# How Safe Is Your Child's Summer Job?

Teaching kids to spot unsafe work situations -- and to say "no" when necessary -- is your job as a parent.

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By James McCommons

Teen Job Injuries

Last year, Skylar Ellis, of East Harwich, Massachusetts, and another teenage worker were overcome by chemical fumes while cleaning the dining room of the doughnut shop where they worked.

"We were using bleach and some other chemicals, working it into the corners and getting down and scrubbing," the 17-year-old says. "The stuff was right in your face. After about three hours, we had a hard time breathing. The other girl threw up."

The supervisor called 911, and the girls were taken to the emergency room, given oxygen, and released. They had sore throats for days afterward, but they were lucky. In extreme cases, such exposure could lead to severe respiratory problems or even death. Knowing more about the chemicals and having a workplace where proper ventilation was provided would likely have spared them their trouble in the first place.

Despite the best intentions of their parents, thousands of teens are injured -- some are even killed -- while working summer jobs. Occasionally, teenagers take risks or make bad decisions. Some employers put their young workers in peril. Senseless accidents happen.

Yet there are steps that parents can take to safeguard their children, says Darlene Adkins, coordinator of the Child Labor Coalition, a watchdog group and part of the National Consumers League. "There are many good employers out there, but don't depend upon them to do the right thing," she says. "Being safe on the job really falls to the parent and the teenager."

## Accidents Will Happen

The teen workforce (ages 13 to 17) numbers about 4 million in summer. And though teens are barred from the most dangerous occupations, they're nearly twice as likely to be injured compared to adults. On average, 65 teenagers die on the job annually, 70,000 receive emergency room treatment, and another 140,000 are injured but do not go to a hospital, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a research arm of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**Know the risks.** The greater your awareness of high-risk jobs, the better equipped you and your kids will be to make smart choices about summer employment. For example:

- Most injuries occur in retail stores, fast-food restaurants, and grocery stores, where two-thirds of all teenagers work. Kids get sprains while lifting, burns from hot grease and steam, and lacerations from mishandling box cutters, knives, and slicers.
- Most fatalities take place in three work zones: on the farm (accidents with tractors and heavy machinery), at construction sites (heavy-equipment accidents or falls), and behind retail counters late at night (assault and homicide are the biggest risks).

If you want to play it safe, don't let your child work on a farm, at a construction site, or behind a counter late at night where money is being exchanged -- it's as simple as that, says Adkins.

**Know the law.** "We encourage parents and teenagers to be aware of the child labor laws," says Dawn Castillo, an epidemiologist with NIOSH.

For example, kids younger than 13 years can babysit and deliver newspapers, but are banned from most other work. Children ages 14 and 15 may work in grocery stores and restaurants but can't operate most power-driven equipment. At 16, teens can work any job that does not carry a Department of Labor hazardous designation (such as working with hazardous materials). And children as young as 14 can put in 40-hour weeks during summer.

**Pick up a copy of the child-labor statutes** at your local state labor office. Search your state's official Web site or the U.S. Department of Labor Web site. (This site has links to the child labor rules for each state, some of which may be more restrictive than federal laws.) Also, many states, schools, and advocacy groups offer guidelines, brochures, and tips to parents and teens.

## Talking to Your Kids About Work

**Ask kids about their jobs.** While understanding child labor laws can help, it's by no means an insurance policy against injury. Bear in mind that federal regulations date back to the 1930s and

haven't been updated to address all modern hazards in the workplace, such as the mechanization of agriculture and proliferation of noxious chemicals. It's important to know what sort of work your kids are doing, and what sort of environment they're working in. This way, you can make common-sense decisions about what is safe and what isn't.

Make sure kids understand the risks. Research by NIOSH indicates that many teens are injured when trying to please bosses, says Castillo. Her agency investigated the fatality of 16-year-old who fell off a roof. Even though the boss had told him not to worry about the shingles that might slide off during the job, the youth tried to catch a bundle of shingles and fell headfirst.

"To take a risk, you have to appreciate that there is a risk, and sometimes the risk just isn't as obvious to teenagers," Castillo says. "They are just trying to do a good job."

Risks aren't always obvious to front-line supervisors, who may be just a few years older than the teen. Nor are many supervisors well versed in child labor laws. Some employers even violate the statutes because of lax enforcement. Inspectors often turn up only when there is an injury or a complaint. One report by the Government Accounting Office (GAO) showed that a business is likely visited on average every 80 years.

"This lack of oversight means parents must educate their teens about this new and alien world of working adults," says Gail Gross, an expert in child development and behavior in Houston, Texas, who hosts *Let's Talk*, a radio show focusing on issues affecting parenting and children. Sit down and talk to your teens about the law. Be sure to discuss the proper behavior of supervisors and the rights of your child not to be harassed or abused, she suggests.

"This is a time when kids want more freedom, want to make their own money, but they also need guidance from parents," Gross says. "Do not send your children out into the working world on their own."

Probing the Job

**Visit the work site.** Meet the supervisor or business owner. Ask questions about your child's duties, hours, and training. In other words, have a conversation, set some parameters, and take a good look around at the working conditions, Gross suggests. Yes, it may embarrass your kid, so try to keep a low profile. Consider meeting the supervisor on a day when your child isn't working.

"Make sure the boss knows who you are and that you're paying attention," says Gross. "He'll be less likely to put your children into a vulnerable position, treat them badly, or ask them to work additional hours if he knows you don't approve."

Once you've made an initial visit, make your presence known from time to time. If your child works at a restaurant, stop by and have dinner. Pick up or drop off your kids at work.

**Stay aware of any changes in the job.** "Sometimes a teen is hired to bus and wipe down tables, but a few months later is working with hot grease or a slicer," says Adkins. "You want to know about that."

**Teach them to speak up.** Of course, you can't always be there, and part of the reason your kids are taking jobs is to learn responsibility. Make sure they know that means standing up for themselves and saying "no" when they don't feel comfortable.

Last summer, Mary Wambold helped her 16-year-old son Allan land a job as a "field guide" at a Boy Scout camp on Lake Erie, where she also worked as an arts and crafts instructor.

Allan's job -- shepherding groups of Cub Scouts from activity to activity -- seemed ideal and safe. But when an adult supervisor and other counselors organized a tug-of-war, Allan's instincts told him to refuse to join in. In the end, though, a supervisor coaxed him into slipping his fingers into knots in the rope.

"The two guys behind me weighed 200 pounds each. As soon as we started pulling, the knots closed down on my fingers," he recalls. "I didn't even have time to yell." The thin rope severed the index and ring fingers on Allan's right hand, causing damage so severe that reattachment was impossible.

"It was an unintentional act, but it was a senseless act. It didn't have to happen," Mary says.

In its way, the Wambolds' story is sadly unremarkable, says Adkins.

"It's tough for kids to speak up. What you want them to say is: 'I don't feel comfortable doing this. I haven't been trained to do this, or I just don't feel safe doing this,'" says Adkins.

Above all, make sure your kids know they have your support. They can always quit and walk away -- and count on you to back them up when they do.

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