

Case Studies: Child safety on farms around Australia

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The Harveys from Cowra

An excerpt from *Keeping the Kids Safe at 'Golden Acres'*. June 25th 2003. [Click here to download a full copy of the Harveys' case study.](#)

The Harvey family runs a livestock and cropping farm at Cowra NSW. Graham and Lyn share the farm work and raise their three children Allisha (11), Kaitlyn (8) and Jack (6). They are the third generation of farmers working two adjacent 900 acre blocks.

The Harveys were selected as winners of Farmsafe Australia's Child Safety on Farms Summer Safety Competition for 2002/03 from 62 entrants Australia wide.

Making the farm safer for kids

The Harveys are a great example of an ordinary farming family working on a day-to-day basis with a focus on the safety of their children. Importantly the Harveys:

- make their farm environment safer by having a securely fenced safe play area, covering water hazards such as sheep dips and clearing trees and junk to improve visibility when moving farm machinery and vehicles:
- plan ahead— risky or demanding activities are done when the children are at school
- use safe methods of work and adopt safety rules for themselves and their children.

"We (as parents) are the ones that would have to live with it if something happened to one of them. We have made some strict rules for our children while they are around us when we are working but more importantly we have made some strict rules for ourselves. Rules are broken and bad judgements are made by children all the time so the responsibility for obeying safety rules is best placed on the shoulders of adults. We must make kids aware and enforce rules on the kids but they are just that, kids, they don't have the experiences that life has dealt us and they are so easily distracted."



The Lanyons from Boort

A Superb Safe Play Area at Boort, Victoria

Roslyn and Isaac Lanyon and their children Brydie(8), Otis(6) and Tillie-Mae(4) are the winners of the Victorian award presented at Victoria Farmsafe Forum by Paul Weller President of the Victorian Farmers' Federation.

The Lanyon's live on a 400 hectare cropping and sheep property near the town of Boort in the north of Victoria. Isaac is a third generation farmer.

Their key strategies for keeping their children safe on the farm are:

- supervision - one of the key reasons for Roslyn's decision to stay at home as a full-time Mum, farm office worker and farm assistant; and
- a safe play area has been constructed to form a barrier between the children and farm hazards.

Safety has always been an important consideration and incidents at home and locally have reinforced the need for action.

"we have been slack on the seatbelt rule in the ute around the farm. There was a tragedy recently involving a local family where there was a lack of seatbelts. This has really shocked everyone into line - and seatbelts are now on - always! And we never let the kids on the back of the ute. They always nag, but we never give in!"

The farm includes a dangerous irrigation channel close to the house.

"We don't tell the kids that there are crocodiles in the water, we tell them that they can drown. We read them stories out of the paper that remind them what can happen on farms."

Roslyn believes that an interesting outside environment is vital to keeping children within 'safe' areas.

Some of the key features of their wonderful safe play area include:

- A 1.2 metre fence constructed from wire mesh with improvised self latching gates. *"I have yet to see a child successfully climb it. Most people have house yards, but many are inadequately fenced if they are intended to keep the kids inside."*
- The area can be visually patrolled from the kitchen and office and is an adequate distance from the workshop and machinery shed.
- The play area is large (23m by 27m) with age-specific play equipment and activities including: a trampoline at ground level (built above a pit); a cubby on several levels, but with ladders which can be removed

depending on the age of visiting children; a completely shaded sand pit and an expanse of open lawn; in summer a shallow wading pool is placed under a shady tree and is only used for "buddy" swimming and under supervision; a thoughtful selection of plants (for smell and eating), places for the children to sit and paths that take them through interesting spaces; the play area can be partitioned from the rest of the house yard and temporary fences and gates have been used at times to keep little children in the correct areas. As the children get older and their play interests change, they play in other areas of the yard.

- During school holidays Roslyn and the children and plan special theme days, interesting activities and family outings.

Roslyn's primary teaching background means that she takes into account children's developmental characteristics when deciding what to allow them to do:

"We don't let our children on motorbikes. I'm a bike education teacher and I know their limitations ... tunnel vision for example. Children are unpredictable, and like to push the boundaries as much as possible. Our farm is not perfect by any means and there may be many things we have 'got wrong,' but only further education will help us. We are probably 'over safe' at times, especially with visitors - but you can never be too careful."

The Hensleys from Emerald



Nina Hensley and Adam receive award from Alan Jackson of Farmsafe QLD
Photo courtesy Kerry Lee at CQ News

Queensland Cattle Farmer Highlights Changing Nature of Child Safety

Nina and Chris Hensley and their children, Adam(2) and Ivy(4) were announced as the Queensland State winner of the Child Safety on Farms Competition in Emerald at the Country Women's Association by Alan Jackson Area Manager of Farmsafe QLD.

The Hensley's live on a 100,000 acre property about an hour from Emerald in Western Queensland where they run 5000 cattle. In accepting the award Nina Hensley noted that she did not originally come from a rural background and therefore sees different hazards from her partner.

"I am particularly concerned about water hazards, agricultural chemicals and poisonous plants. My husband is more aware of dangers surrounding farm machinery and stock. Together I hope we provide a safe environment for our children which doesn't hinder their natural curiosity and development."

Sometimes this can create difficulties in getting things done. For example Nina was only successful in having the fence around the house yard fixed

when she let Chris to look after the kids one day with firm instructions that they weren't to go near the shed. *"The next day our yard was made secure."*

Both Nina and Chris believe that creating exclusive "out of bounds" area feeds curiosity. They see supervised exploration as a way of removing the mystery and the likelihood that their children will sneak away to explore these areas on their own.

Nina believes that the most under-rated danger on farms is horses. *"Even a quiet horse can get a fright and behave unpredictably and I would dearly love to see all farm children wear head protection. Chris and I agree that we won't have a pony on 'Peakvale. When our children are old enough to manage a stockhorse, only then are they old enough to learn to ride. Till then, we occasionally lead them around on a horse."*

Significantly, the Hensleys recognise that child safety has to be continually managed: *"It doesn't matter how many safety strategies are put in place, there is always another area that can be addressed as children's capabilities and interests are constantly changing. What was safe one year may not be the next and having completed Farmsafe Australia's checklist once is no excuse for not doing it again. All in all though, there is absolutely no substitution for adequate supervision."*

The Parsons from Port Lincoln

SA Farmer Steers Clear of Dangerous Equipment



Rob with daughter Rachel at the new computer

Rob Parsons is a fourth generation farmer on his 1000 hectare farm 50Kms north of Port Lincoln in SA's Ayre Peninsula. He and his wife Sue (who works as a nurse) have brought up their two children on the farm - Daniel (now 19) and Rachel (now 16) and continue to have children regularly visit with them on the farm.

The presentation to Rob took place at the SA Farmers Federation Annual Dinner held during Farm Safety week. John Ruskin, CEO of Australian Primary Superannuation, presented the award at the dinner to Peter Treloar, a friend and neighbour, who was representing Rob. Peter acknowledged the work and safety ethic that the Parsons have on their property.

Rob's focus on safety stems from his father who got caught in the PTO of a header. His father used to always bring it up and show them pictures and make them think about what could have happened.

"He survived. The PTO tore off all his clothes. He was left standing in his shoes and socks .. the only mark on him was where his leather belt screwed into a knot at his back before it fortunately broke. The thought of what might have happened leaves a nasty taste in your mouth."

Risks on the farm that the Parsons have had to manage include water, chemicals and heavy machinery. *"We have lots of dams including one right next to the house. The kids are amazed that there are crocs here in SA ... there's even a sign up which warns them."*

As well as this "psychological" measure they also have fenced barriers. *"We have two cyclone fences around the dam. The outer one is the fence of the house yard and then there is a lane way between it and the second one which is of smaller squares. If they make it through the first the second one generally puts them off. Other water hazards such as troughs and dips we keep covered."*

Motorbikes aren't used on the farm as Rob believes they are too dangerous. He uses raceways and a 4 wheel drive utility to manage the movement of sheep. *"Most of the other farmers around here have 4-wheel motorcycles but I haven't allowed myself to go that way."*

According to Rob a major contributor to the issue of child safety is that farmers are stretched and sometimes have little choice but to take their children with them when they are working. *"I have a real problem with kids going on tractors and headers. But it's happening because of there's no one else to look after the kids. The kids go to sleep after a couple of rounds because of the heat and they can so easily hit a button or the door handle ... and they can pop open so easily."*

The Sadlers from Wongan Hills



WA Winners - Long Time Supporters of Child Safety

Christine and Don Sadler from Wongan Hills are the WA State winners of the child safety on farms competition. The presentation of the award was made as part of Farmsafe Week by Dr Graeme Robertson, Director General of the Department of Agriculture. Christine and Don have brought up four children on their wheat and sheep (6000 head) farm and now have family, friends and occasionally tourists who visit the farm with children.

The Country Women's Association was the beginning of Christine's interest in farm safety. *"Stories come through in meetings ... and the statistics are horrifying. We also have had some bad accidents around here ... one of our neighbours lost an arm."*

These accidents made the Sadlers aware of just how important the issue was and how people in the region needed constant reminding because it was so easy to lapse into a false sense of security.

Christine has been a guest speaker at schools in the district and has placed stories in the local papers about accidents and near accidents. She believes that reading about other people's accidents is the best way to get the message through on farm safety.

Farmsafe crosswords, puzzles and poems were used to promote farm safety in the media. Christine has adhered hundreds of farm safe stickers on to utes and other machinery and given out thousands of pamphlets on safety at field days, clearing sales and the local footy!

Christine subsequently started a Careful Cocky column in the local Farm Weekly that has been going now for five to six years. She still contributes to it occasionally but it is now self sustaining. There are many steps that the Saddlers have taken to make their farm safer for kids. These include restricting play to near the house, making dams and old wells inaccessible and prohibiting travel on the backs of utes.

"The houses are properly fenced off and we have never allowed the kids around machinery or on motor bikes. Don wouldn't let the kids ride a motorbike until they were old enough to be able to pick it up and they always had to wear a helmet. Don always wears a helmet and goggles on the bike too."

Christine and Don's son Darren is now helping to run the farm and safety measures are still being implemented. Most recently new safety ladders were installed on 12 silos on the property. Safety rails near the shearing shed steps were installed and the workshop is now lockable.

Christine also believes that farm women play a vital role in farm safety:
"If a woman chooses to help run the farm, her role can be paramount in contributing to farm safety around the home and workplace. It is a full time rewarding and stimulating job being in the home on a farm, and contributing in a worthwhile way to everything happening around you. I think farm safety is at risk when there is not that extra person (especially the female aspect) to add ideas and comments to discussions on farm safety."

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The Forsyths from Moree



Safe & interesting – Will enjoys his “Safe Play Area” and only ventures out on the farm when accompanied by an adult. Water tanks are covered and can't be climbed.

As a toddler, growing up on or even visiting a farm or rural property can be an exciting and happy experience. There are so many things to see and do. There are wide open spaces you want to explore. There are dams; trucks; tractors & animals, just like the toy farm set, right out there in the paddock. And they're bigger – and they move too. Anything that's big and moves looks really interesting when you're little. Raising children on farms or rural properties can be an exciting and happy experience too. But it can also be a challenge - weighing up the desire to provide a unique and stimulating experience for your child; against the need to keep them safe in an environment with many more hazards than the average suburban backyard.

Wendy Forsyth knows these challenges too well. Wendy, her husband John and 18 month old William live on 'Gabo', a cattle/grains property in northwestern NSW. “*William just loves the tractors,*” says Wendy, as William excitedly gabbles “*...tacta, tacta...*”. As we walk past the shed, William runs toward the grain harvester, currently stored out of season. John has recently raised the access ladder, out of reach of small climbers

William also loves water.& The dam is about 200 metres from the house – still walking distance for an adventurous and determined toddler. There's something about the sparkle and movement of water that attracts youngsters all too easily. Dams, rivers, troughs, irrigation channels and tanks are common drowning hazards present on farms.

“John thinks it's better to avoid taking William near the dam when we're out and about on the farm – that way he may be less likely to want to go there, if he 'escapes'”, says Wendy. Even if able to swim, young children easily topple over into water and are not strong enough to climb out of the muddy and sometimes steep embankments of dams, creeks and channels.

“Approximately 30 children die each year on Australian farms, with up to 600 injured seriously enough to require admission to hospital for farm-related injuries,” says Mr. Laurie Stiller, Program Leader for the Child Safety on Farms Strategy, Farmsafe Australia.

Many more children present to general practitioners and emergency departments of country hospitals. According to research carried out by the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health & Safety, drowning and vehicle runovers are the main causes of death and serious injury for the 0-5 year age group on farms.

Concern over the high rate of child injury on farms, led Farmsafe Australia to develop a program to address the issue. The Program was launched in

December 2002 by Hon. Larry Anthony, Federal Minister for Children & Youth Affairs. It encompasses research into injury, effective solutions, development of education resources and promotion of key child injury prevention strategies.

A Child Safety on Farms Checklist, factsheets and guidance booklet are some of the resources available to assist farm families to address child safety hazards on the farm. One of the key recommendations of the program is the creation of “safe play areas” for small children on farms.

“The idea of a “Safe Play Area” – whether it be the house yard, or an area down near the dairy, is simply about constructing an area which securely separates very young children from farm hazards such as water, vehicles, machinery, motorbikes or animals,” says Mr. Stiller.

“Safe play areas need to be securely fenced, located where children are highly visible and ideally have plenty of shade and interesting activities for young children, such as sandpits, play-equipment etc.” Mr. Stiller said.

Wendy and John have a safe play area on their farm.

“I can usually see William playing in the yard from the laundry. I still keep a close eye on him, but he is generally safe inside the yard. If it goes quiet, I know to check around the front of the yard or check that the gate hasn't been left open – it only takes once....they can get away so quickly,” says Wendy.

As a ‘rule of thumb,’ fences should be at least 1.2 m high, extend to the ground and be constructed so as not to provide foot-holds for climbing (eg. support rails on the outside surface). Fences which meet pool safety standard AS 1926.1 – 1993 are an ideal, but these can be costly. Orb sheeting or well-strained wire netting are examples of practical and effective fencing materials. Self-latching gates are also an ideal; alternatives will usually require more vigilance.

“Safe Play Areas’, supported by supervision and family rules about out-of-bounds areas, are the best array of solutions for protecting small children on farms. Young children this age can not fully comprehend rules or understand the danger of farm hazards - they rely on adults to make the decisions for them”, said Mr. Stiller.

Case histories and research from the RLSSA have shown, however, that even the best barriers will sometimes be compromised by gates being left open, by objects being stacked, or fences not being maintained.

“It will always be important to have back-up measures in place. Even hard barriers such as fences are not 100% effective. Resuscitation skills and an emergency plan close to the phone are a must in the event that an incident does occur,” Mr. Stiller said.

The Joliffes from Wagga Wagga



Water storage is an integral part of most farming properties and in many cases located quite close to the house. This represents a big risk to children who by nature are often curious and adventurous. Drowning in dams, creeks, irrigation channels and troughs is an ever present danger, especially toddlers. The Royal Lifesaving Society of Australia's found in their 2002 report, a disturbing increase in toddlers drowning in inland waterways including dams.

Sometimes fencing the water body can be part of the solution. One family that has recently addressed the risk on their farm is the Jollife family, who live on a dairy in Wagga Wagga. When a new effluent dam was built near the family home it was Rose, the Grandmother to four children aged between 9 and 4, who insisted the fence being built so the children couldn't get through.

"It was going to be fenced anyway, but we got contractors in and the fence was constructed so the fabricated hinge joint wire stretched from the ground to the first strand of barbed wire about 1.5 metres above the ground. And there's another strand of barbed wire above that. The kids can't get under, over or through it," says Glen, the father of the boys. Andrea, the boys' mother, is also pleased with the result. "It cost more money to do it that way, but it's worth it.... for the peace of mind. We have kids come and visit all the time, so it's good that they can't get near the dam too."

However, it is not always possible to fence a dam the way the Jollife's have. A good alternative is to create a safe, securely fenced play area for the children - such as a house yard. This also separates young children from other farm hazards such as reversing vehicles and mobile plant.

Either way a "hard barrier" such as a fence, ideally non-climbable and with a self latching gate, is a critical control. And it needs the backup of supervision, clearly communicated out of bounds rules and resuscitation skills - just in case the barrier fails.

The dam is definitely "out of bounds" for the Jollife boys. *"We tell them it's got crocodiles in it!"* Andrea says with a laugh. *"They know - they're not allowed near it."*

"The crocodile story only works for so long. After a while they want to go and look for it!" says Glen. *"All the boys are having swimming lessons too."*

The perfect solution for child safety risks is not always possible. But the more measures in place, the better the risk is controlled. The biggest risk is not to do anything.

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