

Toolbox Safety Talks

New and young workers

SafeWork SA

information > advice > support

Talk about safety at work

Take ten minutes at 10am, or at any other time of the day, to talk with your team about workplace safety. This training resource is designed to help you deliver short presentations covering a series of work health and safety topics.

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Here is an example of an incident involving new and young workers.

A 16-year old school student had three fingers on his left hand severely crushed when using a metal cutting guillotine. The student was cutting off the ends of 50 pre-cut flat metal strips with the guillotine.

The student was shown what to do by the supervisor who, after watching him cut the ends off four strips, left him to complete the rest of the task on his own. The student had cut 47 strips and was cutting the 48th strip when he slipped, lost his balance and fell forward, putting three fingers into the operational area of the machine. He inadvertently activated the foot control, bringing the machine's clamping device down and crushing three of his fingers, two of which were later amputated.

ASK THE QUESTION

What factors contributed to the incident?

Possible answers:

- *the machine was not suitably guarded to prevent contact with its moving parts*
- *the student had no prior experience operating a metal cutting guillotine*
- *the supervisor assumed the student had more experience within the industry than was the case.*

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Young people include:

- school leavers starting work for the first time
- apprentices and trainees
- those working on a casual or part-time basis outside school hours
- work experience, vocational and training students
- children who visit the workplace and may not necessarily be 'workers'.

Workplace health and safety is everyone's responsibility

A Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBU) has a duty of care under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012 (SA)* to prevent incidents by identifying the hazards, assessing the risks, and dealing with them before new and young workers are exposed.

When assessing risks to young people there are several factors to consider:

- **The person's size and level of physical maturity** – young workers may be at greater risk of manual task injuries because of their size. Their muscle strength is still developing and the bones do not fully mature until around 25 years of age. They may misjudge the degree of difficulty when handling items that are heavy, bulky or out of reach, and may persist with the task when a more experienced worker would ask for help.
- **Their general behaviour and psychological maturity** – brain development isn't complete until the early 20s (especially in relation to decision making and organising). This means that a different approach to learning may be needed.
- **Their work experience and training** – new workers without any work experience may not process information in the same way as experienced workers. Some hazards may seem too obvious to mention, but not to the new worker. They may be less skilled in pacing the work according to their capabilities and take on too much too quickly.
- **Their ability to make mature judgements about their own safety and the safety of others** – safety is often not a priority for young workers. Some are risk-takers, others have limited work health and safety knowledge. However, young workers often crave responsibility and autonomy, which may lead them to take short cuts and develop their own way of doing things, some of which may be unsafe. Young workers can also be persuaded by peer pressure.
- **Their ability to cope with unexpected, stressful situations** – new and young workers have less ability to deal with violent and aggressive behaviour. Initiation ceremonies may also be an issue. Making sure they know who to talk to if they're feeling worried, stressed or pressured is a good start. New and young workers are often keen to make a good impression. We need to be mindful of not allocating jobs that are unpopular with other workers, like cleaning toilets or cleaning up spills that they may not have the skills/knowledge for.

It is the PCBU's responsibility to provide information, instruction and training before a new or young worker starts work. However, if you bombard new workers with safety information they aren't likely to remember it all, and may miss or forget important points. Staggering the induction can be useful – give them the essentials on day one; review on day five; final review with supervisor on day 10, with additional information given each day. We can help by preparing a checklist to see if we cover the basics.

Mentor programs are a good idea. People often find it easier to talk to a co-worker than a boss. This also enables constant supervision – the mentor can show the new person procedures, alert them to hazards and be a friend. Some workplaces use this strategy for the first month of employment.

As workers, we have a responsibility to protect our own health and safety and that of others affected by our work. We also need to abide by procedures and policies in relation to work health and safety. We should all be provided with appropriate information and training to enable us to fulfil that obligation.

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So, if you are doing an induction to a new task or job with a person, make sure you do the following things:

- **give clear instructions** – explain something, and get the new worker to repeat the information
- **demonstrate** – show and tell them how to perform a task. It's easier to learn if you are shown how to do something.
- **observe** – watch them do it to make sure they have it right. Don't leave them until you are sure.
- **assume nothing** – even if they come from a similar workplace, don't miss anything out. The things that are obvious to you may not be obvious to a new person.
- **encourage questions** – new people don't want to seem stupid by asking questions. You can make them feel comfortable and encourage them to ask questions by promoting discussion, not just providing instruction.
- **consider special needs** – language barriers, cultural or religious differences, literacy difficulties, limited knowledge of local legislation and safety standards, and reluctance to engage with authority figures
- **check understanding** – get the new person to go through the job themselves. Review it with them and follow up constantly to make sure they are still doing the job safely.

ASK THE QUESTION

Before I finish, is there anything that we could be doing better in this workplace for new and young workers?

Take notes about suggestions ... don't panic if there aren't any takers!

READ OUT

OK, unless anyone has any questions, thanks for participating.