

times higher than adult workers in some occupational sectors, says a statement from the American Society of Safety Engineers. "Unlike adults, adolescents have less developed cognitive abilities, physical coordination and overall maturity, and experience a rapidly changing physiology," the statement notes.

Dr. Mitsopulos says she would support an approach in which employment rights and workplace safety issues are included in high school curriculum to help ensure all students receive the information.

"I believe that a gradual repeated approach is probably more effective for young workers. This gives a consistent message about safety practices at work that need to be followed," she maintains.

The number of claims for 20- to 24-year-olds has not aligned with the success Ontario has seen in the reduction of lost time among youth 19 and under, where oh&s education is delivered to secondary students, notes the report on vulnerable workers. Since school safety lessons started in Ontario, WSIB statistics show an overall 32 per cent decrease in lost-time injuries among teenagers between 2000 and 2005.

But some improvement is not necessarily enough. Young workers receive little or no oh&s training throughout their school years and are unprepared to enter the working world, argues Harper, who is also a health and safety representative for Xstrata Nickel in Sudbury, Ontario. Because young workers are eager to satisfy and are reluctant to make any waves, fearing they may lose their jobs, "some unscrupulous employers use this lack of knowledge and eagerness to their advantage," Harper charges.

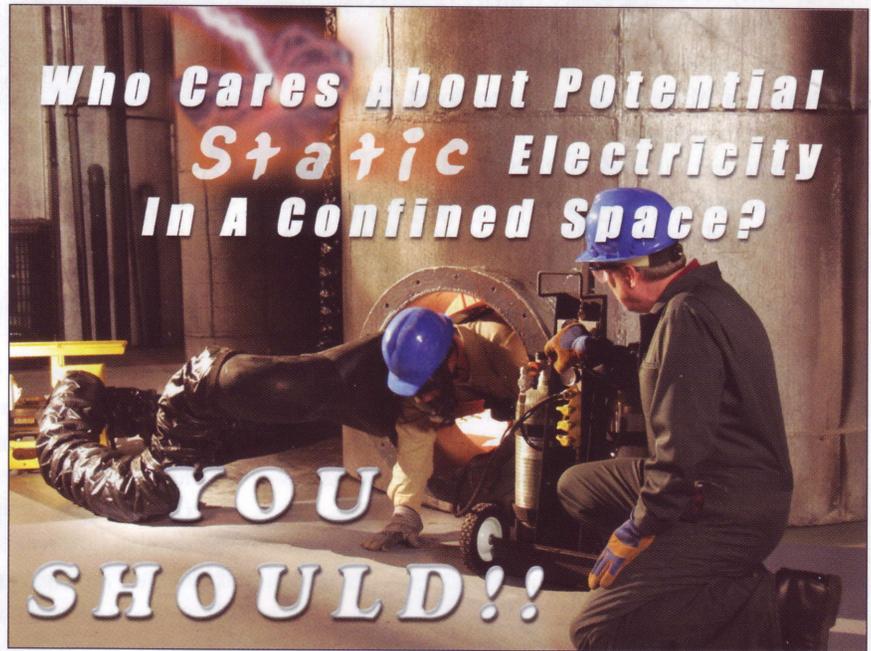
Dr. Mitsopulos notes that disseminating relevant oh&s information at school should cover such issues as workplace rights, what to expect when starting a new job, and what questions to ask the employer.

The Power Workers' Union, based in Toronto, offers a number of tips for new and prospective employees:

- Find out what your health and safety rights are under the law.
- Find out as much as possible about the prospective job duties before your interview.

- Find out as much as you can about the safety performance of your prospective employer.
 - Ask probing questions about the employer's safety and skills training programs at your interview.
 - Never be afraid to ask questions.
 - Never assume that, "If it wasn't safe, they wouldn't ask me to do it."
 - If you're not sure it's safe, don't do it.
- That recognition can only be helped by

appropriate training. Dr. Mitsopulos is of the view that training must incorporate methods that enable a young person to judge whether or not a task is unsafe. "This is the part that should be addressed in a high school-based course rather than leaving it to the discretion of employers," she suggests. "Obviously, employers have a vested interest in getting the work done and some employers may not pay close attention to safety standards or they may



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assume that the young worker knows what is unsafe and there is no need to point out safety issues," she adds.

Some school systems have seen value in delivering oh&s awareness training to co-op students, says Harper. The problem at present, however, is that what is often missing is "the meat and potatoes of how to utilize legislation," he says.

Messages with a shock value may capture the attention of young people more readily, hopefully so they recall these lessons later on, says Dr. Mitsopoulos. The messages should outline the consequences of poor safety practices on the job, she suggests, pointing to recent spots from Ontario's WSIB. "They are dramatic and, therefore, capture the viewer's attention while telling a story."

Last fall, the SAFE Work ad campaign, courtesy of the Manitoba Workers' Compensation Board (WCB), emphasized the importance of workplace safety training.

Running over four weeks, the campaign featured young children doing adult jobs amidst a host of workplace hazards, but with little direction from their supervisor other than to "be careful." The campaign "drives home the message that safe workers are not born that way; they need training," notes the WCB.

The long view

Dr. Mitsopoulos agrees shock is not enough. Educating young people about on-the-job safety practices and rights remains an essential part of the process as that information is necessary to

make good — and safe — evaluations of workplace conditions. "It is also important for the training process at work to emphasize the need to follow safety rules and what could happen if such rules are not followed," Dr. Mitsopoulos advises.

Canada's Wonderland, the country's largest single-location employer of youth, uses a variety of techniques when training its new and young employees, says Theo Bosch, the company's director of loss prevention. All employees go through an orientation, taking either a group format or one-on-one session in a classroom setting.

"We find that tailoring the type of training to each specific job area really helps in ensuring that training is being fully understood by all employees," says Bosch.

"We also do departmental training, which often involves more equipment-specific training for those jobs which require work with special equipment," he adds.

With respect to what form that training may take, among the array of options used at Canada's Wonderland to get the safety message out are the following: audio and visual presentations, teaching aids with all training scenarios, hands-on experience (promoting active participation in training sessions), and peer training.

"We do follow-up testing to ensure that the message has been understood by all," Bosch notes, and "provide written takeaways and resources on site for reference for anyone who has follow-up questions regarding their training," he reports.

"Tailgate meetings" have been an effective way to convey and reinforce the importance of workplace safety on a daily basis with employees, Bosch says.

"With our business being a short season like it is, only open during the summer, communication is crucial to our success," he says. Management practices and an open-door policy encourages staff to communicate any questions and concerns by holding pre-shift and post-shift meetings. To accommodate each new generation and its skill sets, the company also revises its training techniques each and every year.

Seeing is believing

Goodwill is another organization that has considerable experience with youth. "Each year, hundreds of young workers and other vulnerable people are employed in Goodwill REACH (Real Employment to Achieve Community Health), a transitional employment initiative that gives people access to the labour market and an opportunity to fully participate in society," says Hunter.

Like Canada's Wonderland, Goodwill has found that visual demonstrations of safe work techniques followed by hands-on trials



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work best with younger workers. Those methods are “reinforced with visual aids posted at each work station,” Hunter says.

“In addition, Goodwill is working to standardize and continuously improve processes at work stations and to integrate safety into all aspects of the job,” she says.

One way workplace parties are trying to achieve that is by having employee teams for individual stores meet to develop new and more efficient approaches to performing daily tasks and incorporating best practices in health and safety.

Assigning supervisors and job coaches to young workers, in addition to holding weekly check-in meetings, helps to ensure adjustment to the job is as smooth as possible, Hunter reports. “Young workers are required to complete work logs which give them an opportunity to reflect on their learning from the week, as well as to set goals.”

Moreover, she points out, young workers are not permitted to perform certain tasks that may put them at greater risk of injury, such as operating specific types of equipment.

Questions and answers

Hunter has found that establishing a rapport with each employee from the beginning of employment “creates a valued level of comfort and instills feelings of accountability, which ensure employees are motivated to ask important questions.”

Employers who recognize a need for specialized, new worker training seem to be few and far between — and Ontario injury statistics should be enough to convince everyone that changes are in order, says Harper. “When 30 per cent of accepted claims come from the age group, under 25, in this province, there’s got to be something wrong with the way we do business,” he argues.

Harper is of the mind that, in general, unless required by specific provisions in legislation, employers “are sorely lacking when it comes to any form of young worker training.” He contends that, oftentimes, there are only verbal instructions, a quick safety talk and the workers are then left on their own.

In late July of 2007, WorkSafeBC announced that protections for young workers or workers new to a job site were in effect. Amendments to British Columbia’s *Occupational Health and Safety Regulation* mean employers are required to provide all young or new workers with orientation and training specific to the work site, and to record and document that training.

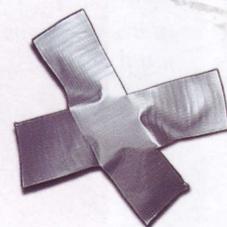
WorkSafeBC notes a young worker is defined as between 15 and 24 years of age; a new worker is any worker who is new to the workplace, returning to a workplace where hazards have changed during the individual’s absence, affected by a change in the workplace hazards, or relocated to a new workplace if the hazards there differ from the hazards in the previous workplace.

“Even though most safety organizations all have young worker programs developed, employers seldom deliver them,” Harper

charges. “I’m certain that if you went and spoke to a group of young workers and asked them what their duties are under the [OH&S Act] that most, if not all, would not be able to give you an answer,” he adds.

And youth clearly have some questions. On April 18, the fourth annual “Our Youth at Work” (OYAW) simulcast became the largest corporate and student force gathered since the event was launched in 2005. In all, there were 100 simultaneous, open question-and-answer sessions at high schools in 50 Ontario cities. More than 60 employers took part, joined by officials for the

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Canadian Standards Association (CSA) and CSA International.

“We started out with six companies and six high schools, and this year we’re introducing more than 10 times that number of companies to kids at 100 high schools,” Rob Ellis, founder and president of OYAW, says in a statement. “This kind of growth indicates the appetite we’re seeing for open communication about difficult, but critical, workplace issues — from both the corporate world and the younger generation,” says Ellis, whose son, David, 18, died in a work-related accident almost a decade ago. It was only his second day on the job.

The event offers an opportunity to hear about the work-related concerns of young workers, Robert Griffin, president and CEO of the CSA Group, says in a statement. This not only helps the group “improve its own best practices, but it also enables us to gain new insights into how standards and certification and testing can play a bigger role in helping to protect Canadian workers,” Griffin goes on to say.

Linda Kovacs says she was shocked when her middle child was severely injured that day three years ago. Calling Scott her “safest kid,” Kovacs notes that he “always took extra precautions growing up to avoid certain situations because he was very cautious.”

Public pressure applied by parents of young workers who have been severely injured or killed on the job, like Linda Kovacs, and concerns raised about the costs associated with young worker injuries has brought some much-needed attention to the issue, Harper suggests. “Unfortunately, there are not enough strong voices singing the same message,” he says. “Until employers see health and safety as an investment in their workplace rather than a cost, nothing will change.”

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Trisha Richards is a writer in Toronto. With files from OHS CANADA.