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Tips for Communicating Agricultural Safety to Children

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Tips for Communicating Agricultural Safety to Children

Abstract

Effectively communicating agricultural safety messages to children requires an understanding of this audience's unique characteristics, which are dependent upon their developmental stages. This article identifies important characteristics for the 4-7 and 8-12 age groups that were used in developing educational resources for children who participate in farm safety day camps and in-school programs. Each age group has specific characteristics that can inhibit communication when they are not considered in designing content and approach of educational materials. In addition, there are three comprehensive communication issues that affect the effectiveness of transferring safety messages to children.

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Comments

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Effectively communicating agricultural safety messages to children requires an understanding of this audience's unique characteristics, which are dependent upon their developmental stages. This article identifies important characteristics for the 4-7 and 8-12 age groups that were used in developing educational resources for children who participate in farm safety day camps and in-school programs. Each age group has specific characteristics that can inhibit communication when they are not considered in designing content and approach of educational materials. In addition, there are three comprehensive communication issues that affect the effectiveness of transferring safety messages to children.

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Safety is not an engaging topic, but it's a prerequisite for agriculture, still one of the nation's most dangerous industries based on deaths per 100,000 workers (National Safety Council, 2002). Farm safety for children is very important because many youth live and sometimes work in this hazard-filled environment, which is linked to an estimated 32,800 injuries and 104 deaths of rural children every year (Myers & Hendricks, 2001; Rivara, 1997).

Several educational resources (Schwab, Miller, & Graham, 2000; Schwab, Miller, & Graham, 2002) for children were created in a response to an identified need from providers of farm safety day camps, in-school programming, and other activities. The production process for these resources has resulted in developing

communication strategies for targeting children with agricultural safety messages. This article shares those strategies and characteristics that can be used to shape how others can communicate agricultural safety messages to children.

Characteristics of Younger Audiences

Children are not "little adults." It is not that children have less information than adults, or lack the vocabulary to understand adult information, but that they perceive and react to the world in entirely different ways. Their thinking processes are very different than an adult's because children are not fully developed physically, their eyesight is not as keen, and reasoning/logic skills have not been learned. Therefore, communicating effectively with children is not a matter of "dumbing down" adult information, but creating entirely new messages based on their developmental stages. Because of developmental variations, a different approach is necessary for the 4-7 age groups and 8-12 age group.

4 - 7 Age Group

The approach used for this age group is just as important as content. Materials must involve parents because many children in this age group cannot read. The messages also need to educate parents on how to present the information and to have realistic expectations for their child. A distinguishing characteristic for this age group is that perception is a child's reality; they do not separate fantasy, imagination, and reality. Other characteristics are the following.

1. Language: Children have a very literal understanding of language.
 - Children do not understand passive voice. A young child understands "The truck was hit by the car" to mean that the truck hit the car (not that the car hit the truck).
 - Avoid prepositions such as near/far, above/beneath, and under/over that are confusing to children. A child told not to go near a Power-Take-Off (PTO) may think he/she is being safe by looking at it from above (from the tractor seat) or even by stepping over it.
 - Avoid words with double meanings, metaphors, hyperbole, sarcasm, and contractions. The phrase "take shelter" can cause a 7-year-old to wonder what shelter and why you should take it.
2. Relativity: Children lack skills to judge size, speed, and distance.
 - Children's eyesight is not yet developed so they cannot judge the proximity of objects by their relative size. Children have not learned perspective and do not relate size to distance. They do not associate seeing a large truck as closer and the same truck that is smaller when it is far away.
3. Thinking processes: Children have a limited attention span and difficulty thinking of more than one thing at a time.
 - Children may not be able to follow complicated directions. Messages and family rules need to be few and simple to remember and follow.
 - Children do not perceive secondary hazards. Their immediate action, such as getting a ball from the other side of a fence that happens to confine a bull, is not perceived as dangerous. After all, they see themselves as retrieving a ball, which is not against a family rule.

8 - 12 Age Group

Content is the most important aspect of communication with this age group. Information needs to be offered in short articles to attract and holds their interest in a variety of ways. A distinguishing characteristic for ages 8 through 12 years is that their peers are very important, sometimes causing them to ignore warnings from adults. Other characteristics are the following.

1. Sense of belonging
 - Older children are exploring their independence and developing a sense of identity. They are looking

for information to use on their own.

- They are exploring how they fit and their place in society. Age appropriate idioms and slang is very appealing to them.

2. Capturing their interest

- Older children enjoy reading for pleasure, especially mysteries and adventures. Presenting information as stories for them to read and solve is effective. Materials should not resemble those for younger children.
- Older children want to learn new things and find explanations of why things work. They want to solve problems and do things on their own, even see themselves as a hero. They like to be challenged with new vocabulary and technical terms in ways they can understand and use.

3. Multiple learning styles and interests

- Older children need a range of materials to accommodate different learning styles and interests. This includes puzzles, eye-catching visuals, and humor with a message.

Other Communication Issues

Information needs to be relevant to the age of the audience. Information that is very important to an adult audience may not be appropriate for a younger audience. For example, adult safety messages often focus on the use of protective gear for chemical applications--activities that should be off-limits for children. Another example would be messages about replacing and maintaining shields and guards on equipment. These tasks, decisions, and messages are adult issues and have no place in safety materials for children.

Children may be afraid to tell an adult when they get in a dangerous situation. If situations require them to communicate problems, then the safety message must help the child overcome his or her fear of "tattling." The message is that it's OK to tell an adult when something happens because it is the right thing to do.

Children understand communication from their own frame of reference. If the topic is about avoiding animals that can carry rabies, be specific and avoid the term "wild animals." To children, wild animals are giraffes, elephants, and more exotic creatures, not raccoons and rabbits that live outdoors.

Lessons Learned

Safety is not something you learn only as an adult. It is a positive attitude and the ability to make good decisions that develops throughout one's entire life. Safety messages communicated effectively to children start the foundation for them to make good decisions that can be used throughout a lifetime.

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