

Episode Title: Growing Safely, Part 1: Navigating Child Care Access & Farm Safety

Topic: Access to Child Care for Farm Families and the Link to Child Safety on the Farm

Summary: Many farmworkers, particularly those in rural areas, have faced difficulties finding affordable, reliable childcare options due to the demands of farm work, which often includes long, irregular hours. Rural communities often lack sufficient childcare providers, and those that do exist may be too expensive or lack flexibility to accommodate farmers' schedules. Additionally, farm families may have limited access to public childcare assistance programs, as these are often more geared toward urban populations. The intersection of low wages in agricultural labor and limited social services has compounded these issues. Over time, various advocacy groups and policymakers have worked to highlight the need for better childcare access in farm communities, but challenges remain. In this episode, we talk with Dr. Florence Becot, nationwide insurance early career professor in agricultural safety and health and faculty member at Penn State, whose research may shed light on solutions that could reshape how we think about childcare in rural communities.

Expert: Florence Becot, Penn State University

Episode Quote:

“The recommendation is: The closer they are to you, the better. They are within arm’s length. You can grab them, they’re right next to you. But when it comes to agriculture, having your kids close to you might not be the safest.”

– 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

When children grow up on a farm, they’re often immersed in the daily operations, from tending to animals to helping in the fields. But here's the thing: with all the hard work, there’s a growing concern about the safety of our youngest farmhands. The statistics on farm-related injuries to children are startling, and many of these incidents could be prevented with more effective childcare options.

00:58 E Ritchie

For many families, access to quality childcare is not just a matter of convenience—it’s a matter of safety. With limited childcare facilities in rural areas, and the unique demands of farm life, finding the right balance can be tough. Today, we’ll be discussing how the lack of access to childcare can leave kids more vulnerable to farm hazards and how farm families are innovating to overcome this challenge. We'll hear from our expert, whose research may shed light on solutions that could reshape how we think about childcare in rural communities.

01:34 E Ritchie

To help us better understand the challenges—and the solutions—I’m joined today by Florence Becot. With years of experience in farm children safety, Florence has a unique perspective on the intersection of childcare access and farm safety.

01:51 F Becot

So, 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. So, in terms of my background in farm children safety, I really developed that expertise when I was at the National Farm Medicine Center for a few years, which is also the home of the National Children's Center. And there, this is where we have some of the national, if not international

experts on farm children safety. And when I joined the team there, I started right away working on a project connected to childcare and farm children's safety. I was writing a grant proposal and then COVID happened and right away I started a project looking at how is COVID and the changes collected to school closures, childcare closures, how are those impacting the safety of children? Because I remember, you know, at the time in early 2020, there was a lot of concerns, right? All of a sudden, schools are closed. Kids can't necessarily go spend time with their grandparents. Our life really got changed in a lot of ways. So, it was to understand what was happening.

03:04 E Ritchie

From your perspective, how would you describe the current state of childcare access for farm families in rural areas? And is it a widespread issue?

03:13 F Becot

Yes, so that's an interesting issue, right? And it's one that hasn't been a whole lot of research on it, but we do know back from the 1980s there was a survey that the US Department of Agriculture did to understand what could make it easier for farm women to be entrepreneurs, like you know, to be like business folks on farms. And at the time back in the 1980s, forty years ago, they had said, childcare support.

03:37 F Becot

And it is not until from what I understand until 2012. There was this article by Reski, and it was actually connected to the Children's Center. And this is, from what I can tell, one of the very first time that someone talked about the connection between farm children safety and childcare and the importance of childcare for farm families. Fast forward about 10 years when we asked the question to a national level survey, where we send this survey to farm families and ask them, do you experience childcare challenges? COVID had been going on for a while, it was 2023. And we had three quarter of farm parents that said, "yes, we are experiencing childcare challenges."

04:18 F Becot

And I should also say that there had been a smaller study by my colleague, Shoshana Inwood at the Ohio State University. So she had done a study. I think it was like 2018 or 2016. It was part of a larger study that they were looking at what makes it easy or hard to be a farmer and they asked all kinds of questions around, you know, access to land and to capital and to chemicals. And they had a question around childcare. And at the time, she had found that two third of the families were experiencing childcare challenges. And when I did that study early on in COVID, same thing, it was two third and then 2023 was two quarter. The thing to know is when we've asked parents even when we've done focus groups, interviews, and we ask "what does childcare look like?" There is a fair amount that said like, "yeah, it's hard and it might be connected to the cost." It might be connected to the availability or to the quality. When we ask childcare, to us childcare is not just like a daycare in town. But it's any different types of things that people do to look after the children when they work.

05:31 E Ritchie

And what are some unique challenges that farm families face when it comes to securing reliable childcare?

05:36 F Becot

In a lot of ways – farmers are not different than any other working families. In the sense that childcare challenges are very common in the US for working families. And we know that in rural areas, there are issues connected to what's been called childcare deserts, where it's just not there. And at some point, that was before COVID, but some of the work that had been done is about 60% of rural counties just did not have enough childcare for children, no matter what occupation the parents have. Where farmers are different, and in some ways maybe are similar to people who work third shifts or are nurses, the schedule- they work very long days- and also there is the seasonality aspect of it, where they might be very, very busy at some time of the year, and not as much as other times of the year, so what we've heard from parents is they say, you know, "I don't need childcare all the time. I just need a few hours here and there when it's really busy." But the challenge is if you don't have a family member to have or a babysitter to come and you're looking at using for

more childcare, those childcare places, whether you have your kids go to someone's house. Or childcare at a church, or a childcare center...

06:56 F Becot

The thing is, those childcare providers, they're not going to hold a spot for someone who's just going to be there once in a while, right? Because they have to make a living themselves. And so, there is the challenge of in order to be able to have a spot for your children, you might have to pay more than you need because there is this idea of the childcare provider is holding a spot that they're not giving to someone else. So, it does create some of that complexity.

07:26 E Ritchie

How does access to childcare impact a parent's ability to keep their children safe from common farm hazards while they work on the farm?

07:35 F Becot

So, it depends, right? It depends what they're working on. And there are plenty of things that you can do around a farm with children. And of course, it depends on the age of the children too. Your children are 7, 8 or 9 where they're becoming more independent: They're getting better at listening to what you ask them to do or stay away from the dangerous part. It's easier, right? But what we know is that the children who are most likely to die on farms are the youngest one. They are like the zero- to three-year-old, three to five-year-old. They're toddler age. Once they start walking, they can move pretty quickly.

08:12 F Becot

What's interesting when you're thinking about farm safety and supervision. So usually when you look at supervision of children, like in general, right, the recommendation is the closer they are to you, the better. Uh, you know, they are within arm's length. You can grab them, you know, they're right next to you. But when it comes to agriculture, having your kids close to you might not be the safest. The tricky part too, where parents will talk about how they might have playgrounds a little further away and they try to like keep an eye on them. At the Children's Center, we would often talk about the Safe Play Areas. So those are areas on the farm that are designed to be fenced in or to really be areas where the children can spend time and play while the parents are working. But of course, it depends on the weather, right? On a day, I don't know what's the temperature where you are, but it's pretty cold. Right. It might not be very practical to have a kid playing outside in that kind of weather, or they might not be able to do it very long.

09:18 E Ritchie

In your research or experience, have you observed a link between limited childcare access and increased child safety risks on the farm?

09:27 F Becot

This is the \$1 million question that we are-- maybe not \$1 million question-- but it is the question of this research study. And we're currently doing additional analysis to answer that question specifically, which from what I can tell hasn't been answered before. And that was when I was asked, you know, what kind of project I would be interested in submitting as part of the Children's Center. That was specifically the question that I wanted to ask because we don't know for sure. So, we did focus groups, small groups, discussions with farm women, and photo voice activities.

10:01 F Becot

And the photo voice activity is a type of research where you ask people to take questions to take pictures. You give them prompts and some of the prompts that we gave was what does it look like to raise the children on farms? What makes it hard? What makes it easier? And we do know that from the qualitative data that they were again a lot of concerns around the children getting hurt. And how not having someone to be able to look after the children while you do the most dangerous task really is when the children were in places where parents didn't necessarily want them there. But they don't always have the option.

10:44 E Ritchie

Are there common strategies or adjustments that farm families can use to manage childcare and safety on the farm?

10:53 F Becot

Yes, we heard a lot about those strategies, and we heard from parents who maybe might take turn in terms of like, hey, like I'm going to work on the farm between this time and that time and then it's going to be your turn. Or I'm going to make sure that we have someone to help with the children, you know, half a day a week or something. Another thing that we heard about was how, in particular for the youngest children, they work around nap time. And so, they'll wait for nap time to do maybe the tractor work, for example. School was another big one.

11:28 F Becot

So often when we think about childcare, we think about, you know, the youngest, right? The zero to pre-K, but what we heard from the parents is how school in and of itself means the kids are gone. And that gives parents a chunk of time to get work done. We don't hear it as much, but some people might do with other like neighboring families sometimes my exchange, you know, might be like, hey, I'm going to take care of all your kids and then you take care of all my kids. But really, we also saw based on the pictures and based on what the parents told us that the children are often around the work site. And folks will use all kinds of different strategies that they will see as a safer way to do things, even though it's farm safety experts, if we were to use the best quote, quote, "the recommended practices", they will say that's a terrible idea. For example, we saw babysits in tractors and tractor cabs. And we know that farm safety experts will say, it is not a good idea to have children in the tractor because of vibration, because if the tractor cab was to open, the cab door was to open, they could fall and...

12:38 F Becot

And that has happened before. But what it was interesting was women talking about how, what if they're in the tractor cab right next to me or in the skid loader right next to me? It means they're not running around. And it means that I have them right next to me. They're right here versus I can't see them. People would have different kind of arrangements in the barns of like play pins, pack and plays. Lots of toys, lots of toys, lots of snacks to keep the children busy when they're younger and they're in strollers. So that's another strategy where you know that your child is in the stroller for a while, and you can do the work that you need to do when they're not running around. And then there was another one too. There was, it was also interesting to see how, I mean, farmers are like so ingenious, right? They're always like figuring something out.

13:25 F Becot

How they use cameras in different ways. And baby monitors was a big topic. And so, in particular, when they were younger, or even as they were a little older, we had people use baby monitors and cameras. And then they'll have, then it depended on your farm, right? But some people through their wife, they could look on the phone or they could get an alarm. Some people said that they don't have Wi-Fi or if they had a barn with a metal roof that impacted their ability to see. So, it led to interesting discussions. From farm women around, hey, what baby monitor do you have? Like what model? Because I'm on the market. So, it was kind of like cool to see. And another one that we got was someone was using a deer cam in their living room. And they had one of the pictures that they sent us, which is hilarious. I love it.

14:14 F Becot

It was the deer cam that was kind of showing the entire living room. And then you had the little girl like hanging out lounging on the couch watching TV. And it was, you know, as much as a lot of parents talked about, I don't like my kids to be in front of screens. I want them to be outside. For some other folks that talked about how TV was the babysitter, because they need to get the time to do the work. So, it was interesting where folks will talk about how I love my kids, but it's also really hard to do this. And the safety piece would come up again and again and again.

14:57 E Ritchie

It's clear that while farm families are often working hard to balance the demands of the land and raising children, the lack of accessible childcare remains a critical gap. With more resources and support, we can help ensure that kids on farms are not only learning valuable life skills but also growing up in environments that prioritize their safety.

15:19 E Ritchie

If you are interested in reading more about Dr. Becot's research project, we have provided a link to the research brief and survey findings under the resources for this episode. We have also included several short articles that talk about the challenges of childcare access among farm families.

15:51 E Ritchie

As we wrap up, I want to leave you with this: The well-being of farm families—and especially our children—depends on creating solutions that meet their unique needs. Whether it's supporting rural childcare initiatives or creating safer environments on the farm, every step counts.

16:11 E Ritchie

Whether you're a parent on the farm or someone who's been impacted by childcare struggles in rural areas, what solutions have worked for you, and what challenges do you still face? Let us know by emailing us at cph-greatplainscenter@uiowa.edu or by clicking on the "Leave Feedback" button on the *FarmSafe* homepage.

16:35 E Ritchie

This episode is the first in a three-part series, with each installment exploring a unique aspect of childcare access within farm families. So, if you liked this episode, listen to season 4 episode 9 and season 4 episode 10.

16:53 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

- **Linking Childcare to Farm Children Safety**, Marshfield Clinic Research Institute: <https://www.marshfieldresearch.org/nccrahs/FarmChildrenChildcare>
- **Short article: 'Farm families' childcare challenges impacting farm businesses:** <https://www.psu.edu/news/research/story/farm-families-childcare-challenges-impacting-farm-businesses-research-suggests>
- **Short article: "When and how to safely involve the children on the farm"** <https://extension.psu.edu/when-and-how-to-safely-involve-children-in-farm-tasks>

Photo

