

Providing Young Volunteers with a Healthy and Safe Working Environment

WE'RE A TEAM and we're GLAD you're here!

When young people come into an organization to volunteer, they won't have the same connection to the work, the commitment to the organization and the full appreciation of the services you provide and the goals of your service that your staff or regular volunteers have. Take the time to talk – to explain WHAT you do, WHY you do it, and HOW it benefits the clients you serve. Understanding the goals and making a better connection to the organization will not only make the volunteer assignment more rewarding, it will also contribute to helping volunteers work safer – when they feel like part of a team they are less likely to act independently and feel isolated. Remember, this is all new to many of your young volunteers – many have not had positions of responsibility outside of their home or school, and the experience may be a little daunting. Further, the supervisor/worker relationship is new and not well understood. How you relate to the young volunteers and the experience you provide will build a foundation for their working lives.

Why are we talking about safety?

- 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.

Most volunteer organizations have paid workers, so they should be familiar with the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*. The *Act* applies to paid workers, but not to volunteers. Regardless, employers have an overall responsibility for the safety of persons in the workplace, and volunteers, especially young ones, should be treated as if the *Act* applied, and as if they were your own children. Teach them well, provide a positive working environment, supervise them and you'll be rewarded with enthusiasm, dedication, hard work, and fewer injuries.

So why are teens vulnerable to injuries at work?

Teens have growing bodies and minds. We all know they're fun, bright, eager to learn and please and have a lot to offer anyone who works with them 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.

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 prohibits student involvement in certain types of activities:

- operation of any type of vehicle,
- use of power tools and equipment,
- 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 they 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.

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.

How to create a rewarding and SAFE volunteer experience

1. Remember when...

Before you begin screening, interviewing, training and supervising young volunteers, you need to take some time to reflect on **your** early work or volunteer experiences.

- Were you patient, open to suggestions and willing to admit your lack of knowledge?
- Did you pretend to know more than you did?
- Did you think that you'd just figure things out as they went along and do them your own way?
- Did you feel intimidated?
- Did you receive any training, instruction or supervision and, if you didn't, wouldn't it have helped to relieve the butterflies and the fear of the unknown or asking a question?
- What were your attitudes to safety then – did you feel invincible; would you have tried anything; would you have bothered with safety?

If you said yes to any of these, you were a normal teen and now that you remember what it was like to start a new job, you'll be better prepared to plan interview questions, set up orientation and training and establish a supervision and mentorship program that will work.

Remind supervisors and others in the workplace how to relate to young workers, to answer their questions and to never assume that they know how to perform tasks.

2. Set tasks

Determine appropriate tasks and carefully assign a task to the *individual* who suits the task. It's not news that teens develop at different rates – no two 15 year olds will likely be at the same level of physical or emotional maturity to handle the same tasks, but it's often something that's not well considered when assigning jobs. Further, their lack of experience means that they may lack the judgement skills older volunteers will have to solve problems or perform a task safely. Match the task to the person.

- Ensure tasks are well defined
 - Doing a little of this and a little of that – or worse yet, putting in time doing “whatever” – will leave the young volunteer uncertain about what to do or how to do it. This can create opportunities for exposure to a wide variety of hazards and a high risk of injury. Ideally, a written “job description” with full instructions helps everyone to understand the requirements of the job and what's expected. Carefully matching the task to the individual will also help to reduce the risk of injury.
- Let them have some choice in selecting tasks
 - Assigning tasks that you and the volunteers have discussed not only helps volunteers pick tasks that interest them, it gives them an chance to select tasks that may help them develop skills and knowledge they think will help them in their career paths. If volunteers

are completing tasks that they like to do and fully understand, they'll have a comfort level that should eliminate the typical discomfort or intimidation a young volunteer may feel.

Sometimes enough is enough!

Teens seem to have endless energy, but the truth is, they have a lot going on. Their bodies are growing, they spend long days at school, must complete homework, have 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. You may want to help them select volunteer times that don't conflict with other responsibilities.

- Consider, with safety in mind, the nature of the tasks assigned. Complex tasks may not be suitable for volunteers who only come in occasionally, as they may not remember the sequences required and may miss a step, exposing themselves and perhaps other people to injuries. Repetitive tasks or ones that are physically demanding are usually not suitable for anyone to do for an extended period of time. To avoid boredom or loss of concentration, consider job rotation. Tasks that carry responsibilities that can impact the health and safety of others may not be appropriate for young volunteers.

3. Teach them well

Young volunteers will need more time with you – plan to spend time training, demonstrating and supervising. Their ambition and skills will reward your investment.

- **Orientation** – everything they NEED to know and more
 - Explain how your organization works, what its mission is, who runs the organization, your policies and procedures.
 - Give an overview of the tasks that they will be assigned and the reasons for doing them – how they fit into the importance of what your organization does or stands for. A sense that their tasks are making a contribution to the overall good of the organization will help make them feel more comfortable and will pave the way to discussions about safety on the job.
- **Training** – talk, listen and be interactive – ask them their opinions, how they would or did solve a problem related to work, etc.
 - Take your time to explain safety precautions and ensure volunteers know all the potential hazards, as well as any safety equipment that needs to be used or worn. Include:

- WHMIS controlled products they may work around and location of the Material Safety Data Sheets;
- Emergency procedures: fire, first aid, injury, alarms and others as applicable.
- Provide written instructions if available for the volunteer to take home and review – especially if they only volunteer periodically.
- Avoid information overload – you may want to break up the orientation and training into smaller sessions.

Discuss past incidents and near misses to demonstrate risks. Talk about how these situations could have been avoided and the type of corrective action you took.

- Demonstrate the jobs to be done – break a job down into small tasks if necessary so that every step is well explained and, most importantly, well understood. Demonstrate again and focus on all safety precautions that are part of the task. Ask the volunteer if they can see anything about the job that may pose a risk and discuss how to prevent injuries associated with those risks. THEY may recognize things you hadn't thought of – that's one of the benefits of a fresh pair of eyes!
 - Have volunteers perform a task until they can do it exactly as required. Get the technical steps right first. Being able to do it a little faster will come with experience. Encourage questions – if they aren't coming – and tell them that as part of the training, you want them to ask you three questions about the job. Repeat the task until it is learned.

Tips for Training Teens

1. Make orientation and training match the learning abilities of your volunteers and have it delivered by a person who is skilled at working with young, inexperienced persons.
2. Keep orientation interactive, asking volunteers to draw on their experience and encourage them to provide input, ideas and suggestions.
3. Make orientation and training practical. Cover what you need to cover –don't get off track.
4. Guide them: provide rules and consequences when rules aren't followed.
5. Have them explain instructions back to you to verify everything is well understood – assumptions won't help anyone.
6. Evaluate. Did the learning take place? Are they applying the learning? Did they perform their job correctly and safely?
7. Provide positive reinforcement when a job is performed well and safely.

8. When tasks or circumstances change, provide new instructions, demonstrations and validation that they understand the new job.

CHECK IT OUT!

Before a volunteer uses it, have powered equipment checked out to ensure it is in top running condition and that all safety devices are present and working properly.

4. Watch over and guide them

- Ready, set, go. Let them perform the job alone when they've demonstrated that they've learned the task.
- Check in on them periodically – a word of encouragement, a helpful suggestion or just a smile will go a long way in encouraging good work habits.
- Correct any unsafe work habits or behaviours you see or become aware of immediately – don't let the behaviour continue.
- Make sure safety standards are maintained throughout the placement.
- Be sure they know where to get help if you're not immediately available.
- Make sure others who are working with the young volunteer also follow the safety rules – mentors will set the pace.

5. Encourage and reward

- Encourage them to report hazards – we can only correct what we know about!
- Encourage initiative and respect suggestions.
- Rewards don't have to be large – a smile, a kind word and a positive comment from you, their mentor and possibly their first supervisor, are a great reward for someone new to work.

OUR SAFETY AGREEMENT

The agreement on the following page has been drafted for use in volunteer organizations to demonstrate the team approach you want to take when it comes to protecting young volunteers. There is also a place for parents to sign to ensure they're aware of your commitment and how they can support their teen.

Fact: Far too many young people who are new to work suffer injuries that could have been prevented. We believe this does not have to happen. We will work together to keep our volunteers safe!

<p>As the sponsoring agency we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide a safe and healthy work environment. • encourage our young volunteers to raise concerns, ask questions and provide suggestions and ideas on making the tasks safer. • respond to concerns, questions, suggestions and ideas brought to our attention. • make sure that volunteers are aware of and follow established safety practices at all times. • ensure young and new volunteers are closely supervised and get the training they need to perform their tasks safely. <p>Signed: _____</p>	<p>As a volunteer I will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ask questions. • ask for training and a demonstration of new tasks I'm assigned. • say no if the task is beyond my capabilities. • never assume I know how to do something if I've never done it before. • discuss at home the tasks I'm asked to do as part of my volunteer work. • immediately report any unsafe conditions or practices that I observe to the sponsor. • report all injuries to my sponsor, no matter how minor they may seem to me. <p>Signed: _____</p>	<p>As the parent/guardian of the volunteer, I will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • talk to my teen about the tasks he/she is assigned and what's involved in doing those jobs – not just at the beginning, but throughout his/her time with the organization. • ask about the orientation, training and supervision he/she receives. • ensure my teen reports injuries and safety concerns to his/her sponsor at the organization. • encourage my teen to say no to tasks that are beyond his/her capabilities or impose undue risks to his/her safety. <p>Signed: _____</p>
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Together, we can prevent work-related injuries.

For more information about workplace health and safety for teens and young adults:

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