

CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND WORKING IN AGRICULTURE

Children are not simply “miniature adults”. As youth grow through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, they not only gain physical strength and size, they also gain stronger thinking, processing and decision-making skills. These abilities develop at different rates for different children, including within the same family. For example, one 14-year-old may be relatively mature and accept responsibility well, while the next may be more of a risk-taker, needing closer adult supervision until they grow older. Similarly, one 7-year-old may be physically big and strong but struggle to consistently understand and follow safety rules while another 7 year old may be very good at following rules but lack the physical strength for specific tasks. This variation in development is normal. Combined with the hazardous nature of some agricultural tasks however, it makes it unwise to assign work based only on the age or size 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 has the skills and ability to complete the task safely. The chart below will help you assign work appropriate for a youth’s age and abilities.

TOPIC	CHARACTERISTICS	SAFETY STRATEGIES FOR ADULTS
Modeling	Youth learn from watching adults and copy what they see.	Model safe behavior. Youth may copy what you do rather than following what you say.
Teaching	Practice and repetition help youth learn new tasks.	Teach first, let youth try the task, then provide positive and constructive feedback. Be patient as youth learn.
Attention Span	Attention improves with age. Most youth don't develop adult-level attention spans until their early 20s.	Assign short tasks, provide frequent breaks and change tasks often.
Decision Making	Youth get better and faster at decisions as they develop, but even older adolescents may make risky, impulsive decisions.	Don't put youth in situations where bad decisions can cause injury.
Transferred Learning	Youth may not transfer learning from one task to another.	Don't assume youth know how to do a new task. Teach them new tasks and ensure competency.
Supervision	Because of youth's underdeveloped abilities, they need adult supervision to help prevent injuries.	The type/level of supervision needed depends on a youth's age, ability and the task. Visit supervision and work guidelines for more information.
Rules	Youth benefit from rules that are known, understood and obeyed.	Set and enforce rules consistently. Explain reasons for rules and follow the rules yourself. Youth notice if you violate rules and 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. Use a proud and congratulatory tone.
Strength & Stamina	Young children have less strength/stamina than older youth. They may try things beyond their ability.	Assign tasks involving smaller loads and shorter distances to younger children, adjusting as they mature. Provide breaks.
Confidence	Youth may feel overconfident – even invincible – leading to risk-taking.	Set and enforce rules. Monitor and supervise.
Self-identity	Many youth value how they look and how others view them. They may want to impress peers. This can lead to hairstyles and outfits that create risk.	Encourage independence and self-identity but monitor hairstyles and clothing. Enforce safety rules and ensure personal protection is not skipped in favor of appearance.
Judgment & Risk-Taking	Children may misjudge risk. They may think they can do more than they can.	Safeguard the environment and provide supervision. Assume children might over-estimate their abilities and take risks.
Safeguards	Youth may skirt safeguards like equipment guards and shields and avoid wearing gloves, goggles, boots, and other personal protective equipment.	Use safety equipment yourself. Don't modify safety devices or remove guards or shields. Wear personal protective equipment. Supervise and prevent youth from taking shortcuts.