

CAUTION:

Children at Work, Home and Play



National Farm Safety and Health Week, Sept. 20-26, is an ideal time to discuss practices that jeopardize all who live, work and visit farms and ranches. Not only does the annual observance, held the third week of September, highlight the pleasures of rural living, it addresses the inherent dangers associated with agriculture. The 1988 theme, "Paws 4 Farm Safety," features youth and animals — their natural attraction and potentially hazardous alliance.

BY LORI GILMORE

LORI GILMORE PHOTOS

Children and animals. Both bring to mind warm images: your daughter working with her first Angus show heifer, your son finishing the livestock chores or your grandchild looking longingly at a playful newborn calf. Youngsters are often fascinated with animals and enjoy the adventure of exploration. Unfortunately, this can be a disastrous combination on farms and ranches.

Farms and ranches are one of America's most hazardous places to work, according to the National Safety Council (NSC). More

than 1 million children call this dangerous workplace home. In both the United States and Canada, children under the age of 16 comprise up to 20% of all farm fatalities, according to data from the National Children's Center for Agricultural Health and Safety at the National Farm Medicine Center, Marshfield, Wis.

An estimated 104 children, age 20 or younger, die of agricultural injuries on U.S. farms and ranches annually, according to Frederick Rivara. In *Fatal and Non-Fatal Farm Injuries to Children and Adolescents in*

the United States, 1990-1994 Rivara noted that more than 22,000 children who live on farms or ranches are injured each year.

Safety experts warn the total number of youth injured on farms and ranches is much greater than these statistics suggest. Many blame the lack of active surveillance to record childhood agricultural injuries for underestimating the danger. They say the conservative numbers don't represent thousands of nonfatal injuries to children *visiting or working* on farms. Nonetheless, the safety threat to all children is very real.

The culprits

Tractors and machinery are the main culprits in farmwork fatalities. Large animals account for many injuries, particularly to children, says Chris Hanna, program manager of the National Children's Center for Agricultural Health and Safety. He says the numbers vary depending on the region and emphasis on livestock production.

Data from Iowa indicates animals were the No. 1 cause of injuries to children 19 years and younger in five out of seven years (1990-96). Likewise, in North Dakota animals have been the leading cause of farm-related injuries to children under the age of 18.

"Most kids are injured doing tasks beyond their developmental capabilities," says Hanna, of the Wisconsin-based rural youth injury prevention research center.

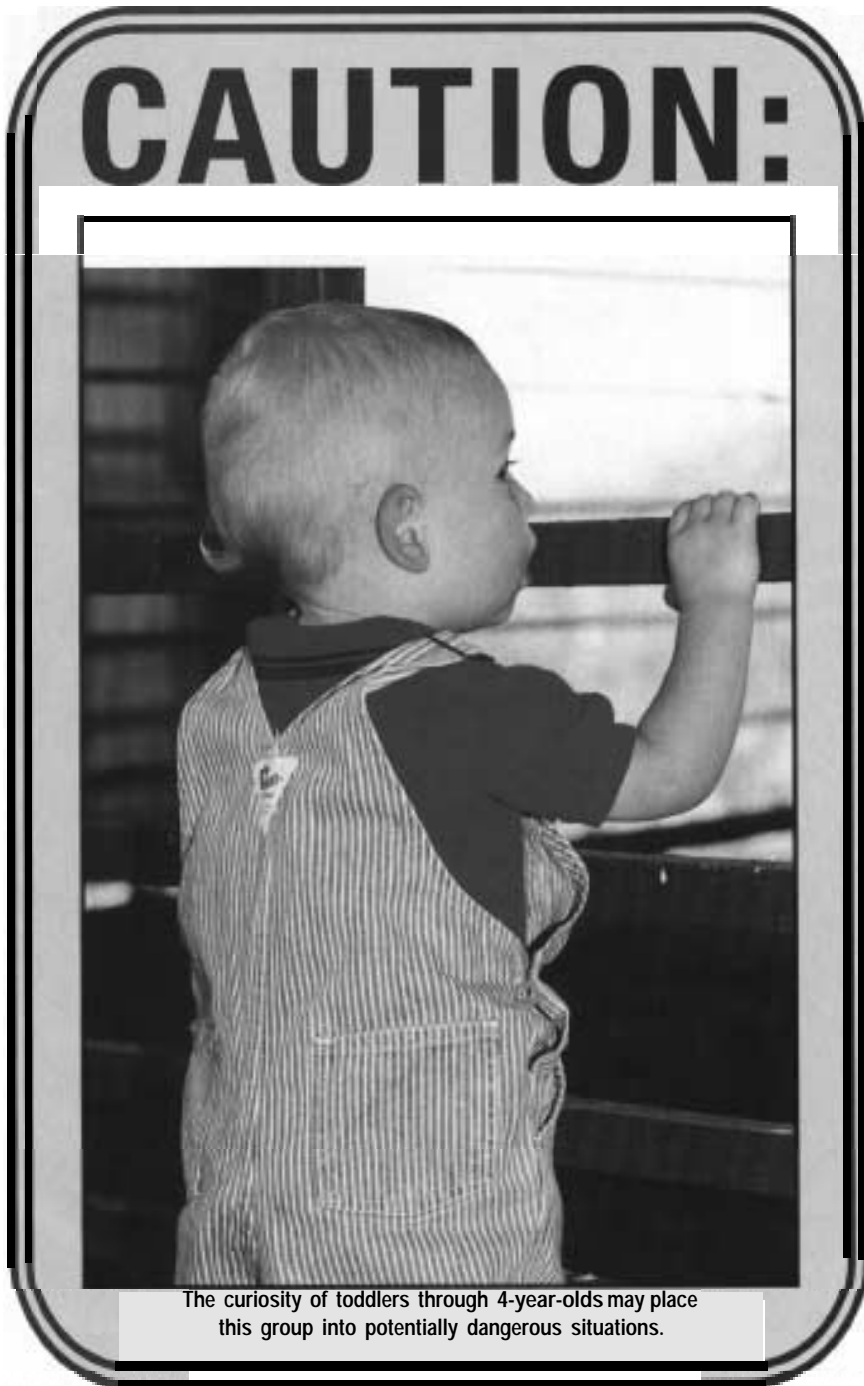
Dee Jepsen, youth safety specialist at Ohio State University (OSU) agrees. "Physically, a child may not be ready to handle some jobs; mentally, a child is not able to think past the job; and emotionally, the child is not experienced with what the outcome could be."

High-risk age groups

Farm safety statistics show that peak ages for agricultural trauma include early toddler through 4 years of age and during middle adolescence. The curiosity of toddlers through 4-year-olds may place this group into potentially dangerous situations. Typically, little ones are very mobile and quick. "They don't understand dangers associated with large animals and machinery," Hanna comments.

OSU's Jepsen stresses that supervision, along with the use of barriers, is imperative for protecting younger kids. Barriers may range from a simple understanding between the parent and the child not to go beyond the gate to placing the youngster in the truck to observe.

"Keep in mind that children might not be in the area where you told them to stand," she says. "Especially with a lot of



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activity, such as moving cattle, they will want to see.”

To reduce a child’s risk of severe injury or death, adults must set limits and explain the reasoning. “As a parent you need to discuss why,” Jepsen says. “Tell the child why he or she shouldn’t go into the bulls pen without someone around or why Dad is working on the other side of the livestock chute.”

Early teenagers also face greater risk. Starting at age 12-14, youth tend to start acting as if they know everything, and they feel invincible. It may also be a time when adult supervision of farm chores is decreased.

“Youth this age may get into situations with farm machinery where physically they are ready, but cognitively they don’t understand all of the risks,” Hanna says. “When something goes wrong— when an animal becomes cross or machinery gets in uneven terrain — the early adolescent may not be able to react.”

“It’s all based on the child’s ability to handle a situation,” Jepsen adds. “Parents should not take for granted that the child is ready for the activity just because he or she grew up on a farm.”

Take responsibility

Since children can get into trouble on the farm and ranch, parents need to take responsibility in teaching safe practices. While there are many danger signs to watch for when dealing with livestock, if educated properly, children can have exciting and safe farm experiences. A work ethic can be instilled as your child grows by assigning manageable farm chores.

“Make sure the task you give is age-appropriate,” adds Mac Legault, Extension project associate in safety at Pennsylvania State University.

“Developmentally appropriate work is great for kids,” says Hanna. “It’s a good opportunity for children to learn a skill, work closely with a positive adult role model and contribute to the family business.”

To reduce your child’s odds of becoming a statistic, look at every task to determine what could go wrong and how to prevent it. Since it only takes a few seconds for a child to get hurt around animals, Legault reiterates parents must provide supervision. He encourages farm and ranch parents to know where their children are working and playing at all times.

Finally, education is essential. Youth need to be taught the risks involved in working with animals on the farm and ranch. Remember, that newborn calf has a protective mother in the pasture. The animals in the lot are only interested in



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getting to the feedbunk. And the show heifer may react instinctively by kicking, bucking or butting.

Following are the most common animal hazards youth face, along with some expert advice on reducing risk of injury.

Livestock handling hazards

“Understanding the animal’s instincts and anticipating what an animal will do in various situations is an important lesson to teach children, even when they are toddlers,” Jepsen says. Learning about

animal behavior will later help youth perform age-appropriate farm tasks.

For example, children are naturally attracted to newborn calves. However, youngsters need to be aware of possible dangers associated with calving time.

“Kids don’t realize the same cow that used to let you pet her may have a different temperament,” says Jepsen.

“First-calf heifers and some older cows are pretty dangerous to be around after calving, especially in range conditions,” Legault says. He recommends keeping kids out of direct contact with the calf and dam. The Penn State safety specialist advises

Telling the Safety Story

Two sisters from south-central Nebraska have teamed up to tell the animal-safety story, primarily to other youth. During the past two years Jill Wellensiek, 19, and her sister Kelli, 16, have presented 17 sessions at five safety day camps.

"We want to help protect others who aren't aware of safe farm practices," the older sibling says.

The girls, raised on a family farm in Buffalo County, learned proper conduct around animals early from their parents, Don and Nancy Wellensiek. Each summer the juniors exhibit Angus heifers at their county fair. They also have experience handling horses, sheep, goats and dogs.

Jill, a recent graduate of Shelton High School, first became interested in safety at age 8. As a perennial 4-H speech contestant, she routinely picked a safety issue. A few years ago

the sisters joined forces to prepare a team presentation focusing on animal safety. That successful demonstration led to their active involvement with Farm Safety 4 Just Kids (FS4JK).

They were first asked to present a session at the organization's national meeting in Nebraska. That particular experience involved training adults how to teach children about livestock safety. After that, Jill and Kelli, along with their mother, became members of the Minden FS4JK chapter. Based on Jill's active involvement with FS4JK an organization with 84 chapters and more than 3,000 members



Kelli, left, and Jill Wellensiek use visual examples to tell the farm-safety message. Here they demonstrate the impact of a panel falling onto a stuffed animal.

nationwide, she was selected a National Safety Congress youth delegate. She later became the first youth member to serve on FS4JK national-board.

"I have learned through my involvement with Farm Safety 4 Just Kids, if you educate children, they will know safe farming practices growing up and hopefully educate their children — perhaps even their parents," says Jill.

Jill believes she and her sister, as teens, have an advantage teaching other youth. "We want kids to have fun while learning about safety," she says. "At the same time, we want them to become aware of dangerous situations that can occur on the farm."

Today the Wellensieks use day camps to deliver their animal-safety message to various age groups. Across the country, organizations such as Extension, FS4JK and Partners for a Safer Community set up learning opportunities for rural and urban youth. Typically, a farm-safety camp covers several areas — ranging from tractor and equipment safety to chemical dangers to water and grain drowning. The Wellensieks always incorporate animal-safety tips.

They also rely on interesting stories and visuals to capture their audience's attention. One such demonstration shows the hazards of a heavy gate falling onto a child. "So many times a small child will climb up on a panel that isn't wired correctly," Jill says.

In their presentation, the sisters use a farm panel and a watermelon or stuffed toy animal to drive home their point. They tell of a little girl who climbs up a panel to let her dad know its time for supper. The youngster jumps down and, at the same time, the faulty equipment falls back. In the demonstration, the falling panel crushes the watermelon.

"This gives children an idea how heavy and powerful the falling gate can be," Jill adds.

Many times the sisters involve the crowd by playing a game of "What are the potential dangers in this?" For example, Jill says they ask the audience what they would do if a ball rolled into the pen with a bull.

"Children need to know that they can't go into the bull's pen," she says. "With younger children, we stress the importance of always being with an adult."

Jill and Kelli Wellensiek understand a child's fascination with animals. They also know the importance of teaching livestock safety. "Animals can be great to be around if you know the proper safety techniques," says Jill.

For additional information on agricultural youth safety, contact the sources at right. Your local Extension office is also an excellent resource for safety material.

Farm Safety 4 Just Kids
P.O. Box 458
Earlham, IA 50072
1-800-423-KIDS (515) 758-2827
Web site: www.fs4jk

National Children's Center for
Agricultural Health and Safety
National Farm Medicine Center
1000 North Oak Ave.
Marshfield, WI 54449-5790
1-800-662-6900
Web site:
www.marshmed.org/nfmc/children

Partners for a Safer Community
Julie Sessions, project director
136 Canner St. 2nd Floor
New Haven, CT 06511
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parents to find a place where children can safely observe, perhaps from inside the truck or outside the pen.

To reduce your children's risk . . .

- Talk about animal behaviors and proper handling skills prior to working with livestock. At an early age, explain that farm animals are not pets and can often be unpredictable.
- Teach toddlers never to go around farm animals alone. Young children should only enter a pen or fenced area with adult supervision.
- Warn your children about a bull's temperament. Let youngsters know that most male animals are dangerous and may become angry very easily. Show older children "the signs" to watch for, including pawing feet, dotty eyes, heavy breathing or snorting and raised ears. Encourage them to respect these warning signals and, upon observation, promptly exit the pen or pasture.
- Make sure your children know that a cow will be very protective of her new baby. Children must understand that a mama will charge anyone, no matter the size, as a defense measure to safeguard her young. Always allow "an out" when working in close quarters.
- Teach children to refrain from making sudden movements and loud noises when approaching an animal. Be certain they will avoid getting kicked by teaching the proper approach. Explain the importance of walking up to the animal from the side and of being calm and deliberate when working with animals.
- Stress the significance of never teasing or taunting livestock. By instinct, animals will react to protect themselves when startled or spooked. Reiterate that large animals should be respected at all times.
- Warn children of the risks of wrapping or tying a rope halter around their bodies. Demonstrate the proper way to hold a halter by holding one hand close to the animal's head for control. Now is also a good time to teach your children how to properly tie an animal.
- Advise children never to sit or lay on top of a large animal, even if it is very tame. Remember, an animal taken to a livestock show is forced into a new environment and can't always be trusted.

Farmstead dangers

Nonfatal farm injuries are often associated with livestock, falls, small tools, building structures and moving machinery

parts, according to the National Children's Center for Agricultural Health and Safety.

"Keep all areas free of junk," says Legault, who is currently helping to develop a safety publication at Penn State entitled *Agriculture Safety and Health Best Management Practices*. He suggests good housekeeping practices. "Everything should have a place and be put away in that place." This tip should help reduce tripping hazards that may result in broken arms, bumped heads and bruises.

To reduce your children's risk...

- Keep working facilities in good repair. Poorly maintained chutes, fences, stalls and ramps provide an avenue for animals to escape, resulting in increased activity and chance of injury to both people and livestock.
- Make sure fences are properly constructed. Gates and panels should be latched securely. Teach older children how to properly latch a gate.
- Make sure proper clothing is worn. Jeans are a must, especially when doing livestock chores. Don't let a child wear loose, thin clothing that can get caught on fences and wire. Hard-toe shoes or boots can help protect little feet much better than sandals or tennis shoes.
- Eliminate unnecessary slipping hazards by keeping facilities clean and uncluttered.
- Cover floor openings on upper levels of barns or other buildings so a person, particularly a small child, won't fall through.
- Don't let your children play in water troughs. The sides are hard to grasp. A child could slip, hit his or her head and fall unconscious into the water. A little person can drown in a bucket of water or anything with slippery sides out of which they can't climb.
- Teach your children never to go near a farm pond alone. Fenced-in ponds should be off limits unless given permission by an adult. Let children know that fences are there for protection and should be respected.
- Make sure children know the difference between a pond and a lagoon. Many mistake a lagoon for a pond because they look similar. Barriers should be placed around lagoons and manure pits. Explain why they should avoid these farmstead hazards.

