

Episode Title: The Farm-Kid Paradox

Topic: Keeping Youth Who Live and Work on the Farm Safe

Summary: Dr. Barbra Lee and Melissa Ploeckelman are joining us again for this episode, The Farm-Kid Paradox, focusing on how to keep children and youth safe while working and living on the farm. The episode covers best practices for educating young farm workers, fostering a culture of safety, and providing age-appropriate tasks to prevent farm incidents.

Expert: Barbra Lee and Melissa Ploeckelman

Episode Quote:

"If we are trying to do a [farm] task at the same time that we are trying to take care of a child, neither thing is getting 100% of our time."

– Melissa Plockelman, outreach center coordinator for the National Farm Medicine Center as well as the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety

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.

Today, we're diving into an important conversation— one that impacts every farmer, every rancher, and every family who lives and works on the farm: the safety of our youth. Farming is a way of life that's deeply rooted in tradition, and for many young people, it's where they grow up, learn, and contribute.

00:53 E Ritchie

In today's episode, we're focusing on the importance of keeping our kids safe as they grow up on the farm. Whether you're a parent, a grandparent, or someone who works closely with the younger generation in the farming world, this episode is for you. We'll talk about real-life stories, expert advice, and practical tips to ensure our future farmers, ranchers, and ag professionals stay safe on the job.

As I have shared before, my mom's side of the family farms, so over my lifetime, I have heard countless close-call stories. Today's shared stories are from my family's experiences of living and working on the farm. First, we will hear from my mom and then my uncle, who now owns and operates the farm.

01:41 S Presnall

I do remember my parents really cautioning us all the time about the cattle. We didn't really get in with the cattle, we were pretty respectful. Particularly if there were bulls.

You know, you wouldn't think sheep would be that dangerous, they're not very big. But I was, I was run over by a sheep because I was in the pen with them and I was really young, I don't remember how old, but I was really young. And probably as tall as the sheep at that time and she had babies and she felt threatened and she butted me down and was right on top of me. But luckily my older brother was there and managed to get me.

My brother runs the operation, and I think he's, you know, much more protective of when his children were young than maybe we even were when we were kids, and certainly his grandchildren as well.

02:35 B Finch

My closest call, we were putting an elevator up, and it has a PTO lift on it. It was an older elevator. And my son – I was on the tractor, and we're just idling, and we turned the PTO on and – where we connect the PTO shaft onto the elevator, there's a bolt sticking out just a little ways. And that caught his shirt, and it ripped his shirt off. The tractor was only idling, and my hand was basically on the PTO shaft to turn it on and off.

But it just takes an instant, and it tore his shirt off. It was very very serious. And luckily nobody was hurt but it scared me and him too. He was 18 or 19 years old.

03:24 E Ritchie

Whether it's operating machinery, navigating large livestock, or simply being out in an environment full of potential hazards, ensuring our youngest generations are safe is something we can never overlook.

03:38 E Ritchie

We are joined today by Dr. Barbra Lee and Melissa Ploeckelman to gain some insight on what farm families can do to protect children and youth while keeping farm life alive and well.

Dr. Barbra Lee is a senior research scientist at the Marshfield Clinic Research Institute. She is also an associate director of the National Children's Center for Rural and Ag Health and Safety, which is a NIOSH funded center in Marshfield, Wisconsin. Melissa Ploeckelman is the outreach center coordinator for the National Farm Medicine Center as well as the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, located in Marshfield, Wisconsin.

Are there certain times or ways that children can be involved in work on the farm?

04:32 B Lee

Certainly, we want children to have good experiences on the farm. We want them to have safe experiences. So, if they plan to, they will be whole and healthy when they grow up to be a farm operator. And there are a number of guidelines, and we're mostly well known for our agricultural youth work guidelines that explain how and when a young person can get involved in work and how much supervision they need, what kind of training, what kind of personal protective equipment they should have. So, we want for them to be good experiences, but at the same time, for the most part, for children under seven years of age, they really the best protection is just to keep them away from the work site.

05:19 M Ploeckelman

At the Farm Center, we call that the Farm-Kid paradox, where we talk about how healthy and good it is to raise children on a farm. But how it is one of the riskiest environments to have children in. And so just making sure that if a child is on the farm that they are 100% supervised. If we're trying to do a task at the same time that we're trying to take care of a child, neither thing is getting 100% of our time as adults. And so, we need to make the distinction between whether we are currently a supervisor of the youth or we are currently doing a task, and if we're doing a task then not to have a child with us.

And then like Barbara talked about the agricultural youth work guidelines, our recommendations on when youth are ready to do a task, and it's not always about the age. A lot of times we talk about the ability level of children, so a child might be 14 years old and maybe has gone through a tractor safety course, but they might be too short or not have enough muscle to be able to push in the clutch and the brake and see what's behind them when they're hauling and implement behind a tractor. So, it's not always age, but it's ability level.

And if anyone's looking for those guidelines, they can find those at www.cultivatesafety.org back slash AYWG, which stands for a youth work guidelines.

06:49 B Lee

An important thing to point out, as Melissa said, you know, we can have all of that training and youth can be ready for things. But in agriculture, when things go wrong like equipment failure or whether when they go wrong, they can go really wrong, fast. And young

people don't have the judgment or the skill really to handle when things go wrong, so that's the important difference between having a job you know, like at a grocery store or something else when kids are working in agriculture, the chances of things going wrong and really wrong are much greater.

And we know that young people working in agriculture are about 8 times more likely to die on the job than their friends who are working elsewhere.

07:40 E Ritchie

Yeah, and something I tend to think about with AG working, or youth working in agriculture that, especially with it being more of a hazardous work environment is, you know, you think about kids that are going to school and they might have extracurricular activities. So, their day is already packed full. And it's not like having a part time here and there job at a restaurant. You need more of those decision-making skills intact to be able to do work safely on the farm.

08:13 B Lee

We had a campaign over the years that was really targeted toward parents to say I'm a parent first and a farmer second. And as a parent first I have to set the priorities of raising that child before the importance of getting the crops harvested or, you know, the cows milked. And sometimes as a parent, it's really hard because, you know, you're trying to run the farm and you want your child to have the best, but you have to come back to quiet times in your day to think through, "How does this child get a chance to be a child and grow up healthy and whole?", and then making that the priority over the farm enterprise.

08:52 M Ploeckelman

The UMASH Center also has great resources on fatigue in farming, and it is the responsibility of the adult to recognize how tired the youth are when they're performing a task. So, if you're hiring a high schooler to come in after the school day, after their sports practices, over to come and milk cows for you every night, recognizing if they're fatigued or tired and maybe even sending them home sometimes is important because we know that at certain levels of fatigue after you've been away for so long, it can be the equivalent of being drunk. So, it's almost like working under the influence. And so, as adults, it's our responsibility to know how the youth are feeling at the time of doing those tasks, and again when you're fatigued and tired, your decision-making ability slows.

And we already know that youth brains are not fully developed yet. They are still growing and developing, so they're their decision-making ability is already a little bit slower, but then when they're fatigued, it slows down even more, causing some of those incidents and sometimes even injuries or fatalities. So again, it's the adults responsibility to really recognize that and make sure that the youth is working safely at all times.

10:13 B Lee

Right. And just to add on to that, young people want to please the adults, they want to please their parents, they want to please—for the most part—their boss, and they don't want to say, hey, I'm really too tired. I really don't. I mean, they're going to say, all right, if I have to, I have to. So, I'm glad Melissa pointed out. It's really up to the adult to tune in and recognize that you know this person isn't ready to take on this job right now, for whatever reason.

10:43 E Ritchie

As we wrap up this episode, here are some key points for farm parents and supervisors to keep in mind. Teach safe practices early. From a young age, children should learn the dangers present on the farm. Teach them about the safe operation of equipment, handling animals, and the importance of staying away from dangerous areas like barns, silos, and areas where heavy machinery is used.

Children should only be given tasks that match their age and maturity level. Younger children should never be around heavy equipment or in potentially dangerous environments like silos or grain bins. Even older children, who may be capable of operating equipment, should still work under adult supervision. They need guidance when learning new tasks and handling complex or risky equipment. Set boundaries for where children are allowed to be on the farm. For example, designate areas for play, and restrict access to areas like machinery storage or fields with high-risk tasks.

11:50 E Ritchie

Use fencing or gates to prevent children from entering dangerous areas. Place warning signs near high-risk equipment or hazardous locations. Ensure that all farm equipment is stored safely when not in use, with keys removed and machinery locked to prevent unauthorized access.

Avoid overburdening children with farm chores. Ensure they have time for rest, play, and relaxation, as fatigue can lead to incidents. Farming can be a demanding environment, so it's important to be mindful of your child's mental and physical well-being. Overworking children, especially during peak seasons, can lead to mistakes and incidents.

By fostering a culture of safety, educating children early, and providing the tools and supervision they need, farm parents can help ensure that their children grow up in a safe and secure farming environment.

12:48 E Ritchie

The Agricultural Youth Work Guidelines (AYWG) are designed to help adults assess a youth's abilities to safely perform a task and assign age and ability-appropriate tasks to youth working in agriculture, helping to prevent injuries and fatalities. Each guideline includes a list of what a youth must be able to do in order to perform a task safely, adult responsibilities and guidance for supervising youth, as well as common hazards and protective strategies. To read these guidelines, visit the Agricultural Youth Work Guidelines link provided in the resources for this episode.

If you are a farm parent or farm supervisor, I encourage you to listen to our episode, "ATVs and Young Riders," from Season 1 and take a look at 2020 Childhood Agricultural Injuries Factsheet from the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety provided in the resources for this episode.

14:04 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

- [Agricultural Work Guidelines](#), Cultivate Safety
- [Childhood Agricultural Injuries – 2020 Factsheet](#), National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety
- [Child Farm Injuries are Never "Accidents"](#), by Dr. Barbara Lee, Peer Reviewed Commentary Published in the Journal of Agromedicine

Photo

