

Iowa Farmer Today

Safety Watch: Keep New, Young Employees Safe on the Farm This Season

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By Brandi Janssen, PhD

As the growing season moves into full swing, many farmers will be looking for summer help. You may hire a college student home for the summer or the high school-aged neighbor who lives down the road.

Hiring young workers on farms can help develop the next generation of farmers, which, given the average age of a farmer is now 58, makes an important contribution to our agricultural sustainability.

But there are some things to consider when hiring young people to work on your farm, especially when it comes to their safety.

Young employees between the ages of 14 and 24 are at increased risk for injuries because of their limited experience in the workforce and lack of ability to identify safety hazards on the job. Young people also may be more likely to take risks such as texting while operating machinery or be sleep deprived, which increases the chance of an injury.

Dr. Diane Rohlman, director of the Healthier Workforce for Excellence based at the University of Iowa, notes, "Young workers may be experiencing rapid physical and emotional changes. They may not know how to think through a problem, transfer knowledge from one task to another, they may take unnecessary risks, and growth spurts may make them unable to judge distances or properly estimate their abilities."

Effective training is critically important for young workers, many of whom may lack both job and farm experience. According to the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, employees should be trained how to do their jobs safely, including how to recognize hazards and take precautions as well as how to use any personal protective equipment provided to them, such as hearing protection or respirators. They should also understand the procedures to take in case of an emergency and how to report an injury. All training activities should be documented in writing.

And, Rohlman adds, "Training is an ongoing process. You need to train young workers when they are first hired, when they are given a new task or tool to use, when they switch tasks and after a close call or injury."

Adolescents respond most effectively to hands-on training in the specific job tasks they are expected to perform.



Photo courtesy Brandi Janssen

Workers harvest produce at a central Iowa CSA farm. Adolescents respond most effectively to hands-on training in the specific job tasks they are expected to perform.

Training should be conducted in-person, using both verbal interactions and demonstrations of how to complete a task. Then, observe them during their work so that you can provide further guidance.

Keep the training sessions short, but be sure to invite young workers to ask questions. They may be hesitant to speak up if they are unclear about something. Remember that their enthusiasm and desire to prove their abilities may outweigh their judgment. Finally, check in with them later to make sure that they continue to do the job safely.

Rohlman suggests, “Ask open-ended questions, such as, ‘tell me how you are going to do this task? What hazards do you need to think about? What things can you do to prevent injuries to yourself or others?’ ” to encourage young workers to speak up about safety issues.

Young employees should know they can take action when necessary. They may feel intimidated approaching a supervisor with concerns, but there should be a clear reporting structure so they know who to talk to if they identify something that is unsafe.

Empowering young workers not only helps them be more engaged employees on your farm, it also trains them to be more effective workers in the future. Do your part to create a safe work environment.

Farm work can be hot and physically demanding; allow for adequate break times and provide a constant source of water on hot days. Be mindful of equipment maintenance and make sure that guards are in place, for example on augers and PTO shafts. Do not have any employee operate a tractor without a Rollover Protective Structure (ROPS) and seatbelt.

Likewise, do not allow any employee to operate a utility vehicle without the use of a seatbelt on a side-by-side Gator, or helmet on an ATV. Have employees tie long hair back, avoid loose clothing that could become entangled in equipment, and wear non-skid shoes.

And, of course, make sure you set a good example. Rohlman points out, “Young workers will do what you do, so be sure that you are wearing your seatbelt, using tools properly, and following workplace policies.”

Educate yourself about laws that pertain to hiring young workers on your farm, especially if you hire workers under the age of 16. There are additional training tips and resources at www.i-cash.org.

Even when you do your part, young workers may not realize that they should take responsibility for their own safety as well. Help them develop their critical thinking skills, hazard and risk assessment abilities, and empower them to speak up to keep themselves and their co-workers safe.

In doing so, you will have better workers on your farm this summer, and will help develop the next generation of responsible workers and farm owners.

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