

Episode Title: Growing Safely, Part 2: Balancing Farming and Family

Topic: Access to Child Care for Farm Families and the Link to Parental Mental Health

Summary: Farm families face similar child care access and affordability challenges as other working families nationwide, yet research on their specific experiences and needs is limited. Existing research lacks a deep understanding of how farm families actually use child care, and what types of arrangements and support systems would motivate them to utilize child care more. In this episode, we are joined by Florence Becot, nationwide insurance early career professor in agricultural safety and health and a faculty member at Penn State University. Dr. Becot's work contributes to the field of agricultural health and safety by examining how under-appreciated factors such as child care, health care, and health insurance shape farm families' ability and willingness to adopt farm safety practices and seek medical care. We discuss Dr. Becot's current study, which highlights the significant, often overlooked, mental health challenges faced by farm women while raising children.

Expert: Florence Becot, Penn State University

Episode Quote:

"...when we had the focus groups with the women, is how many of them said that they had felt isolated, that they had felt that they were the only one, and that they were suffering in silence."

– 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.

00:32 E Ritchie

Farming is a demanding lifestyle—long hours, unpredictable weather, and constant responsibility. But for many farm families, there's another layer to this pressure: the challenge of finding reliable childcare. In the first episode of this three-part series, we discussed the link between childcare access and farm children safety.

00:54 E Ritchie

But how does a lack of childcare access impact mental health? How does the stress of balancing farm work and childcare affect the well-being of parents, and ultimately, their families? Today, we'll explore how the lack of childcare not only creates logistical challenges for farm families but also contributes to mental health struggles, burnout, and feelings of isolation for parents.

01:20 E Ritchie

We will hear from our expert, Florence Becot, who will shed light on the unique pressures farm parents face and how childcare access can make a difference in improving their mental well-being. Florence will share what she has learned so far from her ongoing research working with farm families to understand this challenge.

01:40 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. 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.

02:07 E Ritchie

Farm families are often balancing demanding work schedules with family life. How does this affect their ability to ensure their children's safety when formal childcare options aren't available?

02:20 F Becot

So, we heard that again and again where, in particular from farm women where they felt they just had so much going on. They're taking care of the children; they might be taking care of the household. They might be taking care of an older family member that is sick. They might have an off-farm job. And what we really found was the mental health piece that came up for the parents. So, what's interesting is in the, in the world of farm children safety, the focus has really been on children. And understandably so, right? There are higher rates of injuries and fatalities among children growing up on farms compared to the general population.

02:58 F Becot

But really what we haven't spent a lot of time talking about is what are the emotional consequences on parents, on their mental health, when they are not only navigating a very heavy workload, depending on the time of the year, and when they're trying to look after children in that dangerous environment. And what we found by talking with women, and that was a bit of a surprise-- it was a surprise and it wasn't a surprise-- was how much their mental health was impacted. So when we did the focus groups on purpose, we had decided to not ask questions about mental health because we felt that it wasn't directly related to our topic, but also from the perspective of IRB, which is the review board, right, for ethics research and how we [are] making sure that we're not hurting the people that we're doing research with. So, hurting means psychologically, socially, economically. And so, we wanted to be careful around not asking those questions that can be very personal. But mental health in agriculture is one of my other area[s] of research. So, of course, I'm always thinking about it, right? But what was really interesting is us women would be talking and we started with very general questions around hey what is it like what is a day to day like who are the children with during the day and what we felt was really interesting too was how much different kinds of childcare arrangements people have and so they are constantly trying to be like "OK so between that time in that time there was grandma and in that time in that time I'm taking care of them and then that time in that time..." One mom in the early focus group said it's like passing the baton, and that's exactly what it felt hearing so many of these women talk about was like how much like mental energy goes into figuring out where are the children going to be. And for some folks it was very regular right it was every time was the same way and for others was...

05:04 F Becot

Well, that day my mom was gonna look after the kids, but she has to go to a doctor's appointment. So, you know, like there was like all these gymnastics. But at some point, in the focus groups, we did ask, you know, how does juggling everything make you feel? And we really wanted to get to more of the general "quality of life" question. And what's interesting is when we started doing the data analysis, so we did 11 focus groups.

05:29 F Becot

And what we realized very quickly, even as we were doing the focus groups with my colleague Shoshana, is how often the mental health piece was coming up. They talk about being stressed; they talk about being depressed. And so, when we went back to the data to do the analysis, we found that in *every* group, someone had volunteered that they were stressed and that they had high anxiety. And it was in about half of the groups they talked about being depressed, that including pre- and postpartum depression. When you look at the farm children safety side of things, when you look at the recommendations from experts, this is what you should do, at no point are they considering the parents.

06:11 F Becot

And so that is one of the, the finding of the study that became much more important than we had expected.

06:18 F Becot

And, you know, it comes on top of high levels of stress and anxiety in agriculture that we often talk about. But we tend to talk about the older farmers who've been doing this for a long time, who are men, and in our study, what we say is "women are also suffering from high rates of mental health challenges, in particular when they're raising children," but we haven't been talking about it really.

And the other piece too that's interesting is when you look at the farm safety literature, we often talk about, and rightfully so, the development stages of children. And often when we talk about what is an appropriate task for a five-year-old to do versus a 10-year-old versus a 15-year-old, right? And we often talk about physical development, emotional development, social development. And you know, we use ages as threshold and we know that children do vary, right? But based on these development stages, from a safety perspective, the sense is that it gets that the exposures to risk lessen over time and as to know or being able to be more educated, even though we know that teenagers like to take risk, and they are prone to peer pressure. But what was interesting, too, is oftentimes in the kind of in the general conversations about raising children, we talk about how it just gets easier, you know, once they're past that stage, it'll get easier. And it was interesting because we'll have some women that will say that...

07:50 F Becot

They say like, "oh, I'm just seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, and they might have like toddler aged children" and then there be women with older. Maybe they were their kids were teenagers, and I say, "Well, you know it does and it doesn't." So, in some ways it gets easier when they are very young. The moms we talk about how. They spend a lot of time, you know, "are the kids warm or their diapers clean" and like, "Do you have all the snacks that they like? Do I have all the different layers of clothing?" And "do I have spare change of clothing in case they get wet or something." As the kids get older, you're not worrying as much about those physical needs. Those are like kind of very predictable. But what women were talking about was that as the kids get older, you have to pay attention to something else, which is their emotional development and how the kids start asking questions, and it becomes more complex. As your children are older, you're looking at their emotional development and if they are struggling with friends at school and their peers and those conversations are, you know, a lot more complex because it requires time but also like. You don't know, you know, you don't know if you did it right.

08:58 F Becot

And so that was another interesting finding of our study was that it doesn't necessarily get easier, it just shifts, like in terms of mental health. It's just different. And of course, it's different for everyone because children are different, but there were some very clear patterns. Which, again, I don't think we had quite expected. And based on the existing research, we couldn't quite see that one coming.

09:25 F Becot

It's really interesting because there are more support systems in Europe for families, including for farmers. I've done research in the past looking at what support systems are available for farmers in France when they experience a major illness or injury or when they have a child. And there's a lot more support there. And I will say, you know, when I've talked to my friends in France and in Europe, who've had young children, and when I talk to my friends in the US, their experiences are drastically different. I don't hear the struggles that I hear here. And it's heartbreaking because you see the differences.

10:04 F Becot

But at the same time, I've talked to colleagues who work in Ireland and Slovenia. And it's interesting because they said like, there are a lot of similarities in the challenges where women have high rates of mental health challenges, where it's hard to keep the kids safe on the farm. And there's definitely like the cultural aspect of things is "we've always done it this way," but I think too, like there is this similarities in the challenges. And I think at the same time we are humans. And when you think about that period of life, it's having children, no matter where you live, right? It's a major, major life transformation, no matter what you want to say about it.

10:43 F Becot

It changes people, it impacts bodies, if you're women, it impacts your hormone levels, and it impacts your whole equilibrium. And I think sometimes in particular, in rural areas or in agriculture, we don't want to talk about it because we don't talk about things that are personal. And what was interesting too, is when we had the focus groups with the women, is how many of them said that they had felt isolated, that they had found that they were the only one, and that they were suffering in silence. And what was fascinating is when they were meeting these women from other states, other commodities, I mean, we had focus groups where we had, we might have had a farmer from Ohio who had a 2000-acre row crop operation and we had instances where we had women from a five generation dairy farm in Wisconsin.

11:33 F Becot

And then we had a very diversified farmer, you know, a few acres in Vermont. So, on paper, those folks are different. They don't talk to each other. They're, first of all, they're not in the same state, but they're in very different type of agriculture. Some were organic, some were not. And then we're like, hold on, we're not so different. We spend a lot of time saying that we're different, but we're not so different when it comes to those things of life, raising children and do it in an environment where there isn't really a whole lot of help for families, unless you're lucky and you have a strong support system.

12:13 E Ritchie

During her work, Dr. Becot unexpectedly found that mental health issues were pervasive across different farm types and locations, despite seemingly disparate circumstances. This suggests the challenges are not merely based on farm size or type, but stem from similar underlying pressures of juggling heavy workloads, children's safety concerns, and complex childcare arrangements.

12:41 E Ritchie

A key element of the findings was the realization that the responsibility and stress associated with childcare, particularly the shift from managing physical needs to addressing emotional development, doesn't diminish as children grow older. Instead, the pressures evolve from physical to emotional concerns. Current farm safety literature, which focuses on child development stages and risk mitigation, does not sufficiently address parental mental health concerns. This gap in the current literature and support systems was highlighted by the differing experiences between farm women in the U.S. and those in other countries with more comprehensive support systems.

13:24 E Ritchie

Dr. Becot's work underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the mental health needs of farm families. The isolation and lack of support, as well as the perceived differences in the daily challenges amongst farm women, often lead to suffering in silence. The challenges faced by women in the agricultural community, while seemingly diverse in practice, share similar human elements, including the complexities and stress inherent in raising children, particularly in the absence of adequate societal support.

14:03 E Ritchie

While we may not have all the answers and solutions when it comes to bridging the childcare access gap, there are some resources that provide ways to keep children safe while parents are doing work on the farm, which can hopefully ease some of the stress and anxiety surrounding child safety on farms. We have included some materials from Cultivate Safety in the resources for this episode that can help parents navigate creating safe play areas and ideas for children on the farm when formal childcare options may not be possible. The "Creating Safe Play Areas on Farms" booklet offers detailed guidance on topics such as what makes a safe play area; how to prepare, maintain and improve safe play areas; the steps for creating a safe play area; as well as professional and parent resources.

15:05 E Ritchie

If you enjoyed this episode, I encourage you to listen to the other episodes in this series on childcare access, which include episode 8 and episode 10 of Season 4.

15:17 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

- **Cultivate Safety Webpage:** <https://cultivatesafety.org/play/>
- **Creating Safe Play Areas on Farms,** National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, Booklet: <https://cultivatesafety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SafePlayBooklet2012v4.pdf>
- **Safe Play Areas,** National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, Handout: <https://cultivatesafety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Safe-Play-Areas.pdf>
- **Play Ideas,** National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, Handout: <https://cultivatesafety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Play-Ideas.pdf>

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