A GOOD EXAMPLE

When children start to help out on the farm, they will follow your example. If you work safely, so will they.

EDUCATE

Even small children can learn the rudiments of safety, such as which area of the farm are "off limits." As they get older, children can learn why certain things are dangerous. School programs and safety publications designed specifically for children enhance the learning process.

DON'T ASK TOO MUCH

When youngsters do begin helping with farm work, proper training is essential. Adults should keep in mind a child's limited strength and experience. (How often will a teenager actually admit that they "don't know" or "aren't strong enough?") It is especially easy to assume that the safe way of doing something is obvious. Instead, it is only because of the farmer's wealth of experience that it *seems* obvious. For the youngster, everything about safety has to be explained, and often explained again.

ANTICIPATE LAPSES

Even the best kids can disobey or forget. Similarly, well-supervised children will occasionally end up where they don't belong. Taking children for granted, for example, leaving a can of pesticide out because you

assume that a youngster "knows better", can be extremely dangerous.

SAFE MACHINERY OPERATION SAVES LIVES

The most important safety rule on the farm is NO PASSENGERS - EVER! This rule must be strictly enforced -- no rides "just across the barnyard." Allow enough time for helpers to walk to and from fields, or provide a safe means of transportation. Machinery should be maintained in good repair, with all protective shields in place. Children must understand that they are not allowed to play with idle machinery. Equipment that might fall, such as front-end loaders, should be left in the down position. When self-propelled machinery is parked, brakes should be locked and keys removed from the ignition. Tractor PTO's should always be left in neutral. When starting machinery -- and especially when reversing -- make sure that everyone is in the clear. Know where the children are. Kids should not be allowed to operate machinery until they are big enough to reach all of the controls. They should be thoroughly trained in the safe operation of equipment before start-up. Beginners should be asked to explain things back to you, in their own words, to make certain that they understand. If they seem confused, take the time to over things again until it's clear. Something that seems obvious to an experienced operator may be very confusing to a beginner.

MAKE WORK AREAS "OFF LIMITS"

Until they are old enough to begin helping, children should not be allowed in areas where work is underway. An operator simply can not work with machinery and watch for children at the same time. This is true for field work as well as for work around buildings. Exceptions can be made to show children the type of work being done. However, they should be kept in a group, and always accompanied by an adult. It should be emphasized that they are there to watch, not to play or run around. The supervising adult should be careful to keep the children a safe distance away from any danger.

SAFETY CAN BE BUILT INTO STRUCTURES

Some farm structures are extremely hazardous to children. The most dangerous of these include:

- **Silos**, because of deadly gases and unloading equipment
- **Binned grain** can turn into quicksand, particularly during bottom unloading. (Children also can “drown” in grain as bins are being filled.)
- **Farm ponds and open liquid manure storage** facilities are potential drowning sites.
- **Stationary machinery**, such as feed mills.
- **Electrical boxes and wiring**
- **Anything high** enough to produce a dangerous fall.

The only way to make any of these areas safe for children is to make them inaccessible. In some cases, this requires special fencing, for example, around manure pits. The fencing should be designed to prevent youngsters from squeezing through or climbing over. The bottoms of fixed ladders should be out of reach, or fitted with a special barrier. Portable ladders should be stored away from danger areas, such as silos.

Where protective barriers are needed, they should be fitted properly and designed so that small children cannot squeeze through. Dangerous machinery components and electrical boxes and wiring should be properly shielded. They should be placed out of the reach of small children, or be fitted with locking devices.

NEATNESS COUNTS

Safe designs have to be supported by safe habits. Children can be injured by tripping over objects left lying on the ground; others may be hurt if they become tangled in old fence wire or baler twine. Anything you want to keep should be stored neatly and securely; everything else should be safely discarded. This rule applies not just to the farm yard, but also to fence rows and fields. When storing things, be careful not to create new hazards. For example, a couple of bales of straw stored under a fuse box can put the box within a toddler’s reach. Also, heavy objects should never be left leaning against walls or posts. Children will try to climb them and may fall, or even pull the objects over on top of themselves.

PROVIDE SAFE STORAGE

Dangerous materials, such as pesticides and other toxic chemicals, should be stored in a locked cabinet or shed in their original containers. When a container is empty, it should be rinsed out and properly disposed of as soon as possible. If there is not enough room to securely store treated seed and fertilizer, children should be warned of the dangers in the strongest possible terms. In identifying hazardous materials, be careful not to overlook everyday items, such as matches. Guns should be stored *unloaded* in a place where they are out of children’s reach. Ammunition should be kept in a separate *locked* place. When in use, guns should *never* be left unattended.

SUPERVISION NEEDED AT ALL AGES

As children mature, there are changes in the nature of supervision that is required. In the early years, children simply can not be left alone. If both parent are working, someone else -- a baby-sitter, a relative, or a rural day care service -- must be found. At this age, a fenced play area near the house will make supervision easier. However, an adult should still be close at hand. When the children get older, the need for direct supervision decreases. However, basic rules -- for example, to stay away from areas where work is underway -- are still needed. Adults must be patient and allow enough time to enforce the rules. When older children begin helping on the farm, a different kind of supervision is needed. The days of making areas off limits are gone. Instead, parents must watch to make sure work is being done safely. Whenever safety rules are broken, adults must make time for explanation and enforcement.

IT’S IN YOUR HANDS

Remember that children sometimes are careless, and may forget. They may try to do too much, and sometimes deliberately disobey. In the end, safety is the responsibility of adults. No matter how carefully they are taught, children are still children.

Source: Adapted from material supplied by the Farm Safety Association, Guelph, Ontario

Zenith provides workplace safety resources at: **TheZenith.com**

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