

Understanding Beginning Farmers and Ranchers: Attitudes Toward Child Safety and Safe-Play Areas



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Background: Every three days a child dies on a farm in the United States. Farming is one of the few occupations often operating out of home residence, where non-working bystanders, including children are present. Children who live on farms or whose parents are farmers are significantly more likely to perform agricultural tasks at earlier ages. Safe-play areas are one intervention designed to decrease the incidence of death and non-fatal injury of children under ten years-old. These areas are defined as designated locations with limited exposure to hazards such as traffic, machinery, and pesticides.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with young farm couples in central Wisconsin (n=26) to assess attitudes towards child safety and safe-play areas. Questions involved beliefs about raising children on farms and specific safety practices. Observational notes were recorded during each interview. Interviews were recorded using an MP3 recorder. Inductive coding was used to develop common themes across interviews.

Results: Four themes emerged. First, parents expressed lack of home-work balance, possibly leading to increased child presence in the work place. Second, parents were unaware of national guidelines designed to aid parents in determining a child's readiness to complete agricultural tasks. Third, parents spoke of their child being exceptional, indicating parents' belief that their own child is more prepared to perform agricultural tasks at a younger age. Finally, parents believed in invisible boundaries for their children, which provide a test for both their effectiveness as parents and children's ability to follow instructions.

Conclusions: Parents are acutely aware of risks posed by the farm environment. Only one family had a safe-play area, indicating they are an under-used, unpopular safety intervention. Parents' overwhelming desire to incorporate children on the farm to teach values including responsibility and a strong work ethic explain their reluctance to a safety intervention that eliminates child presence in the work environment.