

Child Development and Working in Agriculture

Children are not simply “miniature adults”. They grow bigger and stronger as they get older, but they also gain more sophisticated thinking, processing and decision-making skills and as such, are better able to keep themselves safe. This growth occurs throughout childhood and adolescence, and even into young adulthood. These abilities develop at different rates for different children, so not all children of the same age are developmentally the same. For example, one 14 year old may be relatively mature and accept responsibility well, while the next one may behave impulsively and take risks. Similarly, one 7 year old may be physically big and strong but mentally have difficulty understanding and following rules. Another 7 year old may be very good at following rules but physically smaller. This variation in development, combined with the hazardous nature of some agricultural tasks, makes it unwise to assign work based only on the age of the youth. Instead, adults must consider the requirements of the task and the youth’s abilities and limitations, and then assign work carefully, always ensuring the youth can complete the task safely.

The chart below provides more information on how youth develop and how adults can help them grow into safe and healthy adults. This information applies throughout development, including adolescence. This knowledge, combined with the use of agricultural youth work guidelines, makes it easier to assign work appropriate for a youth’s age and abilities.

Topic	Characteristics	Safety Strategies for Adults
Modeling	Youth learn a lot from watching adults they trust, and will typically copy the behaviors they see.	Model safe behavior. Youth will more often “do what you do” rather than following what you say.
Teaching	Practice and repetition help youth of all ages learn new tasks.	Teach first, let youth try the task, then provide positive and constructive feedback. Always offer positive feedback before critiquing the job.
Attention Span	Attention improves with age, but most youth don’t develop adult-level attention spans until young adulthood.	Assign short tasks, provide frequent breaks and change tasks often, adjusting tasks and work time as youth grow and mature.
Decision Making	Youth get better and faster at making decisions as they develop, but even older adolescents can make risky and impulsive decisions.	Don’t put youth in situations where a bad decision can cause serious injury.
Transferred Learning	Youth may not easily transfer learning from one task to another.	Don’t assume youth will know what to do when given a new task. Teach them the new task and ensure competency.
Supervision	Because of youth’s underdeveloped abilities, they need to be supervised by adults. Supervision can prevent injuries.	The type and level of supervision will vary depending on the youth’s age and ability, plus the task. Visit supervision and work guidelines sections for more information.
Rules	All youth benefit from rules that are known, understood and obeyed. Young children will only remember a few rules, but older youth will remember more.	For youth of all ages, set rules and enforce them consistently. Explain the reasons for the rules and follow the rules yourself. Remember that youth will notice if you violate rules, and they may copy risky behavior.
Praise	Praise positive and safe behaviors. Behavior that is reinforced will likely be repeated.	Tell youth when they do something safely, using a proud and congratulatory tone. This works well for adolescents and children.
Size, Strength & Stamina	Younger children have less size, strength and stamina than older youth. They may try unwise things that are beyond their ability.	Assign tasks involving smaller loads and shorter distances. Provide frequent breaks. Adjust as youth mature.
Confidence	Youth, especially adolescents, may feel overconfident and even invincible and take risks.	Set and enforce rules. Monitor and supervise.
Self-identity	Many youth value how they look. Especially in adolescence, they want to impress peers. This can lead to hairstyles and outfits that create risk.	Encourage independence and self-identity, but monitor hairstyles and clothing. Set rules to tie back long hair and avoid loose clothing. Ensure personal protection is not skipped in favor of appearance.