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Lawn mowers put young children at risk

By Brandi Janssen

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According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, more than 9,000 children are seen in emergency departments each year for lawn mower-related injuries.

Image courtesy Prevent Child Injury

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Like a lot of farm kids, one of my regular responsibilities was mowing our yard in the summer.

When I started learning how to operate our old riding mower, I remember my legs not being quite long enough to reach the brake pedals, so I had to scoot forward on the seat. I definitely had a few close calls when I couldn't engage the brake properly and went careening around an obstacle.



In retrospect, I was put in a position of doing a job I was not really ready for and I am lucky to have not been injured.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, more than 9,000 children are seen in emergency departments each year for lawn mower-related injuries. These injuries are a leading cause of traumatic amputations in young people, with kids aged 2 to 4 years old and 14 to 17 years old being at the highest risk.

The two peak ages indicate that many young children are injured as bystanders or when riding along with another operator, whereas older kids may be injured as operators.

Dr. Charles Jennissen, a pediatrician and clinical professor of emergency medicine at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine, points out that the greatest proportion of children are injured as bystanders.

“This occurs primarily when a young child runs up to a lawn mower seeking a ride and the operator turns or backs up, running over the child,” he said.

Dr. Jennissen makes an important additional point, “This is more likely to occur with children who have been given previous rides on the mower — either with or without the blades in operation.”

Although you may think that giving a ride to a little one without the blades engaged may be a safer option, it's important to remember that the child may not realize the danger of a mower in the future. They may run toward the mower — a fun vehicle to ride on — rather than understanding that it is a hazard to them.

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Dr. Jennissen says, “Giving lawn mower rides acclimates children to the loud machine and converts the mower into a play thing in the child’s mind.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that young children stay inside when the lawn is being mowed. This protects them from injury from flying debris, as well as a catastrophic run-over incident if they approach the mower without the operator realizing it.

Researchers at the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety recommend that young people start learning to mow the lawn with a push mower, rather than a riding mower. Riding mowers are the cause of injury in about 76% of cases. Young people ages 12 through 14 who have been trained and are supervised should be able to safely operate a push mower. At 16, most young people should be able to operate a riding mower.

It is the adult’s responsibility to ensure the mower is in good mechanical condition and that the young person is well trained about how to safely operate the mower.

In addition, anyone operating a mower should use the appropriate personal protective equipment. This includes sun, hearing and eye protection, long pants, and close-toed, non-skid shoes.

Be aware of rollover hazards on sloped terrain and, if present, have the rollbar up during operation while wearing the seat belt. If your mower has any additional safety features, such as an operator presence switch that stops the blades if the operator releases the handle or gets out of the seat, do not disable them.

In addition to maintaining the mower, make sure that the area to be mowed is cleared of debris that could become a projectile. Consider mulching around trees to make it easier to mow around and trim low branches to improve clearance. Landscape slopes with perennials to reduce or even eliminate mowing entirely.

Mowing is a great opportunity for a young person to learn how to operate a new piece of equipment as well as realize the satisfaction of a job well done. Although I complained bitterly about having to mow our yard on scorching summer days, learning to operate the riding mower was a good skill to develop.

However, it's a skill that can wait until someone is old enough to be able to safely handle the job. Further, the risk of a young child on a mower is too great to justify the few minutes of entertainment.

Dr. Jennissen says, "My recommendation is to never give a child a ride on a lawn mower."

There are plenty of other fun activities in the summer that will not put your child or grandchild at risk.

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