



Safety Up – On Play Areas for Children

To children, all the world's a playground – including the farmyard. Curious young minds are endlessly on the lookout for new things to explore. They do not necessarily recognize dangers and cannot easily understand how to apply the rules from one situation to another. You can't completely childproof a farm, but you can make it safer. The most important things you can do to make it safer for your children are: create a safe play area for them, teach them to use it, and provide adequate supervision at all times.

Play hazard primer

The modern farmyard is loaded with hazards for children. In fact, agriculture is one of the most dangerous occupations in North America. Machinery, tractors, tools, chemicals, livestock, work structures, grain, ponds, dugouts and ditches – all come with built-in dangers. Some are clear and obvious, while others are hidden and easy to overlook. As a result, 158 children aged one to 19 were killed and another 1,300 were seriously injured on Canadian farms between 1990 and 2000.

Safe play area selection

By designating a “hazard-free” play area and making it fun, you remove children from the work environment while allowing them to develop a sense of their own place of belonging on the farm. Your safe play area should be carefully planned in a designated location with clear boundaries and limited exposure to hazards.

Keep in mind that children need a reason to stay in the boundaries. By providing changing play opportunities and equipment appropriate for their age, you make the area more appealing. If hazardous areas are more attractive than the play area, it will be difficult to keep children there.

Farm safety audit

Childproofing a farm seems like an impossible task. But you can make it as safe as possible with some time and effort. Take a tour of your farm from your child's perspective. Get down on their level and look up, down and all around for potential hazards. Then, remove or safely manage these hazards now to prevent a possible tragedy later. Make areas where hazardous materials and equipment are stored “off limits,” and explain the dangers of these areas ahead of time.

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A safe play area should:

- Be separate from traffic and work areas, away from livestock, machinery, driveways and buildings.
- Have easily identifiable boundaries (fences, gates or shrubs).
- Be away from loud noises.
- Be away from drowning hazards, including dugouts, ponds and rain barrels.
- Be within easy sight and sound of a responsible adult, such as in view from a back window.
- Be free from dangerous debris and broken or unsafe equipment.
- Be adequately shaded from the sun and sheltered from wind, dust or hazardous airborne particles.
- Provide enough room to run and explore.
- Be close to first aid, hand-washing and toilet facilities.
- Be located where there are minimal natural hazards (such as prickly or poisonous plants, sharp rocks, insect nests, mice, ticks or other critters).
- Provide a barrier to separate children from farm animals.
- Contain safe and age-appropriate play equipment, such as a sandbox, swings and playhouse.

Pick the right equipment

Select play equipment appropriate for the ages of your children, and be prepared to make changes as they age. Older children need wider boundaries (to play ball or hide-and-seek, for example).

Equipment should be constructed from materials free of lead-based paint and wood treated with creosote and chromated copper arsenate. It should be smooth to avoid wood or metal splinters, and should not absorb excessive heat from sun exposure.

As you set up the area, watch for and remove hazards that could cause pinching, crushing, shearing, and cutting. Be sure you space the equipment correctly to create a minimum risk of injury. Prevent entrapment hazards – small spaces 3½” to 9” where children can get stuck.

Select an appropriate ground material at an appropriate depth to cushion a fall. Finally, ensure the equipment is securely anchored to prevent overturns that can crush a child.

Play by the rules

Once you've set up your safe play area, you need to set limits for its use. Everyone working on the farm needs to know where the play area is located and what the rules for use are. Post them on a sign and explain them to visitors ahead of time.

The rules of play should be designed for safety, and primary among them is the need for children to stay within the identified boundaries of the play area. Remind children about the boundaries often, and enforce consequences consistently if boundaries are breached or safety rules are broken.

It's also important for you to provide close supervision at all times, especially for young children who may put themselves in danger when they encounter unexpected situations (such as an uncovered well, a mother animal with babies, or dangerous trash scattered after a windstorm).

Since not every incident can be predicted and avoided ahead of time, take a first aid course – for the safety of everyone on the farm. Knowing how to respond on the scene of a farm accident could mean the difference between life and death.

Dressed for success

Properly clothe children for play. They should wear boots or shoes that do not have long laces, along with clothing that covers the body – jeans, long-sleeved shirts and hats. Beware of the easily overlooked hazard overhead – the sun! One serious childhood sunburn doubles the chances of developing skin cancer later in life. To prevent sun exposure, insist on sunscreen use for exposed skin and buy protective sunglasses that they will wear. Remember the sun is strongest between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Getting to know you

Children:

- are curious.
- have a short attention span.
- do not easily remember rules.
- depend on adults to protect them.
- cannot fully understand the risks or consequences of serious injury.
- develop at different rates and have different interests.

Parents:

- over-estimate their children's ability to understand concepts.
- under-estimate the risk of disease and injury associated with routine farm tasks.
- want to start teaching children about farming at a young age.
- sometimes believe the benefits of being on a farm outweigh the risks.
- judge their neighbours' unsafe practices more objectively than their own.
- often assume injuries will happen on someone else's farm.
- may lose sight of children when busy.
- sometimes justify unsafe shortcuts to save time.
- may allow an unsafe activity "just once" because it is "fun."

Six steps to a safe play area

1. Pick a site that provides maximum play options with minimum hazard exposure.
2. Sketch the ideal play area for the site, considering ways to promote different kinds of play, including: swinging, climbing, riding and imaginative activity. Allow space to modify for the children's growth.
3. Collect necessary materials (make, buy or adapt for different play activities).
4. Build the area, including appropriate ground cover, borders, fences and gates.
5. Make safety rules, explain them and post signs.
6. Maintain and improve the area regularly.

The last word

It's time to set them loose! In a safe play area with the right equipment and clear, impossible limits they can respect, children will enjoy hours and hours of play that tests their physical, mental and imaginative abilities through the vital years of growth and development.

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