

Keeping Kids Safe

It's a delicate balance.

by Sara Gugelmeyer



Parenting is hard. Being a parent on a farm or ranch adds a whole other dimension. On one hand, from an early age, we need our kids' help. On the other hand, we know it's a dangerous place for them to live, let alone work, so balancing getting things done and teaching responsibility with safety is key.

I am right there, too. We have an 11-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter. Both were very young when we put them on a gentle horse and told them to bring up the rear while we moved cows. I still remember the first time I put the four-wheeler in low gear and told our son to follow me along the edge of the field while I fixed the fence. Just as distinctly, I remember the first time I heard of a horrific accident involving a kid riding a four-wheeler.

According to the 2022 report from the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety (NCCRAHS), agriculture had the highest number of occupational fatalities across all industries for kids 17 and under from 2011-2020. Every three days a child dies in an agricultural-related accident in the United States, and every day 33 children are injured. Tractors and ATV/UTVs were the leading sources of fatal events.

The statistics can be staggering, but even more so are the anecdotal stories. <https://cultivatesafety.org>, the NCCRAHS website, highlights a couple: "A 6-year-old girl falls off

a tractor driven by her father and is run over by the mower he is pulling. She survived but requires multiple amputations. A 2-year-old boy is trampled by cows in the family's milking shed, and dies of his head trauma."

My own story is from a few years ago, when a child my son's age from the neighboring county was driving an ATV and rolled it on a dirt road. He was killed.

While the thought of what can happen is traumatic, the good news is there is a plethora of information out there concerning kids and farm safety. It's only a matter of time before kids are needed to help with farm and ranch work, but being educated on ways to keep them safe is easy to do.

From 2015 to 2017, 79% of children under the age of 18 were not working when injured on the farm. As such, the first way to keep our kids safe is to ensure they have a safe place to be when not working.

Out of harm's way

Cultivatesafety.org reminds us separation is key. "In traditional farm settings, the line between worksite and home can be blurred. Children not actively engaged in appropriate work tasks should be physically separated from the work setting," according to NCCRAHS literature.

The NCCRAHS has produced a comprehensive booklet called "Creating Safe Play Areas on Farms," which provides more details. Some

important things to remember are children depend on parents and adults to protect them — children do not easily remember rules and cannot fully understand the consequences or risks of serious injury. Also, parents tend to overestimate their children's ability to listen and comprehend complex concepts while also underestimating the risk of injury association with routine tasks.

Combine these natural tendencies of children and adults with the intense need to get work done on the operation, and there's a recipe for disaster.

Usually, according to the NCCRAHS, the safest place for young children is off the farm entirely, but that's not always realistic.

Some guidelines for the safe play area location on a farm are:

- Designated by boundaries or physical barriers such as fences, gates or shrubs.
- Away from car, truck or other vehicle traffic.
- Away from hazards such as machinery or unstable structures, for example a tractor tire leaning against building.
- Away from loud noises.
- Free from open water, where children can drown in as little as 2 inches of water.
- Adequately shaded from sun.
- Adequately sheltered from wind, dust or hazardous airborne particles.
- Protected with a strong barrier



Wait For Me

“Wait for me” is a simple phrase used by both parents and children on a frequent basis. Melissa Nelson of Hungry Canyon Designs is no exception.

“That’s what my kids say when we go outside and I am in a hurry, ‘Wait for me, Mom,’” she explains, “or sometimes I will say it to them when they want to go out, but I am not ready, ‘yes you can go, but wait for me.’”

She wanted her young kids to have bright clothing to wear around her family’s Iowa farm and Angus cattle operation, but she couldn’t find anything like that.

“Dressing them in high-vision, bright colors is a simple way for me to keep track of my kids and for others to see them as well,” Melissa explains.

She decided to add high-vision clothing options for children with the “Wait for Me” message on them to her online boutique, Hungry Canyon Designs, which already featured authentic and accurate ag-related cards, gifts and home décor. She also offers “Wait for Me” stickers.

“A lot of people put them by the ignition or in the corner of the tractor window, so that it’s a visible reminder to slow down and wait for kids or check to make sure they’re in a safe space,” Melissa says.

Hungry Canyon Designs has sponsored farm safety days and educational events, and part of the proceeds from these items are used for that and to contribute to family memorials of those lost in tragic farm accidents.

Log on to www.HungryCanyonDesign.com to learn more or order.

separating children from the worksite.

- Within sight and sound of a responsible adult.
- Close to first aid, hand-washing and toilet facilities.
- Small or large enough to match the amount of space needed to play safely.
- Easily and regularly maintained with grass mowed and snow removed.
- Where there is minimal risk of snakes, fire ants or other “critters” (e.g., ticks, mice, mosquitoes) that interrupt play or pose a health hazard.

Many parents ask, “Can’t I set up a safe area inside a barn or shop? Or why can’t I take my child with me if they’re in a tractor cab?”

The NCCRAHS likens this to taking a child to a construction site or factory. Such practices are not adequate because the parent or adult supervisor is distracted and trying to complete farm work. Also, these situations expose children to hazards such as dust, noise and vibration which may lead to chronic health problems.

Ready, set, work

Once we have a safe area for children who are not working, how and when can we know when a child

is ready to become useful? It’s critical not to rush it.

According to the NCCRAHS, while there are many benefits to youth working in agriculture, there are also risks. Since 2009, more youth have died while working in ag-related jobs than all other industries combined.

www.AgriSafe.org is another resource for information on youth ag safety. In the AgriSafe Online Learning Lab, there is information on all kinds of agricultural safety protocols, research and expert articles.

One of which is the webinar “Children and Youth: Living, working and playing safely on farms”, during which Marsha Salzwedel, the NCCRAHS youth safety specialist describes ag safety for youth in detail. These webinars require the user to register, but are free.

“Kids are most at risk when asked to perform tasks that don’t match their physical and mental abilities,”

Salzwedel says. “That mismatch is very dangerous for children.”

She points parents and employers to the Agricultural Youth Work Guidelines, which were developed to help parents and supervisors assign age-appropriate jobs and address the risks involved.

The first step is to assess the youth’s ability to perform a job

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safely. Children and even teens have varying levels of physical, cognitive and emotional development, and all are lacking compared with adults. It's important to remember these abilities develop at different rates for different children, even within the same family. For this reason, it is unwise to assign work based only on the age or size of the youth, Salzwedel explains. The following are some guidelines to remember when assigning children tasks:

Youth learn from watching adults and model what they see. The parent or adult supervisor must model safe behavior. Youth may skimp on safeguards like equipment shields and avoid wearing protective equipment like gloves or goggles. Always model good behavior by wearing the proper safety equipment yourself and supervise youth to be sure they do the same.

Practice and repetition help youth learn new tasks. Teach the child first and then watch the child perform the task. Provide positive and constructive feedback.

Our ability to focus improves with age. Most children do not develop adult-level attention spans until their early 20s, so assign short tasks and provide frequent breaks or change tasks often.

Youth get better and faster at decisions as they develop, but even older adolescents often make risky impulsive decisions. The only way to keep them safe is to not put youth in situations where an impulsive decision can cause serious injury.

Youth may not transfer learning from one task to another, so don't assume youth know how to do a new task. Adults must teach each new task, no matter how similar to the last, to ensure competency.

Because of youth's underdeveloped abilities, they need adult supervision to help prevent injuries. Detailed supervision instructions for common farm tasks are described in detail in the Agricultural Youth Work Guidelines, but remember each individual is different.

Youth benefit from clear rules that are known and understood by all, so set and enforce rules consistently. Adults should also follow the rules; youth notice if some violate rules and may copy that risky behavior.

Don't forget to praise positive behavior. Commend youth when they do something safely with a proud and congratulatory tone.

Young children often have less strength than older youth and may overestimate their abilities and try things they shouldn't. Remember to give younger children smaller loads and shorter distances and then increase as they age. Always provide breaks.

Youth may feel overconfident, leading to risk-taking. That's why adults must set and enforce rules and then monitor that they're being followed. Many youth value how they look and how others see them. Trying to impress peers can lead to risk-taking. Always monitor hairstyles and clothes for safety risks, and be sure personal protection is not skipped in favor of their appearance.

When trying to determine if a child is ready to perform a task safely, it's important to ask if they can do these things:

▶ Reach and operate all controls while wearing a seatbelt or other restraint to ensure safety. Do they have the strength to repeatedly operate the controls, or perform the task?

▶ Are they tall enough to maintain a good field of vision while performing the task, i.e., seeing through the pickup or tractor window, or over the fence with livestock-related duties?

▶ Can they understand and consistently repeat the steps of the process?

▶ Can they recognize a hazard, quickly problem-solve to avoid it and then respond appropriately? This could be a road hazard when driving or operating a tractor, or if something goes wrong while working with livestock?

▶ Can they react quickly enough to maintain safety, i.e., jump over the fence if a cow gets through the gate, etc.?

▶ Are they mature enough to consistently do what is expected without taking risks?

▶ Can they think through their actions and understand a consequence before reacting?

▶ Can and will they consistently dress appropriately? Such as, tie back their long hair, wear pants, avoid loose clothing?

▶ Can they safely demonstrate the job to you four to five times without fail?

▶ Can they communicate with you if something goes wrong?

Salzwedel reminds us, "There are a lot of benefits for kids who live, work and play on farms and ranches. And if we can work together to make these farms and ranches safer, then we children can take advantage of the benefits and live a long and healthy life." **AJ**

Editor's note: Log on to CultivateSafety.org and AgriSafe.org for more. Sara Gugelmeyer is a freelance writer from Lakin, Kan.