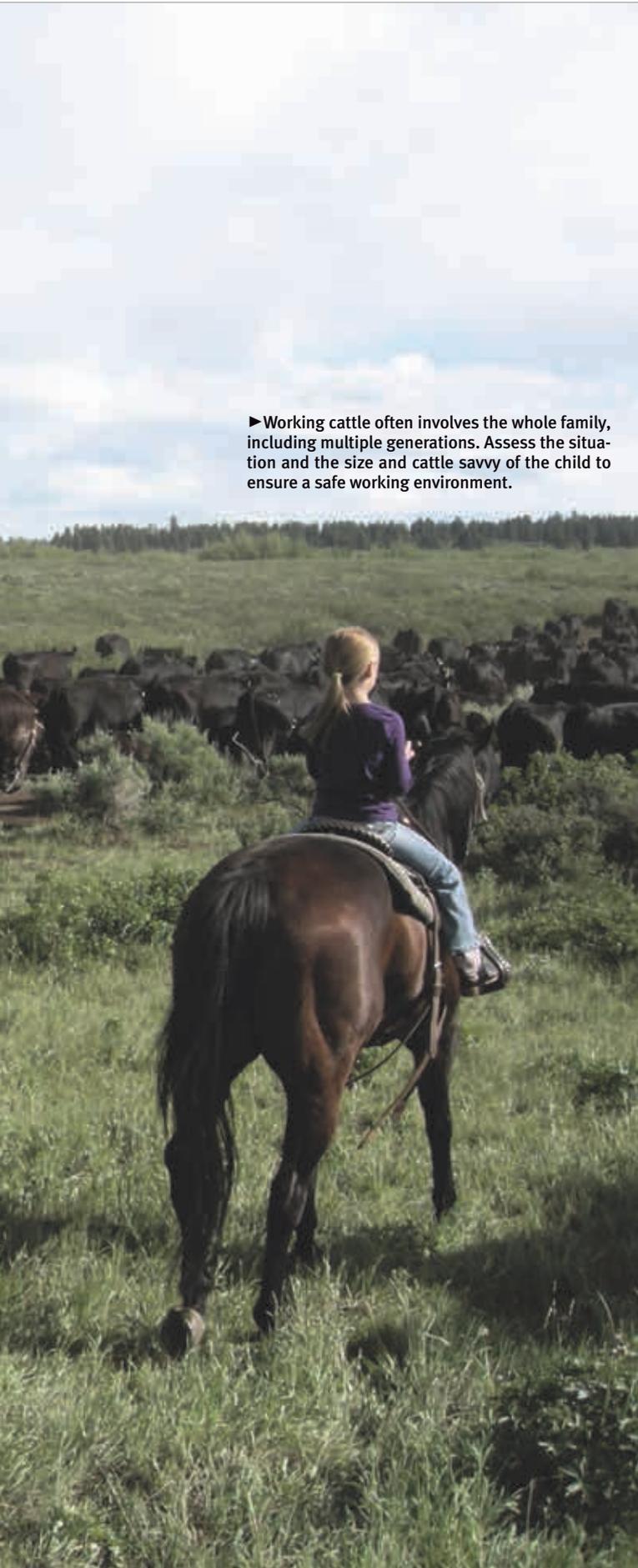


# Safety for Minors is Not a Minor Detail

Every day 38 children are injured in agriculture-related events.  
Every three days a child dies from one.

*Story & photos by Paige Nelson, intern*





► Working cattle often involves the whole family, including multiple generations. Assess the situation and the size and cattle savvy of the child to ensure a safe working environment.

PHOTO BY LYNDEY KUNZ

I was in junior high and working at a place that raised a lot of roping stock. They happened to have a cow out in the field that had a big abscess in the jaw. She had an appointment to go into the vet in 30 minutes, and my boss said we needed to hurry and get her in and get her loaded,” recalls Willy Twitchell, professor of animal science at Brigham Young University–Idaho (BYU–I) and cattle behavior and handling professional.

“In my junior-high-age excitability and behavior, I chased the animal into the corral on the four-wheeler. By the time I got to the corral she was fairly agitated, considering that she was already in distress.

“She was just standing there — her head held high, but not acting like she wanted to hurt me or anything. So, I started hollering at her and flapping my arms and trying to get her [to] move.

“She didn’t move, so I started getting closer and closer. I asked her to move, and all of a sudden this horned Corriente cow put her head down and started chasing after me. I remember looking back, and I could see her nose, and then I looked forward and looked back, and I couldn’t see her horns anymore. I looked forward, then back, and all I could see was her shoulder. I put my hand back behind me to kind of prepare for impact, when both horns came right by the side of my hip. I went airborne. I flew through the air, hit ground and, luckily, she turned before she hit me again. After that, I backed up, and I started to treat her with a lot more respect and started to pay a little more attention to what she was telling me,” he says.

Angus cattle don’t have horns, but a kick or solid bunt from one can leave, at the very least, a lasting impression and, sometimes, a permanent reminder like a scar or broken bone.

As America’s food-producing sector, we need to be aware of the dangers that surround our work environment and that of our children. According to the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, about every three days a child dies in an agriculture-related incident, and every day about 38 children are injured in agriculture-related incidents.

### Why are children getting hurt?

“That’s where they live and play,” explains Bernard Geschke, program specialist for the Progressive Agriculture Foundation, which sponsors Progressive Agriculture Safety Days. “They are exposed to a lot of these high-risk areas that [most urban youth are] not exposed to.”

Many injuries and deaths occur because children were drawn to the area because of the noise or equipment, Geschke says. “They might be on the other side of the farm and hear a tractor start, so they ride their bike over to see what’s happening.

“It’s amazing how many children are injured and killed,” he continues, “and they are not actually helping with the farm task.”

Geschke says the areas on the farm and ranch that are at the highest risk for accidents are where equipment is being backed up, animals or equipment are being loaded or unloaded, and areas of observance where, “People are just standing around watching something, not really realizing what else is going on around them.”

Courtney Yelton, a Farm Safety For Just Kids outreach coordinator, adds that manure pits, calving sheds, parked equipment and haystacks are also high-risk areas for children.

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### Education starts today — for everyone

As an industry, agriculture is steeped in tradition and proud, to say the least, of its roots. Where tractors have replaced horses, and steel, electricity and fuel have replaced almost everything else, old safety concerns have fallen away as new ones have emerged. Geschke says farm and ranch safety starts with education.

“Education is important at every age,” he emphasizes. “I don’t care if you’re a child, if you’re in your 20s, your 40s or your 80s, education is extremely important. Equipment is changing all the time. The same equipment that grandma and grandpa had 40, 50, 60 years ago is not like some of the equipment we’re using today.”

As part of his job with the Progressive Agriculture Foundation, Geschke organizes farm and ranch safety days across the United States and Canada.

“It’s not a one-day workshop. Safety education is something you have to deal with every day,” he emphasizes. He explains that when dealing with both children and hired adolescents, safety is a topic that should be discussed daily because tasks on the farm or ranch change daily. “There are always things every day that have to be dealt with on safety, and it’s not the same thing every day because you’re not always doing the same thing with that horse; you’re not doing the same thing with that tractor.”

### Establishing safety guidelines

The benefits of growing up and working on a farm or ranch far outweigh any reasons to discourage parents from rearing children in that environment. In fact, many farm parents shudder at the thought of anything less than a farm complete with livestock and crops for the raising environment of their children. However, as character building as it is, just like anything else in agriculture, raising children on a farm requires work.



► Farm Safety For Just Kids Outreach Coordinator Courtney Yelton says, “The biggest recommendation for children riding horses is the horse itself. Ensuring that your child is on a horse that is suitable for their riding skill and age is the most crucial aspect of all.”

### Looking for more?

Organizations like Progressive Ag Foundation, [www.progressiveag.org](http://www.progressiveag.org), and Farm Safety For Just Kids, [www.farmsafetyforjustkids.org](http://www.farmsafetyforjustkids.org), as well as state Farm Bureau federations are dedicated to the education and training of children and parents involved in agriculture. The resources provided by these organizations are free of cost. For more information regarding youth safety or to plan an agriculture safety day in your community, contact Bernard Geschke at [farmsafetydaybg@aol.com](mailto:farmsafetydaybg@aol.com) or Courtney Yelton at [courtneyyelton@gmail.com](mailto:courtneyyelton@gmail.com).

Along with education, parents need to set specific safety goals, provide ample training and lay down the rules for play and work on the farm.

**Designing and evaluating tasks.** “Parents know their children best and know their children’s abilities and responsibility levels,” says Yelton. Parents need to evaluate the farm chores at

hand and think critically about the potential for injury inherent in each.

“The key is to think like your child would, then teach your child the appropriate safety practices within each task,” she notes.

When teaching a child a task, Yelton says the areas to be covered include areas of potential injury within task region; proper use of equipment; what to do if equipment breaks; equipment safety procedures: power takeoff (PTO), tires, seat belt, etc.; steps to complete the task safely; and where to go and who to ask when questions arise.

**Rules for farm youth.** Safety starts with parents standing their ground on farm rules.

“I think we have to empower parents to parent,” says Geschke. “Maybe the most important thing to say is ‘No. No, you’re not big enough. No, you’re not old enough. No, you’re not mature enough. This is way and above your abilities, or we’ve got to wait to get trained on this first.’”

Both Yelton and Geschke agree that for small children, ages 0-6 years old, a “designated safety zone” needs to be created.

This should be located away from high-traffic areas and should be fenced well enough that a child cannot easily escape.



► “With proper training, children can easily recognize the warning signs from livestock. Parents should teach their children to watch livestock whenever they are within their presence,” advises Yelton.

**Rules for friends.** Growing up in agriculture gives children a fairly clear picture of what is acceptable and not acceptable behavior around equipment and animals. Yet, many friends of ag youth will have little to no idea about the dangers when they visit.

Geschke says that it's the parents' job to regulate activities and, well, just "parent." He explains, "I think parents assume everybody knows the risk," while the truth is, "My child knows the risk, but my child's friends that are visiting don't have a clue what the risks are."

Everyone who comes on the farm or ranch needs to be educated and given a clear set of rules, says Geschke. He adds that it doesn't matter whether the visitors are ag-based or urban-based, "Everybody needs that education, and sometimes people just fail to take the time to do it."

### Working with cattle

Leading sources of nonfatal injuries to kids on the farm are falls, animals and vehicles, according to the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety. Cattle are large, sometimes unpredictable and prey animals; thus, handling them requires skill and attention to detail.

People like the late Bud Williams and Temple Grandin have spent their lives learning and practicing cattle behavior, so teaching a child to safely work cattle can be a stressful task for the busy cattle producer. However, Twitchell says the



► Before a child is placed on a horse, he or she should fully understand how to control the horse and be able to make it do what they want, says Bernard Geschke, program specialist for the Progressive Agriculture Foundation. "If they're not able to, you're setting that child up for failure."

### Precautions for sale day

For many Angus breeders, sale season brings the excitement and stress of preparing for a production sale. However, inviting any number of people to your farm or ranch presents a safety concern. Progressive Agriculture Foundation Program Specialist Bernard Geschke advises producers to prepare in advance: Put up signs, have someone directing traffic and have plenty of extra sets of eyes to monitor the guests.

"The boss can't be out there, so [he or she] has to have a safety committee — somebody they can trust and somebody that's got enough guts to tell people 'No!'"

He recommends a safety committee consist of three or four other farmers or ranchers. These people should be reminding visitors to not climb on panels or get in with the animals. They need to be helping back in trailers and watching out for people where animals are either being loaded or unloaded.

"Get people out there where your highest risks are being run," he says.

Shari Kuther, chair of the Idaho Farm Bureau Health and Safety Committee and board member for the Progressive Agriculture Foundation, adds that making sure fences are in good repair is essential.

"Follow safe practices, especially at sale day," she urges. "You wouldn't trust a bull on any other day, so why would you trust him today, for example."

job can be done, and it can be done the wrong way or the right way. Either way, youth catch on rapidly.

"Those young kids can pick it up really fast," Twitchell says. "They can either learn how to listen to a cow or learn how to ignore a cow quickly."

A few aspects of the ranch situation need to be taken into account before children are involved in either helping or learning to help, says Twitchell.

#### First, what is the animal-handling culture of the ranch?

"If everyone on the ranch is handling the animals in an aggressive manner, usually the animals begin to act very reactively, and any time an animal is acting reactively, it's a dangerous situation for everybody there and for sure a child," he says.

#### Second, the size of the child needs to be assessed.

"If the cattle can't see them and they become reactionary, they can run over the child very easily," Twitchell says.

Even if the culture is a nice, calm handling environment, animals can still become reactionary, Twitchell advises. "If there is a child out there learning how to work, they need to be right next to an adult so the animals can see them."

#### Third, can the child recognize normal and abnormal cattle behavior?

"I think if we are interested in creating a safe environment

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### Promoting safety to the public

In an age of product marketing focused on producing food in a safe environment and on the "family farm," the value of a positive message is priceless. Thanks to 24-hour news stations and the ease of the Internet, when news happens, good or bad, we know about it. Thus, cattle producers who can promote a positive and safe atmosphere for their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews to their consumers will aid consumer security and create loyalty for their market.

Shari Kuther, chair of the Idaho Farm Bureau Health and Safety Committee and board member for the Progressive Agriculture Foundation, says, "Farmers and ranchers using safe farming and ranching practices every day create habits, and when others are invited to the farm and ranch, they can see it, too."

Kuther says, "Another way to help promote safe practices is to make sure that the photos that get released through the media show safe practices. Making sure that the tractors have ROPS (roll-over protection systems), no extra riders, children on the right side of the fence, etc."

When guests are invited to the farm or ranch, guest safety should be in the forefront of everyone's mind, she explains. "If a practice is not safe for the farmer and his family, it is also not safe for visitors."

For example: "Just as a farmer does not allow his children to ride with him in a tractor, he or she should not allow a non-agriculture visitor who wants to 'see how it's done' to ride either."

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with our kids on the ranch, it has to come down to teaching them about the animal's behavior," explains Twitchell. "I'd start teaching the kid this is what normal behavior is. This is how a cow normally carries her head. This is how her ears work. This is what their eyes look like. This is the normal rate at which they travel."

From there, he says, describe to the child how abnormal, aggressive or dominant behavior looks: high head, fixed and enlarged eye, stiffened body, ear position, etc.

Twitchell says parents can't always train their children for every possible problem that could happen, but they can prepare them for the myriad of possibilities that can occur with cattle.

"Try to prepare them by watching and learning behavior and keeping themselves safe that way," Twitchell emphasizes. "What I don't want to happen is to always be yelling at them 'Get out of there, you're in trouble,' or 'Do this, do that' because then the person just starts handling the animals through a sense of fear rather than communication."



PHOTO BY LYNDSY KUNZ

► "I think it's important to teach what it looks like for an animal to change from normal to abnormal behavior, and what the triggers are that tell the child that they are starting to get in an unsafe situation," says Willy Twitchell, professor of animal science at BYU-I.