

Keep Your **KIDS** Away From the Yard

by Julie Wiest

Make sure your children are indoors on a nice day – until you've finished mowing the lawn, that is. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "Each year in the United States, approximately 9,400 children under 18 receive emergency care for lawn mower-related injuries." Lawn mower injuries include cuts, bruises, burns, loss of sight and amputations. This figure is extremely high and also unacceptable when you think about the fact that many, if not most, of these injuries can be prevented.

A lawn mower is a cutting machine with a blade that can travel up to 200 miles per hour. It can cut not only grass, but anything in its path, including fingers, toes, hands, feet, arms and legs. It can also hurl objects that get caught underneath at people and property, causing serious injury or damage.

Fortunately, there are several things parents can do to prevent their child from being injured by a lawn mower. When children are very young, they should not be allowed anywhere near a lawn mower when it is in use. It is very difficult to hear a child



approaching over the noise of the mower, and it can be difficult to see children, especially if there are hills, tall grass or overhanging trees in the area. Therefore, children belong indoors when a lawn mower is being used. Children should never be allowed to play on a lawn mower, even if it is turned off; a lawn mower is a piece of machinery, not a toy. In addition, children should not be allowed to ride on a riding lawn mower with its operator, as they are at great risk of falling under the blades.

As children get a bit older and more mature, they can help with the yard work, and most teens are certainly capable of mowing the lawn. But, first, parents should have a talk with their teen, explaining the dangers of a lawn mower and how to operate it safely. Moreover, they should always follow safety rules and set a good example for their children.



Any lawn mower operator should wear proper clothing: long pants, long sleeves, boots or sturdy footwear, eyeglasses and hearing protection. Close-fitted clothing is also best to prevent clothing from getting caught in the mower blade, and make sure those shoelaces are tied! Push mowers should be pushed across slopes so that your foot will not get caught underneath if you slip and so that the mower will not roll backwards and over you. Riding mowers should be used up and down slopes to prevent tipping. Also, mow only in daylight, never mow wet grass (to avoid slipping), and always walk behind a push mower instead of pulling it backward.

Parents have a responsibility to keep their children safe. They can eliminate worries by keeping children supervised indoors. And, the first few times they allow their teen to mow the lawn, they should watch to make sure he or she is following the safety rules previously discussed. It is up to the parents' discretion as to whether their teen is mentally and physically mature enough to use a lawn mower.

Some lawn mowers come with safety features that may aid in preventing injuries. NMIR, or "no mowing in reverse," technology disables the mower's blade when moving backward, reducing the possibility of injury if it rolls over a foot or a child. Other features include a shield that covers the back blade and an operator presence switch, which requires the operator to hold the device to keep the mower going; as soon as he or she lets off the switch, the blades stop. In addition, the federal government has set rules for manufacturers that require push mowers' blades to stop when the handle is released.

Besides help from lawn mower manufacturers and the government, other organizations are getting involved to help reduce the number of injuries and deaths from lawn mowers. The American Trauma Society (ATS) educates children through their Traumaroo program, which was developed in 1994 to help reduce the number of preventable injuries among children. The program features Troo, the animated kangaroo character that teaches everyday safety through fun activities. The ATS offers five Traumaroo safety programs, each of which includes an animated VHS videotape, a facilitator's program guide, a full-color Troo and friends poster, a sample activity book, achievement stickers, and a certification of completion. For more information, visit www.amtrauma.org or call 800/556-7890.

Most importantly, parents need to be responsible and good role models when they mow the lawn, and they need to teach their children to be safe. Safety education, new safety features, and parents setting good examples are all important steps in the right direction, and educational resources and programs are there to help. ■