

Young workers like these mechanic apprentices rely on proper training, supervision, and support to stay safe on the job.

Lessening the risks for our young workers

By Susan Kerschbaumer

Workers under the age of 25 run a greater risk of being injured on the job than those in any other age group. The statistics are sobering: every day, 27 of our province's young workers lose time to injuries; every week, seven are permanently disabled.

"For young employees, almost everything they do is new to them," says Helen Chandler, WorkSafeBC industry specialist. "And they have a great desire to please." This, coupled with their lack of experience, makes them especially vulnerable to workplace dangers.

Speaking to those who work with youth

Presenting at the B.C. Recreation and Parks Association's In Your Face Youth Workers' Conference on October 1 in Vancouver, Chandler laid out the challenges to a particularly key audience: frontline workers who engage directly with youth.

Chandler explained that young people in the workplace are at increased risk of injury due to a lack of awareness and experience, mixed with inadequate training, orientation, and supervision. Youth are often in temporary jobs that come with lots of danger but

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—Jennifer Lambert, Alive After Five program coordinator

little training, such as restaurant work. And, eager to build their resumés and reluctant to cause problems, they are generally more hesitant than older workers to ask questions or raise issues.

Improving the statistics

Throughout her interactive seminar, Chandler offered concrete tips and skills that youth-support workers could use to help reduce the risks young people face. She involved her audience in various scenarios — a young woman tells you she’s being bullied at work, for instance, or a young man isn’t being properly trained for duties in his family business — and armed the participants with some effective strategies for improving young worker safety.

She emphasized the legal obligation employers have to provide new workers with adequate training. In addition, she stressed the importance of letting young people know that they have the right to refuse work, and of teaching them to speak up respectfully when they don’t feel properly equipped to do a job.

“I talk about how sometimes it’s easier for young employees to talk to peers first,” says Chandler. “If others have the same concern, then they can approach the employer as a group.”

Wanting to prove themselves, but unaware of the dangers

Jennifer Lambert of the BCFED Health and Safety Centre agrees that such information is crucial. As the coordinator of the Alive After Five program, which educates young workers on their safety-related rights, she knows that youth often lack the confidence to ask questions or speak up to their employers. Yet, she says, they are “always willing to take on more to prove themselves.”

As a result, they can find themselves in some deeply concerning situations. Lambert has recently heard from day labourers, for example, who had been sent out to remove asbestos with no training and no equipment. “They don’t realize it’s so dangerous, because they

didn’t come from the era that grew up with it,” she says. Unfortunately, these scenarios aren’t unique; over the past year and a half, asbestos removal by young, inexperienced workers has become “prevalent” in Victoria, says Lambert.

“Young people assume adults are protecting them, so they don’t question their decision making,” says Lambert. Like Chandler, Lambert stresses the importance of teaching young workers to speak up and feel confident in saying no: “Trust your instincts. Ask questions. If something doesn’t feel right in your gut, ask.” 😊

There’s an unsafe condition at work. What should you do?

- 1 Talk to your immediate supervisor — either on your own or with other concerned co-workers — and explain your concern.
- 2 If you’re not satisfied with the answer, or if your immediate supervisor isn’t available, go to his or her supervisor.
- 3 Still not satisfied? Ask a safety representative, a member of the safety committee, or your shop steward.
- 4 Report the situation to WorkSafeBC (anonymously, if you prefer) at 604.276.3100 or 1.888.621.7233.