

Protecting Your Teen Volunteer

A guide for parents and guardians of Ontario secondary school students

It's an exciting time for everyone involved when young people begin to volunteer in their community or take their first job. For many, volunteering for an organization, agency or providing their services for others is the first time they've been "on their own" under the guidance and instruction of other adults – a milestone in their adolescent journey to adulthood.

Through the early years, parents strive to provide a safe environment for their children. We use car seats, put plugs in open electrical sockets, close off staircases, hold hands crossing the street, put household chemicals out of reach, have children wear bike helmets and safety gear when playing sports, send them to babysitting and driving courses, and the list goes on. We do all these things to protect our children from preventable injury and illness. But what about their safety at the time they reach this milestone, when they work for others?

Studies have shown that, when youth move into the "working world", as volunteers or working for pay, most parents have little or no concern for their child's safety while performing tasks in that environment. Until alerted to the astounding number of youth that are injured or killed on the job, most parents have never thought about their need to continue protecting their teen as they move into the world of work.

Did you know?

- In the past three years, 39 Ontario workers under the age of 24 lost their lives on the job.
- In 2000, three 14 year olds lost their lives while visiting a workplace.
- In 2000, over 17,000 young workers filed a claim with the WSIB for injuries they sustained that caused them to miss at least one day of work. At least 34,000 MORE required first aid or suffered injuries that they didn't report to the workplace.

So why are teens vulnerable to injuries at work?

As a parent of a teen, you are all too familiar with the characteristics that come with a growing body and mind. We know they're fun, bright, eager to get out into the world and have a lot to offer but, realistically, teens are at a developmental phase that means that many are prone to being impatient, clumsy, bored or impulsive, acting on "for the moment"

thinking. Often they are afraid to ask questions because they don't want to look "stupid". When you put the average teen in a situation that he or she has never experienced before, the risk of injury doubles. When that teen goes into a work situation where people don't spend the time to provide orientation, training, supervision and a positive environment where the teen feels comfortable, the risk of injury skyrockets.

At a volunteer assignment, or a new job for that matter, youth find:

- most tasks they're assigned involve activities that aren't familiar to them.
- the experience of taking on responsibility in a place other than home or school is new and a little daunting.
- the sponsor/volunteer or employer/worker relationship is new and youth new to this situation don't always know how they're expected to relate to their "boss".
- some adults in the organization/workplace don't know how to relate to youth and don't always take the time to explain the basics to them. Adults need to remember what it was like their first day on a new job!
- they don't have the experience to know how to recognize workplace hazards.
- they are reluctant to ask for help or question existing work practices for fear of looking incapable or "stupid".
- they fall back on trust. Children are taught to respect and listen to adults, so, in this new situation where they don't know what to do, they decide to trust their employers and fellow workers to look out for their safety – which is one of the worst times to rely on trust.
- they don't get training, demonstrations or supervision.
- sometimes they get assigned boring, repetitive, physically demanding or mundane tasks, which increases the potential for inattention or over-exertion, which can result in injuries.
- they're tired after school, homework, family responsibilities and perhaps a part-time job. Being tired and less attentive increases the risk of injury. A balance needs to be struck to ensure their well-being comes first.

Your role in the graduation requirement to complete 40 hours of community involvement

The Ministry of Education policy on community involvement* lists several principles for volunteers and their parents to follow when selecting a suitable volunteer assignment. The top priority is to ensure that the activity is performed in a safe environment.

The policy goes further to help you and your teen choose a safe activity by prohibiting student involvement in certain types of activities:

- operation of any type of vehicle,
- use of power tools,
- use of scaffolding,
- administration of any form of medication,
- performing any medical procedure, or
- handling “Designated Substances”**, which are regulated under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*. The most common ones your teen may encounter are lead, mercury and asbestos.

Ministry of Education policy also includes minimum age requirements for youth to be IN a workplace – which apply to volunteers. These requirements are actually regulations made under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act***. Workplaces that knowingly bring underage youth into the workplace may be in contravention of the legislation and subject to penalties. Workplaces that are prohibited from allowing youth to be on the site until they are of a certain age are those that engage in complex or potentially dangerous work that require regular workers to have extensive training, experience and skills to perform the work safely. Most would involve working with moving equipment, working at heights, handling chemicals, working in and around mobile equipment and similar tasks – environments where you wouldn’t want your teen occasionally visiting to complete his or her 40 hour community involvement requirement.

You must be:

- 16 years old to be on (or work at) a construction site or logging operation
- 15 years old to be in (or work at) a factory, unless you’re on a tour or accompanied by an adult
- 14 years old to be in (or work at) other types of industrial establishments.

Your teen’s school will provide a list of any other types of volunteer assignments prohibited by the local Board of Education.

Examples of types of work and workplaces with no minimum age requirements prohibiting youth from volunteering:

- ✓ libraries, museums, art galleries
- ✓ schools, daycare centres, camps
- ✓ health care facilities: i.e. hospitals, nursing homes, retirement homes, and hospices (excluding kitchens)
- ✓ recreation events such as coaching sports teams or providing
- ✓ golf, tennis or ski instruction
- ✓ community events: car washes, food and clothing drives.

So, how can I help my teen select a safe volunteer assignment?

Let your teen determine the type of activities he or she would like to undertake to further his or her skills or get some practical experience, but when it comes down to the final decision, play an active role in helping your teen make the choice.

Here are a few examples of things you should consider:

1. **The age and maturity of your teen** – is he or she physically, socially and emotionally ready to handle the activity? If decision-making is required as part of the activity, does your teen have good judgement skills (a quick decision or not “thinking it through” may cause an unsafe situation and expose your teen to injury). Few know your teen better than you. Your assessment is valuable.
2. **Does the organization/sponsor/agency have a good reputation in your community**, or are they just getting started or unknown?
3. **Do they regularly use volunteers?** Can you ask one of their current volunteers to talk to you and your teen to find out more about the type of work they do? If they’ve never used volunteers, you may not want to be the first one!
4. **Provision of safety instruction.** Is your teen expected to jump right into helping, or will he or she receive training on what needs to be done, a demonstration and some safety instruction? The extent of orientation training may vary depending on the activity – for a few hours at a food drive, 10 or 15 minutes of orientation is likely enough (i.e. what your task is, how to lift and move boxes safely, when to ask for help, what to do if you get injured), but for 40 hours spent at a nursing home, the

initial training and orientation should be at least one hour and continue as new tasks are assigned.

5. **Avoiding any activity that involves a hazardous process, biological or chemical hazard.** First, teen volunteers completing their 40 hour volunteer requirement are prohibited from operating power tools – this should extend to any powered equipment, such as woodworking tools, industrial equipment, mobile equipment, etc. If teens are required to work at heights, proper ladders and instruction need to be provided. If they're in a health care environment, their tasks should minimize any exposure to biological hazards and they should be instructed about wearing rubber gloves and the requirements for hand washing. They should avoid work with chemicals, including cleaning compounds. Avoiding exposure to these hazards is the best method of protection – the alternative is extensive training, use of personal protective equipment and an unnecessary risk of injury or illness.

How can I help to make sure my teen is safe once he or she starts the assignment?

Choosing wisely in the first place will give you peace of mind. Periodically monitoring the types of activities your teen is involved in will allow you the opportunity to ask more questions and continue assessing to see if he or she is in a vulnerable situation. If there are aspects of work assignments that make you feel that your teen is at risk, you and your teen should talk about it right away and take immediate action to discuss it with the organization/sponsor. You could stop the task until the concern is discussed and any problems are rectified or you may decide it's better just to leave this particular volunteer assignment.

- ✓ When they come home from spending time in their volunteer work, ask your teens about the type of work they did. If it is something different than what they did on a previous day, ask if they received instruction on how to do the new job and if their supervisor was around to demonstrate and make sure they did it correctly and safely.
- ✓ If you spot any dangers from what they say, talk to them about these risks and what they should do to protect themselves.
- ✓ Encourage your teens to ask their supervisors for help and ask questions when they're not sure about how to perform a task safely.

How to detect if my teen is at risk at work

Answer: There is no complete list of everything your teen could be exposed to and all the things you need to ask to ensure he or she is safe.

Advice: Use the same judgement skills you used when your teen was a child and that you use now in other situations he or she is exposed to, such as violence, driving and drugs. For instance, if your teen is exposed to situations involving working alone, working at heights, lifting heavy loads, using chemicals or powered equipment, or handling sharp objects or laboratory samples **there's a risk**. If he or she doesn't have any training, supervision or protective equipment in these situations **your teen is at serious risk of injury or illness**.

Stand up for your teen's rights: everyone – paid or not – has the right to work in a safe and healthy work environment.

Illness and injury can change a teen's life... forever.

A word about insurance – volunteers are not covered by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). Students involved in the secondary school volunteer program should consider purchasing their own student accident insurance through their schools.

...That's another good reason why ensuring a safe placement is very important.

Resources and References

* The full Ministry of Education Community Involvement Policy can be obtained on the Ministry's [website](#) or through your secondary school.

** The full list of designated substances or information about minimum ages for work can be found on or requested through the Ministry of Labour's [website](#) or you can call your local Ministry of Labour office. Numbers can be found in the blue pages of the phone book.

Want to familiarize yourself about young worker health and safety? Visit: [Ministry of Labour](#), [Canada's National Workplace Health and Safety Website](#) or [Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety](#).

Quiz for parents

What do you know about your teen's job?

1. What tasks does he or she normally perform?
2. Did your teen receive orientation to the job and the rules of the workplace?
3. Did he or she receive safety training and information on the hazards associated with the job?
4. Does your teen work with powered equipment, chemicals, mobile equipment, at heights, around biological agents or is he or she required to lift and carry heavy objects?
5. Does the supervisor work in or near your teen's work area?
6. Does the supervisor provide feedback on how your teen is performing the job and provide information and advice to help prevent him or her from being injured?
7. Is your teen required to use or wear protective equipment? If so, has he or she been trained in how to use it properly and ensure it fits?
8. If your teen works with chemicals, has he or she received WHMIS training?
9. Does your teen know that he or she must report safety concerns and hazards to his or her supervisor?
10. Does your teen know that all injuries he or she suffers must be reported to his or her supervisor?

Whether they are volunteers or paid workers, youth at work are vulnerable to injuries. Your good judgement and parental guidance can help protect them.

For more information about workplace health and safety for teens:

[Ministry of Labour](#)

[Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety](#)

[Canada's National Workplace Health and Safety Website](#)

WSIB Prevention Hotline: 1-800-663-6639