

Safe Farm



Promoting Agricultural Health & Safety

Keep young children safe on farms

Too many rural families learn the hard way that a farm can be a dangerous place for growing children. The National Safety Council estimates that 300 people under age 19 die and approximately 24,000 (65 every day) are seriously hurt on our nation's farms each year. In Iowa, at least one out of every five farm injuries is to a child.

No matter how much parents know about farm dangers, they should not expect their children to understand them. Parents can teach children about safety, but they also must provide a safe environment. This publication will review developmental issues for children in preschool and early school years who still need supervision but are becoming independent and want to be part of family farm activities.

Development and safety

All parents are anxious for their children to develop, whether it's taking their first step or riding a lawnmower. However, children under age eight have many limitations. They cannot mentally manipulate ideas; they need concrete situations and rely on perceptions, which can be inaccurate. Their ability to reason and use logic is immature. They cannot apply what is learned from one situation to another situation. Young children often are overconfident and will attempt things beyond abilities to imitate or please adults. Since they still are learning skills, they concentrate thoroughly on tasks, frequently "missing" other input, or "forgetting" repeated warnings. Children under age eight may seem "grown up" compared to earlier years, but they need adults to monitor activities and keep them safe, especially on a farm.

Following are several developmental stages. Ages are approximate because

children develop at different rates and have different personalities.

Toddlers (under 3 years)

Children need a protected environment because they are driven to explore the world around them. Even very young infants are attracted by noise, movement, and brightly colored objects. Children seek out sensory experiences, such as playing in sand, grain, or water. Drowning is a big danger; buckets of water are an overlooked hazard on farms.

Their tendency to put everything in their mouth also makes them susceptible to poisoning. Even a drop or diluted mist can kill or permanently injure a child, a fact that families must remember during pesticide application season. For example, a child accompanying adults who bring meals to the field must be kept away from treated areas. Discourage workers from hugging children until they've taken off protective clothing and washed with soap and water.

Older toddlers enjoy moving. They often run headlong and have trouble stopping or turning. They want to do things by themselves and can be very stubborn. They have a short attention span, always looking for new and interesting activities.

They do not understand important concepts, such as the relationship between size and distance. A child in the middle of a driveway will see an approaching tractor, but not know how close the tractor is to them or even that it's moving. They also cannot understand personal property. As a result, they may experiment with "forbidden" items, such as matches, electricity or tools, when an adult is not looking.

Farm youth safety

What can you do ?

- Never allow children under age eight independent access to livestock, farm buildings, or machinery.
- Teach children as young as age two never to eat or drink anything unless a family adult gives it to them.
- Supervise children on the farm. Do not rely on rules—and their ability to follow them—to keep them safe.
- Be a good model for safety. For example, never use pesticides in front of young children because they may later try to imitate you.
- Provide a supervised outdoor play area away from livestock, traffic, and machinery for children. A fence helps separate play from work areas.

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Preschoolers (about 3-5 years)

Preschoolers run and climb very well, and are adventurous. They like to taste different things, such as shelled corn. They enjoy animals, especially baby animals, but can be oblivious to the mother animal's reactions.

Although preschoolers are beginning to understand prepositions, they may not understand where "beside" is, or comparative phrases such as "too close." For example, preschoolers must be told exactly how much food to put in the dog dish, rather than not "too much."

They may seek privacy, and often get in trouble when alone because they make poor judgments. They may misunderstand directions, and cannot follow more than two or three at a time. They can follow a simple rule, provided it isn't too challenging to their self-control (i.e. don't expect them to stay away from baby pigs they can see from the swing set). Playing near animals, grain storage, machinery, and farm buildings are key dangers for preschoolers on the farm.

Young schoolagers (6-8 years)

Young schoolagers still cannot judge distance, especially of moving objects. They often manipulate rules to their advantage. Although six-year-olds are still self-centered and impatient, by age seven they can be inward and preoccupied, leading to carelessness or not hearing what is said to them.

They still may find it hard to sit in one place, and tire easily or become clumsy. This is important when the child is around machinery or livestock for long periods (such as waiting in a pick-up truck in the field).

A seven-year-old still cannot apply one situation to another. For example, a child told not to go near a grain wagon doesn't realize the warning also applies to a truck full of soybeans.

Children this age also may get confused about directions; "left" and "right" are still new concepts. Always reinforce directions with visual cues, asking a child to move "toward me," rather than "the north door."

Teach rules

Parents should **never** rely only on rules for their children's safety. Rather, rules are

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safeguards to be used **in addition to** proper supervision. Children under age three do not understand rules, and children cannot be relied upon to remember or heed them until after age seven. Rules are learned gradually through repetition.

Around age three, children begin to understand simple rules that relate to concrete situations. For example, when a child asks about cattle, the parent can say that he or she must stay five steps away from the fence. For "never" situations, give the child at least one acceptable alternative. For example, suggest that children find an adult to take them to see the horses.

When teaching rules, ask the child to repeat the rule, then ask a question to make sure the child understands. Give hints, if needed. Repeat rules whenever the situation arises.

To teach rules to older children, capitalize on their helpfulness by making the rule something that you need rather than an ultimatum for them to follow. For example, you might say, "Hogs can be unpredictable and dangerous. I worry that you might get hurt if you are alone around them. It would really help me to know that you'll never go near hogs unless you are with an adult."

Provide supervision

The key to a child's health and well being on a farm is for parents to provide appropriate supervision. Toddlers should be closely supervised at all times and never left alone, even for a few minutes. Even six-year-olds should be monitored from a close distance, and checked on every 10-15 minutes.

During busy times, farm families should consider arranging childcare. A babysitter or childcare provider could come to your home, you could take children to a family daycare home, set up a babysitting exchange with a friend, or form a cooperative with other farm families. The hassles and hardships of arranged childcare become trivial when compared to the stress, guilt, and expense when a child is injured or killed on the farm.

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... and justice for all

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Farm youth safety

For more information

- Farm safety for young children*, Pm-1592, lists key farm dangers, appropriate rules, and supervision needs for each of six developmental stages under age eight, and a brief review of six hazard areas on the farm. Single copies are free at any extension office.
- Other youth-related publications in the Safe Farm series include:
 - *Review family farm safety rules*, Pm-1265g;
 - *Extra riders mean extra dangers*, Pm-1518c;
 - *Know laws about youth farm workers*, Pm-1518f,
 - *Match age, abilities to farm chores*, Pm-1518i.
- TEAMING UP ... A Farm Safety Walkabout for Kids* combines safety with family activities in a workbook for elementary-aged youth. Different sections focus on farm machinery, safe play areas, lawnmowers, livestock and how to be prepared for emergencies. Contact Farm Safety 4 Just Kids, (toll-free) at 1-800-423-5437 to purchase the workbook or get other farm safety resources.

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Safe Farm is an Iowa State University Extension project helping to make Iowa farms a safer place to work and live.

Check the World Wide Web at: <http://www.ae.iastate.edu> for more safety information.