Safety considerations for children on the farm

K-State agricultural safety expert lays out how to keep farm kids out of danger

By Jacob Klaudt, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. — According to the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, 33 serious injuries involving children occur on a farm or ranch in the United States every day.

To prevent these incidents, only youth with proper training and experience should be allowed to drive large equipment (the leading cause of injury and death for all ages on farms), said Tawnie Larson, a project consultant for the Kansas Agriculture Safety and Health program at Kansas State University.

“Farm kids do things like drive tractors all the time, which may be not too challenging for some,” she said. “The issue is that, cognitively, they are not prepared to safely handle a situation where something goes wrong, and that’s how major accidents happen.”

Her advice to adults: “Start demonstrating (to children) how to do things safely at a young age, and as they get older take them to formal tractor safety trainings.”

Safety starts before kids hop up into a tractor’s cab, according to Larson, noting that parents need to determine their child’s capacity to work beforehand by their mental – not physical -- maturity.

“Just because a kid is taller or bigger doesn’t mean they are more developed mentally than others. You can send out older, stronger kids to work, and they might have issues following instructions or rules you’ve set and injure themselves. Farm kids aren’t mini-adults; they might physically look capable, but that does not always translate to completing a job safely.”

Parents can avert accidents and injuries on the farm by providing specialized equipment and implementing safety strategies that keep children focused on the job at hand.

“They can install a ROPS (rollover protection structure) device to tractors without cabs, to keep children out of harm in case of a machine tipping over. Kids who wear their seatbelts will also be more secure in a situation like that.”
“I would also remove any distractions like their phones, loud music and friends riding with them while they are driving equipment.”

Modern tractors have a “buddy” seat that an additional passenger can sit in for training purposes. To ride safely in these situations, Larson encourages producers not to exceed the number of passengers recommended for a vehicle.

“One of the biggest safety issues is having extra riders – especially in a tractor without a cab. Just say no to additional people because there have been many injuries and fatalities where a child with no place to sit is held while driving,” she said.

Children often follow the example of the older people around them. In turn, Larson recommends that parents become proper role models to teach their children farm safety.

“In general, farm safety is an attitude and a habit, not something that you remember to do,” she said. “Parents need to create this attitude and habit in their daily life for children to model. If you find yourself using the common expression, ‘Do as I say, Not as I do,’ you are doing safety wrong.”

She adds: “Parents need to display safe behaviors and explain to their children why. Model the job, show them how to do it, watch them do it safety and then provide further advice as needed.”

Doing things safely is also something parents and other adults should do all the time, not if something has gone wrong, according to Larson. “If you create a good, safe environment, fewer bad things will happen,” she said.

Farm safety materials and a list of age-appropriate tasks are available online through Cultivate Safety, a website from the National Farm Medicine Center.

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Sidebar
Farm safety for non-working children

When thinking about farm safety for kids, Tawnie Larson, a project consultant for the Kansas Agriculture Safety and Health program at Kansas State University, splits children into two categories: working and non-working.

Parents train, supervise and provide proper protective equipment to ensure their working children’s safety, and likewise, need to take precautions for the well-being of their younger, non-working kids.

“Higher injury and fatality rates related to large farm equipment are seen in that demographic (younger, non-working kids),” Larson said. “If there are no physical barriers around machinery or proper communication about hazards in the area, (adults) must take special care to keep them safe and away from harm.”

During farming season, parents and older children may all be needed in the field, yet Larson said there is still a need for supervision of the younger, non-working children.
“Sometimes, parents have no choice and they take their children harvesting in a combine, for example,” she said. “In that environment, there is dust and debris in the air, a constant loud noise and the vibration of the machine, which may be harmful to infants and other small children. Producers should provide ear, eye and respiratory protection for everyone in the field, especially our little ones.”

She adds: “Parents should especially be concerned with the vibration because we don’t know what that does to their brains and their bodies while they’re in a cab for hours at a time. We know it’s hard to find childcare, but there should be an alternative that isn’t in a piece of working farm equipment. “

Larson’s recommended approaches for the safety of non-working children:

- Create safe play and recreation areas far from hazards like equipment sheds, water sources, chemicals and livestock.
- Provide children with blaze orange/yellow safety equipment and clothing to increase their visibility.
- Outline unsafe areas for non-working visitors to the farm when they arrive.
- Wait until children are six years or older to engage in farm tasks.
- Keep non-working children out of tractor cabs and other large equipment.
- Find childcare off the farm – older siblings, grandparents or trusted members of the community – when potentially dangerous activities are happening.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Cultivate Safety, https://cultivatesafety.org/work/

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