



Childcare Program Helps Keep Kids Safe

Durham Offers On-Farm Support as Extra Precaution

By Amy Petherick for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

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Any parent could use an extra set of hands sometimes. That’s what inspired the development of one on-farm childcare program in Ontario nearly 30 years ago.

The farm women of Durham County were troubled by a number of child deaths in their community and in 1987, the Bethesda-Reach Women’s Institute was determined to prevent more from happening. Corrine Croxall could see the hazards the new, larger farm equipment was introducing to her dairy farm, so she enlisted the help of her friend Barbara Evans to start what’s now known as the Durham Farm and Rural Family Resources On Farm Childcare Program (DFRFR).

The DFRFR program is designed to match flexible, on-site child caregivers with farm families during peak seasons between May and September. The caregivers that are available plan activities, and have basic infant care skills. The service is available only to farm families in the Region of Durham and a Farm Business Registration number is required to qualify. Families can book a maximum of nine hours daily, and must pay for a minimum of four hours.

Karen Barkey, who is the coordinator of the program today, says the organization is very proud of their history. The format which was original implemented by those forward-thinking women is still honoured today. The caregivers available to farm parents still prepare a light lunch for the family. And just as they were in the beginning, the young people hired still come from Early Childhood Education fields of study. Karen says she’s heard that there were as many as four similar pilot programs operating in the province when the program started in Durham but it seems the others have all died out since.

“The Canada Summer Jobs program makes this work,” she says, noting that they apply for assistance every year. Karen says they could make it a totally self-sustaining program by charging the families more but their goal is to keep costs as low as possible so that start-up farms are not forced to choose between operating capital and safer childcare options.

Originally the program required that both parents farm full-time, but it has since evolved after coordinators learned obtaining childcare for farm kids can be tricky. “I have a few families who might only use us once all summer,” she explains. “Not every family is looking to us as their regular solution for childcare, which we’re OK with, and there’s quite a wide variety in how often people use and the reasons why they use us.”





Karen says for a lot of farm families there's a cousin available to watch the kids in a pinch or Grandma will offer back up, but it bothers her that some parents might not have another choice than to take their kids with them into potentially hazardous situations. "A piece of me wants to encourage kids to be part of daily farm life... I think there's a difference between teaching little Johnny what it's like to grow up on a farm and having little Johnny with you 10 hours a day," she says.

Parenting is full of personal decisions and many people may not see the need to bring in help. But last year, 25 families in Durham did decide it was an extra safety precaution they wanted during the busy season to ensure their kids stayed safe. Maria Davis, who was a caregiver for the program for many years and now works as a teacher, believes in the program so much that she's working to get a similar program operating for families who want this option in her area.

"When there's three young ones and you only have two hands, it's a little bit hard to keep your eyes on everyone's movements," she says. "Having me there, we could still do some little chores but they had a chaperone. It lets the kids be kids in the summer and gives the parents the flexibility to come and go."

Having also been one of the first kids to benefit from the program on her own family's farm, she understands how valuable it is to grow up in a farm environment. She also witnessed firsthand how providing childcare on the farm made it possible for parents to make time for their kids, . She's sure that her involvement did help to make the farms she worked for a safer place to raise kids and she says it was more fun for everyone.

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Durham Photo 1 Cutline: The Durham Farm and Rural Family Resources On Farm Childcare Program matches caregivers with farm families during peak seasons between May and September.

Durham Photo 2 Cutline: Last year, 25 families in the Durham area used the program to help keep their kids safe.

Durham Photo 3 Cutline: The caregivers hired for the program are studying Early Childhood Education.

