



## ***Making safety a key item in young workers' tool kits***

A solid understanding of what young workers need and look for is critical to training them to be safe on the job, says Chris Neilson, Senior Manager, Human Resources for the Capital Regional District (CRD) which covers southern Vancouver Island.

In practical terms, he says, understanding enables effective training programs which rest on key elements such as:

- ▶ A corporate culture where young and experienced workers actively promote safety together and, to assure peer input, separately. All employees need to be involved if inexperienced workers are to “follow the leads they’re given on safety.”
- ▶ An environment that makes safety training fun and uses a variety of methods, including practical, hands-on approaches and learning by example.
- ▶ Ongoing program monitoring and evaluation because, “it’s one thing to put a program in place, but another to know that it works,” says Neilson.

Concepts like those have earned the CRD several awards, including an honourable mention for new and young worker safety training in a 2005 national competition of the Canadian Society of Safety Engineering.

On average, a quarter of the 700 employees at CRD are young workers. The mix calls for a variety of training approaches, according to Neilson. They must accommodate a “significant seasonal hire” of summer parks and recreation workers, *Water Wise* assessors working with the public on water conservation, and regular and casual employees found “everywhere the CRD is.”

From general orientation to “nuts and bolts” learning about specific work areas, Neilson says that safety consistently takes centre stage for both casual and regular employees. “We take nothing for granted. We let them know about each potential hazard and show them how to deal with it.”

“When we bring new hires in,” he says, “we assure they acquire safety skills, and we provide support systems like mentoring. Young workers may be assigned buddies for their first days on the job; or depending on the work site, they may have a ‘go-to’ person as long as their employment lasts.”

The CRD tells young workers that “you’re one of the family here,” and “we’re giving you a tool kit to do your work safely.” Part of the telling involves overcoming the barriers that keep young workers from asking questions.

“Our experience has been that young workers sometimes asked fewer questions, and we developed systems to encourage them,” says Neilson. “The CRD offers direction and knowledge, encourages people to ask questions, and double-checks in a firm, non-threatening manner to see that work is done safely.”

He goes on to explain, “It’s up to the supervisor, walking a fine line between not wanting to micro-manage them and understanding some questions still may not be asked. We have tried to create an environment where people are comfortable asking questions.”

This year, the district will also ask some questions, according to Neilson. “Our motto is ‘Safety Is Everyone’s Business’, and this includes input from young workers. Our programs and processes are effective, yet it is still important to do a regular ‘health-check’ of them with a survey of young workers.”