

Iowa Farmer Today

Youths on the farm need role models, review

By Kim McMichael

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A boy learns to drive a tractor on a farm. Many agricultural work-related injuries are associated with children doing work that does not match their developmental level.

Agriculture is an important part of the Midwest economy and culture, and many children grow up on the farm, live in a rural farming community or detassel to make money in the summer.

While there are many benefits of living and working in agriculture, there are also risks.

Many agricultural work-related injuries and deaths are associated with children doing work that does not match their developmental level. Some of the top causes of injuries and fatalities are machinery, motor vehicles/ATVs, falls and animals.

We often consider children as “miniature adults,” but it is important to remember children are still mentally and physically developing and continue to develop even into their early 20s.

Each child develops differently, which means that it may not be best to determine appropriate farm tasks only by their age. For example, one 16-year-old may be cautious and responsible, while the next could be more of a risk-taker or have a shorter attention span.

When assigning work to youth, in addition to looking at the requirements of the task, the youth’s personality, work style and ability should also be assessed.

Youth characteristics to consider when working on the farm include impulsivity, lack of experience or knowledge, risk-taking behavior, limited sense of vulnerability to injury and a desire to “prove” themselves.

Supervisors will want to create an atmosphere that encourages questions, provides feedback and trains youths to recognize and

address risks and hazards. Modeling safe behavior is an important aspect to teaching and supervising teens.

When training youths to perform a task, explain the task and demonstrate how to do it. Next, repeat the instructions and watch them perform the task. Be sure to praise success and correct mistakes and answer questions.

Youths should continue to be supervised closely until they are proficient in the task. Training should also be given periodically for review and when something new.

Additionally, providing a safe workplace that identifies hazards and offers personal protective equipment will benefit all employees, including youths. PPE may not fit a child the same way it would an adult, so ensuring a proper fit and providing signs displaying information on the proper use of PPE is critical. Signs can be posted to detail procedures, designate areas where children are not allowed, to educate on hazards or to indicate that PPE is required.

A helpful resource in assessing youth's abilities is the Hired Agricultural Youth Work Guidelines available on I-CASH's website at tinyurl.com/4xzsmwkm.

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