

Summer Heat Hazards: Advice for parents sending their child off on their first summer job

By: G. Gordon

It's that time of year again – the backpacks are stuffed under the bed and the swimsuits emerge. Watching our kids mature and become teenagers before our eyes (much to our chagrin), summer becomes more than just fun in the sun. Many teenagers will be working for the first time, and many will be working outdoors, as lifeguards, summer camp counselors, gardeners, and ticket takers at amusement parks.

As a mother and safety expert for State Compensation Insurance Fund, I'm a double-threat. Not only am I full of safety and illness prevention concerns, but I am also concerned for the next generation of maturing teenagers. Governor Schwarzenegger has proclaimed May as Safe Jobs for Youth Month, to highlight the importance of preventing teen injuries on the job, and as parents we can help. Knowing there are millions of parents dealing with sending their teens off for a first summer job, I thought I'd share some of my thoughts as to how parents can better prepare their working teens for the coming summer.

An ounce of prevention

You'll probably be met with rolling eyes, but it is imperative to have a discussion about safety with your teen prior to the first day on the job. Most summer jobs provide teenagers independence and self confidence, extra spending money, and fun. But the fun ends when someone is hurt or injured. It is imperative that your teenager understands that there are risks involved and safety precautions that should be considered while on the job. Have a discussion about the job and your expectations. Ensure that your teen understands the dangers of summer heat and sun, as well as the specific safety precautions that should be considered.

Needed supplies

Many summer jobs involve being in the sun for long periods of time. If this is true for your teen, now is the time to do a closet inventory for proper attire. Your best bet is to involve your teen in purchasing the things he'll need – a hat, sunglasses, a long sleeved shirt and long pants.

Most likely, your teen will challenge you over how what you bought makes him look, or “forget” to put the preventive articles on. Also important is sunscreen. The American Academy of Dermatologists recommends reapplying sunscreen every two hours, at minimum. Make sure you send your teen off with the highest SPF possible. And if you have a teenage daughter who is determined to forgo sun protection in favor of building her tan, remind her that while she may not look hip at work, she’ll be much hipper spending her free time at the pool with her friends than home alone covered in aloe vera. She’ll thank you later! If you suspect your teen may “forget” to apply sunscreen, make it extra easy for them with a spray on, or something that smells good (or doesn’t smell) and have them apply it before they leave home.

Hydration, which aids in maintaining a cool body temperature, is a must when working outside in the summer months. When my daughter was a teen, I bought her a refillable water bottle (pink of course). This way, I could foster ample hydration but also know that I’m doing my part for the environment. If tap water is a battle with your teen, alternatives include flavored waters or sports drinks that have minimal added sugars. Encourage your teen to take all the breaks offered by their employer and head for the shade.

Also make sure that your teen is familiar with the symptoms of heat exhaustion and heatstroke – that they understand that if they are tired and sweating a bit, that’s normal, but cramps, nausea, extreme fatigue, dizziness, disorientation, hyperventilation, profuse sweating, and vomiting are not. Anyone working outdoors for the summer needs to know how to recognize these symptoms, how to describe them, and how to articulate their needs assertively if something happens.

Only after I was confident the job was safe did I agree to my daughter’s summer job. Sit down with your teen, weigh and consider the situation carefully, and decide if the job is an appropriate fit. Be aware of the laws that protect young workers, and make sure that throughout the summer you are checking in with your teen frequently about the tasks, the work environment. If your teen has concerns, discuss if these need to be addressed with the supervisor. Lastly, reinforce with your teen that it is ok, and important, to *ask questions* if they are confused about or don’t know what to do in an emergency situation.

Retaining Professionalism

When it comes to a first summer job, an ounce of prevention can make the difference between a fun summer and a disastrous one. Properly dressed and lotioned to prevent sunburn, well-hydrated to prevent heat illness, and armed with knowledge about the rights and responsibilities of employees, your teen can enjoy independence while staying safe. For more resources on heat illness prevention, visit www.scif.com.

Questions Your Child Should Ask Employers

- What are the hazards of the job?
- What are my roles and responsibilities?
- What are my hours?
- What are my wages?
- What training will I receive?
- Who do I report to?
- What do I do if I become ill or get hurt?

More on the specifics of child labor laws is available on State Fund's Young Worker section, <http://www.scif.com/safety/YoungWorkers.html>.