

Episode Title: Growing Safely, Part 3: Closing the Child Care Access Gap

Topic: Addressing Gaps in Child Care Access Among Farm Families and What Community Support Looks Like

Summary: While useful tools and educational programs are being developed to address childcare needs and farm child safety, there are still many social, practical, and monetary challenges to overcome. Dr. Florence Becot joins us again to wrap up our three-part series. This time, we explore the broader impact of childcare expenses on farm families' ability to earn a living and the need for more extensive support initiatives in rural areas to mitigate some of these challenges. This episode highlights the need for comprehensive support that goes beyond simply addressing childcare access and emphasizes the importance of stable farm income and affordable health insurance to enable farmers to successfully balance work and family responsibilities.

Expert: Florence Becot

Episode Quote:

"I wish I could just run my farm, have a successful business and raise my family the way I want to raise them. But there are just factors outside of my control that are just making it hard."

– Florence Becot, PhD

Transcript

00:10 E Ritchie

Welcome to the *FarmSafe* Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye, an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, we share first-hand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

00:33 E Ritchie

As we discussed in part 1 and 2 of this "Growing Safely" series, farm families have historically faced significant challenges in accessing childcare due to the rural nature of farming communities and the demanding, unpredictable hours of farm work. Many rural areas lack sufficient childcare providers, and those available are often expensive, inflexible, or far from farm operations. There is a need for comprehensive support that goes beyond simply addressing childcare access. Farmers' organizations, researchers, and policymakers can all play critical roles in this effort.

01:15 E Ritchie

While helpful resources and educational programs are emerging to address childcare needs and child safety on farms, significant financial, logistical, and social barriers persist. Florence Becot joins us again in the last episode of this three-part series to explore the broader impact of childcare costs on the livelihood of farm families and stress the need for broader support initiatives in rural communities to alleviate some of these issues.

01:46 F Becot

My name is Florence Becot. I am a faculty member at Penn State. I am the Nationwide Insurance Early Career Professor in Agricultural Safety and Health. And I also lead the Ag Safety and Health program there. And I've been there since January 2024.

02:00 E Ritchie

Are there any educational programs or resources available to farm families that focus on both child safety and managing childcare needs?

02:10 F Becot

Yes, so there are a few, and there's been an increase. So, from the National Children's Center, for many years, they have worked on the youth working guidelines. So, these are for a bit for older children. Those are youth working guidelines where they explain like at different ages, these are things that children can do based on their child development. It gives you clear indication of like "when are they ready?" Those are guides that are based on the different tasks that kids can do. So, working with livestock or when are they old enough to drive a tractor? And at Penn State, where I am, we have one resource that was developed by my predecessor, Dennis Murphy years ago, and we updated it last summer, and where it also is a very simple table of how old are the children, and this is the kind of things that they can or cannot do. So, it's almost like a very small version of the youth working guidelines, like, here's like two pages. If you're just going to read two things, read this.

03:09 F Becot

So other resources include the "Safe Play Areas." And it gives a lot of ideas on what can you do on the farm to create a Safe Play Area, depending on your farm setup and these are some things to think about, and some of the colleagues at Marshfield actually have gone through training around playground safety and playground design. And so, I think that they can also work directly with parents, I think, to talk through their plans and then around childcare. A group of colleagues developed a curriculum connected to childcare and to a lesser extent child safety.

03:45 F Becot

Really to guide families through what are the different childcare options that you might be able to use. And so that new resource, whole-farm planning curriculum that includes a childcare module goes into more of these details around what does that look like. And it's a curriculum that is starting to be offered in different states in the Midwest. And from what I understand, it's the first one of that kind that really dives into childcare for farm families, how to navigate it, some of the things to think about, there are some decision tools that people can use, and also for people to be like, "hey, what are my goals? What do I want?" So that the solutions that you look for are really tailored based on what you want.

04:28 E Ritchie

For farm families listening to this, what would you say to help them balance childcare needs and child safety on their farms?

04:37 F Becot

That's a hard one. And I'm going to be honest, and I struggle with this all the time because, so we've talked about these resources, right, on what people can do, the importance of having a network and family support. But what some farmers talked about is like, "Hey, I don't have a village. We always say that it takes a village to raise children, and I don't have a village." Some people talked about how their parents are older and they are not able to provide the care. Some people talked about how they didn't trust their parents or in laws to take care of their kids because they felt that the older generation was just not safe.

05:15 F Becot

There were also the examples of, "my dad is 80 years old, he's still on the tractor, but he can't hear a thing." It's really a tricky one because what we've heard is people will use more childcare if it was available. Because the other part that we haven't talked about is there is farm child safety, but there's also the impact on farm business viability. When there aren't easy options for childcare, no matter what that looks like, it's paid [or] unpaid. It really impacts when you can work, how much work you can do. Some of the costs around childcare impact, are you spending money to grow the farm for farm investments or are you paying for childcare? And it's not to say that one is good or the other, right? But it's just like it's a tradeoff. People have to make decisions. And if you have childcare that costs \$15,000 or \$18,000 for just one child, if you happen to have twins, like someone I was talking with recently, he has twins, that financially makes it really hard quickly. So, there has been an initiative around the Farm Bill to add more support for rural childcare.

06:27 F Becot

And that's something that's been supported both by the Farm Bureau and the National Farmers Union, as well as other groups that have really come up in favor of supporting childcare in rural areas, because it's connected to rural economic development. And they see it as a need, like that's something that they hear from their members. They've heard about our research, but we don't know what's going to happen with the Farm Bill at this point.

06:50 E Ritchie

So, how can listeners and communities support initiatives aimed at improving childcare access and safety for farm families?

07:00 F Becot

My sense is what I've seen to be most successful is when farmers advocate through their organizations for what they feel is needed. My understanding in the case of Farm Bureau, one of the reasons why rural childcare was added as a priority in their policy book was because there were farmers-- some of the young and beginning farmer groups that were going through the grassroots efforts and talking about what are our needs and priorities-- and that was coming up as key issues. And I've heard it from folks in Indiana, I've heard it from folks in New York state, I've heard it from folks in Pennsylvania. Another way to traditionally for people if they want, something is to call their legislator. Are they going to get it? Maybe not, but if legislator hear it more than once, often it does impact what they're going to support or not support.

07:59 F Becot

And then on the research side of things, we've done a lot of work to do outreach and to share about the findings and to say, "Hey, we've talked to all these farmers across the country." In the survey, we had 860 farmers who participated. And one of the questions that we asked was, "what kinds of solutions would make it easier for you to navigate work and the children?" And we had a list of 18 different options. And those options were mostly based on what we had heard during the focus groups, but 18 different options. And we had some that were more information about safety, more information about childcare, right? Maybe they were information-based. And we had some solutions that were really connected to childcare. So, for example, universal childcare. And we also had more stable farm income, affordable health insurance. Well, guess what is the top thing that farmers picked? Like by far.

08:57 E Ritchie

More affordable health insurance?

08:59 F Becot

Yep. 75% of farmers said that's what they wanted. Yeah, and when you think about why so often people have that our farm job so that they can have insurance. And so often when we're doing that work around childcare, they're saying, "I will stay home with the kids. I want to be home and raise the kids. But one of us needs to have the off-farm job so that we can have the insurance because farming is a very dangerous job. And we can't afford to buy health insurance directly from an insurer." And so, it was, I think it was really interesting in the solutions that we asked about. Really what people want is something that will address the larger overarching problems.

09:42 F Becot

Childcare was more middle of the road, around half people wanted solution connected to childcare. There are a lot of people who want to raise the children at home, but also that we're saying, "Well, if we're able to make a decent living of farming, then we don't need these other things." And so, there was also the piece around more stable income, farm income prices. And the idea again is, if you know how much you're going to be making, you're making a decent living based on how much you're putting into it, then you don't need the other stuff because you can take care of it yourself. That's how I read it.

10:16E Ritchie

I would interpret that the same. It makes sense.

10:20 F Becot

And what's fascinating, but I'm, I don't think it's surprising, if you think about it, is we don't find that much of a difference based on the kinds of farm that they operate or based on what the family looks like. We find that the biggest thing is, are they experiencing childcare challenges? Are they spending a lot of money on childcare? And it was the same for the health insurance research. It was fascinating. It was same thing. The thing that was making the biggest difference it seemed like was: what's the quality of a health insurance coverage? Does it cover you properly if you have a major illness or injury?

10:56 F Becot

At the end of the day is the needs of children, they're not that different. But there are a lot of people who are like, "This is tough. And I wish it wasn't tough because I wish I could just run my farm, have a successful business and raise my family the way I want to raise them. But there are just factors outside of my control that are just making it hard." In talking to farmers over the years, I feel like that's kind of the common thing that I hear.

11:26 E Ritchie

I've really enjoyed hearing what you've learned.

11:30 F Becot

Thank you.

11:31 E Ritchie

I had a want to do an episode on this topic, I was like looking and there was just like nothing else, it seemed like, that's been done on it.

11:43 F Becot

No, no, there is again, there is that the study that Shoshana started and was more focused on the community development side of things. And then we got the grant through the Children's Center is really where we've been able to do a lot of work. And I have also never seen a research project where so many people want to talk to us. Usually, it's hard to get farmers to talk. It's like, "I don't want to talk to you. I don't have time. You're wasting my time." It's like, understood. Thank you. In this case, I've never seen anything like this. Our goal for the focus group was to talk to 30 women.

12:18 F Becot

And I was like, it's probably going to take five weeks to find 30 women willing to do this. These are busy people with their kids. They just don't have time. We had 108 sign up in five days. Could not believe it. And we had so many people say, "Thank you so much for doing this research." My favorite quote was from this farmer in Ohio who said, "When I saw this study, I thought to myself, it's about darn time."

12:52 F Becot

When we think about recruiting the next generation of farmers, sure, it's really important to think about access to land, access to capital, access to equipment, absolutely. But we also need to think about the people and are they able to meet their needs and the needs of their families in a way that allows them to operate a business successfully?

13:14 E Ritchie

Successful initiatives rely on farm workers advocating for their needs through their organizations like the Farm Bureau. Grassroots efforts and direct communication with legislators are vital. In particular, speaking up within their organizations is important—this advocacy demonstrates that it is a widespread problem and not an individual farm issue.

13:46 E Ritchie

For those who are apart of or connected to the agricultural field in some capacity, think about how you can support efforts to close the childcare access gap among farm families. Whether it is being apart of improving outreach to farm families about available programs and services or advocating for these issues within your organizations, I want to encourage our listeners to get involved in initiatives that support our farming communities.

14:15 E Ritchie

In the previous episode in this series, Episode 9 of Season 4, we provided several resources from Cultivate Safety for creating Safe Play Areas on farms. If you would like to view those materials, see the resource links under episode 9 or visit cultivatesafety.org for a range of farm children safety resources.

14:38 E Ritchie

For those interested in supporting efforts to deliver childcare for farm families, we have provided “A Roadmap for Delivering Child Care in Agricultural Communities” workbook in this episode’s resources. This workbook, created by the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety and the Migrant Clinicians Network, provides a roadmap for establishing accessible childcare services in agricultural communities. It emphasizes the significant need for such services, highlighting the high rate of missed work by farmworkers due to childcare issues and the preference of farmworkers for locations with good childcare. The document outlines steps for conducting a needs assessment, identifying funding sources, marketing the program, implementing childcare services, and evaluating the program’s success, including considerations for policy, legal, and logistical factors. It also suggests collaborating with community organizations, employers, and childcare providers to create sustainable solutions.

15:46 E Ritchie

Listen in on the *FarmSafe* podcast to join in on the conversation about keeping safe on the farm.

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe on your farm. Also let us know if there’s questions you have or topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website, gpcah.org, or email us.

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Episode Resources

- *A Roadmap for Delivering Child Care in Agricultural Communities*, Workbook, National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety & Migrant Clinicians Network: https://cultivatesafety.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/A-Roadmap-for-Delivering-Child-Care-in-Agricultural-Communities_Web.pdf
- **Safe Play Posters**
- **Child/Youth Agricultural Safety Checklist**, National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety (PDF – in folder, no web link, downloadable)
- **Child Agricultural Safety Brochure**, National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety (PDF – in folder, no web link, downloadable)

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