

RURAL SAFETY



Kids living in rural communities encounter a lot of potential hazards that their urban counterparts don't usually see. Farm equipment, all-terrain vehicles, power lines, agricultural chemicals and livestock are just a few of the things that can threaten a youngster's safety when they live on a farm or acreage.

One way to educate kids about safety issues is through the Rural Safety Rules Program sponsored by the UFA and Co-operators Insurance. KidSafe recently spoke with Sean Somers, Member Relations Coordinator for the UFA, about the programs his organization hosts across Alberta.

Sean says that "since 1998, we have had nearly 5000 participants taking part in 47 camps. This year, we will be running nine different camps throughout the province between the months of May and July. We run them as day camps from 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. - and this

includes a lunch break and a snack break. We generally try to limit the number of participants to 150 per camp - but at some sites the numbers can get a little higher than that."

The success of these camps is due to the cooperation and support of local businesses, many of whom donate their time and equipment for the day. Local communities are also very supportive, and several different community groups may come out to take part in these programs. These groups include local agricultural societies, community health nurses, St. John's Ambulance representatives, the RCMP, rural fire departments and 4-H clubs. All of the kids who take part in the program need to be accompanied by an adult - but there may be a few kids with each adult. This helps to ensure that the children are under constant supervision when they are around moving equipment.

Different Stations

There are six or seven different stations set up around the site, and each one deals with a slightly different aspect of farm safety:

Small Machinery

This station deals with the safe use of lawnmowers, garden tillers, weed-whackers and other power tools. It also looks at safe riding techniques for all-terrain-vehicles, snowmobiles and other small farm vehicles. The use of helmets and other safety gear is strongly emphasized.



Large Machinery

This area includes tractors, combines, balers, power take-off equipment, loaders, augers and grain trucks.



Health Concerns

A volunteer tells youngsters about how to protect themselves by wearing sunscreen; using safety goggles to protect their eyes; wearing respirators to protect their lungs from dust, allergens and chemicals; and wearing hearing protection when they are around noisy equipment.



Safety Around Animals

This site shows youngsters the safe handling of all kinds of farm animals, including cattle, sheep, poultry, pigs and horses - as well as pets like cats and dogs. Sean notes that "an added concern in rural communities is how to deal with cats and dogs that are not pets, but are actually running wild. Youngsters need to exercise a lot of extra precautions around these animals."



Environmental Safety Agricultural Chemicals

The kids learn about different fire hazards, electrical hazards and chemical hazards they might encounter on a farm.

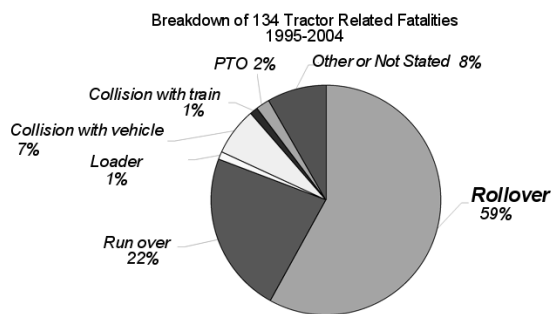


Emergency First Response

This site gives children advice on what they need to do in emergency situations. They learn about what to do if there is a fire or accident on their farm, and are shown very basic first-aid responses, the Heimlich manoeuvre, etc. They are told who to call, and how to describe where their farm is located so emergency personnel can get there as quickly as possible.



Kids are broken up into groups of ten, and they take turns touring the different stations. There are two different programs delivered at each site: one for children from six to ten, and one for youths from ten to fifteen. A lot of the older kids are already riding snowmobiles and all-terrain-vehicles, as well as operating lawnmowers, weed-whackers and other lawn and garden tools. They are given hands-on experience that teaches them how to operate this equipment safely.



Younger children probably won't be operating this kind of equipment for a few years - but they will still be around other people who are using this equipment. They are told which are the dangerous parts and what they need to avoid. They learn to wear gloves, eye protection and proper footwear - and they discover how easy it is for loose clothing and shoelaces to get caught up in moving equipment. They are also shown how to shut this equipment off if they ever encounter an emergency situation. They are told not to get too close to machinery like lawnmowers because of the danger of being hit by the discharge, or of getting the fingers or toes caught in the blades. Sean points out these are exactly the kinds of careless mistakes we teach kids to avoid."

A six or seven year old child is obviously too young to be riding a tractor. But program organizers still encourage the kids to climb up on the driver's seat and have a look around. Then they will have another youngster stand behind the big double wheels in the back of the tractor.

The children in the driver's seat are unable to see the person standing behind them. This helps to graphically illustrate that people operating tractors have a limited field of vision and a lot of blind spots to deal with. Seeing the view from the driver's perspective lets kids know just how vulnerable they can be when they are playing near large machinery.

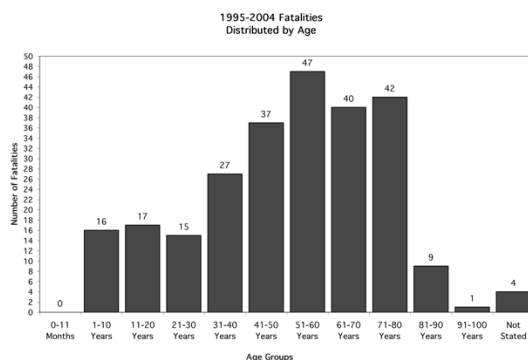


Another issue the Rural Safety Rules Program examines is the importance of not having extra riders on large equipment. Virtually all farm equipment is designed to accommodate only one person - the operator! When additional riders are sitting or standing in the cab, they are distracting the driver and putting themselves at risk of being bounced out of the cab. Sean stresses that "riders who are bounced off a tractor usually end up behind the back wheels, and this can easily result in death. A big contributor to farm injuries comes from tractor rollovers. If you have additional people sitting with the driver, the danger from rollovers becomes that much worse."

No Second Chances

Kids aren't the only ones who end up getting injured in accidents, and safety is important to everybody in rural communities. Farmers have a very small window of opportunity when it comes to getting the crops seeded in the spring or harvested in the fall. They often work extremely long hours, and they may start taking shortcuts when they are in a hurry.

Sean notes that "in order to really drive home the dangers, we encourage program organizers in the different communities to bring in people from that area who were injured in farm accidents to come and speak to the kids. This illustrates the fact that these aren't hypothetical dangers we are talking about - they happen to real people on real farms."



Creating Awareness

There are thousands of farms and acreages across Alberta, and all of them have their own potential hazards. While organizers with Rural Safety Rules can't teach everything, they can promote awareness. They allow youngsters to take what they learn at the camp and apply it to their own situations at home. When photographers look through a camera, they all see different things. Organizers hope that when youngsters walk away from the camp, they will see things a little bit differently as well.

Before they leave, all the kids get a farm walkabout book that they can take home with them. It helps them to identify possible safety hazards on their own farm. Sean points out that "these camps act as a real eye-opener for the kids - and for parents as well. It gets them to think twice about potential risks they never knew existed, or dangers they have come to take for granted."