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Culturally Competent Safety Interventions for Children in Old Order Anabaptist Communities

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ABSTRACT. This commentary describes the challenges of child safety interventions in Old Order Amish and Mennonite communities in North America. It proposes nine culturally sensitive interventions appropriate for these separatist communities.

KEYWORDS. Child safety, farm safety, Old Order Anabaptist

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes some of the challenges of making child safety interventions in Old Order Amish and Mennonite Anabaptist communities in North America. It offers nine recommendations for implementing culturally sensitive interventions in these distinctive separatist communities. The commentary does not offer recommendations for Hutterite and Brethren communities, although many of the same principles would pertain to them as well.

Anabaptist religious groups emerged in 16th century Europe at the time of the Protestant Reformation. They immigrated to North America in the 18th and 19th centuries and presently are clustered in four major groups: Amish, Brethren, Hutterites, and Mennonites.[1]

In the late 19th century, tradition-minded subgroups of Amish and Mennonites known as "Old Orders" emerged within the major Anabaptist groups in response to the growing pressures of industrialization and urbanization in American society. This essay focuses on the Old Order Amish (hereafter Amish) and Old Order Mennonites (hereafter Mennonites) that maintain various forms of cultural separation from mainstream society.

Both of these Old Order groups live in rural areas and have a large number of households engaged in small-scale family farming operations; others work in small Old Order–owned business or in factories. The Amish use horse-drawn equipment in their fields, whereas Mennonites typically use steel-wheeled tractors. Both groups use horse and buggy transportation and speak a German dialect know as Pennsylvania German or Pennsylvania Dutch.[2–4] (A small percentage of Amish communities speak a Swiss German dialect.) The Amish, who live in 448 settlements in 29 states and the Canadian province of Ontario, numbered about 261,000 adults and children.[5] The Mennonites, who live in 10 states and Ontario,

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have an estimated population of 40,000.

Like any rural farm family, there are specific characteristics of farming that expose Amish and Mennonite children to unique hazards. Because both Amish and Mennonite families use horse and buggy transportation, their children risk danger if horses are frightened and when they travel on public roads with motor vehicles. Although the Mennonites use steel-wheeled tractors for farming, the Amish pull their farm equipment by horses. Mennonite children as young as 8 or 9 years of age drive steel-wheeled tractors, and Amish children as young as age 6 sometimes operate horse-drawn equipment such as a hay rake. Run-over accidents caused by frightened animals are a typical source of injury. Both Amish and Mennonite families often have six or more children who are rarely confined to safe play areas, and older siblings often supervise the younger ones. Improperly supervised children are exposed to many potential dangers around mechanical equipment in the barn and on the field.

The most comprehensive data set on childhood injuries was compiled by Purdue University's Old Order Anabaptist Injury Database in collaboration with the Young Center of Elizabethtown College. A comprehensive profile of farm-related injuries among children and prevention strategies, based on this project, was reported previously in the *Journal of Agromedicine*.[6] This research identified 217 farm-related injuries for children in 2002 and found the most frequent reasons for injury were falls (38%), direct animal contact (13%), struck or cut by equipment (9%), run over by equipment (8%), crushed or pinned (7%), and entanglement (5%). Of the 217 injured children, 87% were males. The peak ages for injury were 13 and 14. Children under the age of 8 were more likely to be fatally injured than youth aged 8 to 17 by a factor of 2 to 1.

Several cultural barriers provide challenges for outsiders seeking to improve safety measures for children in these communities: (1) The Amish and Mennonite religious ideology includes the principle of cultural separation from the larger society, as demonstrated by distinctive dress, use of a dialect, and limits on some forms of social interaction with outsiders. (2) Religious beliefs emphasize the importance of separation of church and state, which restricts them from receiving many forms of government aid. (3) Most of the groups end the formal education of children at the eighth grade, and then youth enter informal, full-time apprenticeships working on a farm, around the household, in a business, or learning a trade alongside their parents, neighbors, or other family members. (4) The oral nature of their local-based, small-scale society means that they are not familiar with bureaucratic systems, protocols, and written documents. (5) Because they grant considerable authority to tradition, they are somewhat reluctant to change their practices based on scientific research or the proposals of professionals unknown or recognized in their communities. (6) These Old Order groups also place certain restrictions on the use of some forms of technology—telephone, electricity, television, computer, motor vehicles, and mechanized farm equipment. (7) There are some forty different Amish groups and half a dozen Mennonite groups, each of which has different lifestyle regulations, patterns of interaction with outsiders, and views of the larger society. The dress of the boys in Figure 1 identify them as members of a specific Amish subgroup. (8) The groups have no centralized office or leadership, but only loosely coupled networks, which make it difficult for singular, one-size-fits-all interventions to gain traction in specific communities.

Considerable information about the nature and frequency of childhood accidents and injuries is available in weekly and monthly publications compiled in English by Old Order communities. These national periodicals include *The Budget*, *Die Botschaft*, and *The Diary*, as well as regional Old Order newsletters. Such publications provide an effective venue for placing announcements or advertisements regarding safety issues. For example, the Pennsylvania Department of Health placed announcements in *Die Botschaft* regarding the dangers of toxic sprays, insecticides and household cleaners.

FIGURE 1. Three Amish brothers in blue. ©Daniel Rodriguez (figure available in color online).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREVENTIVE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

1. *Importance of Face-To-Face Contact*. Because the Old Order communities have many cultural differences and no centralized hierarchy, all interventions require voluntary support by local members based on face-to-face interaction with safety experts such as teachers, nurses, or agricultural extension agents.
2. *Use of Safety Committees*. Many Old Order communities have established informal safety committees to educate their own members regarding industrial hazards, roadway safety for horse-drawn vehicles, and general health concerns. Whenever possible, interventions should be sanctioned and promoted by these grassroots safety committees.
3. *Culturally Specific Materials*. The written and illustrative content of training and educational materials should be culturally specific. For example, for Amish groups illustrations of horse-drawn machinery should be used, not large self-propelled equipment. Small-scale, low-tech illustrations should reflect the reality of Old Order farms. English language must be very basic and clear because it is the second language of these groups, and the technical vocabulary of readers is limited by an eighth-grade private school education.
4. *Use of Existing Practices: Schools/Media*. Whenever possible, interventions should be embedded in or integrated with existing Old Order practices, social organizations, and traditions. Most children attend small privately operated schools that can serve as sites for safety education. Announcements and safety guidelines can be placed and/or promoted on a regular basis in Old Order newspapers and periodicals. Printed booklets on safety may gain greater legitimacy if they are produced and promoted by Old Order publishers.
5. *Culturally Specific Illustrations*. Safety education should be contextualized to fit within the religious traditions and beliefs

of the community. Illustrations that show computers and television sets, women in professional roles, or people wearing jewelry are inappropriate. Showing Old Order subjects in photographs likewise violates cultural norms. Examples of appropriate culturally specific publications for children include *Weeds in Our Garden: Farm Safety Activity Book,*[7] a coloring book for kids that has biblical and culturally related quotes to enhance its effectiveness. *Farm Safety Stories*[8] is another coloring book with culturally sensitive drawings and short stories with true and false answers. Another culturally specific resource is *Farm Safety 4 Just Kids*.[9]

6. *Experience-Oriented Outreach Programs*. Public "See and Do" farm safety events as stand-alone events or incorporated into broader community agricultural or health fairs, which provide activities and food for families, have been successful in some Old Order communities. Such practical programs are especially effective when combined with written materials for both children and adults.
7. *Age-Specific Programming*. Interventions should target the safety of children in two age groups that are especially vulnerable to injuries: preschool-aged children and 13- to 15-year-olds. Those concerning preschool children must, of course, focus on parents and offer specific ways that parents can create safe play and work environments for children. Schools provide one of the best venues to target the 13- to 15-year-olds.
8. *Injury-Specific Programming*. Interventions should target the specific types of injuries that occur most frequently on Old Order farms—hay-hole falls, contact with animals, accidents involving horse-drawn equipment, burns, and poisonings.
9. *Basic First Aid*. Because Old Order farms are located in rural areas, and some have limited access to telephones and first aid kits, basic instructions for treating injuries, written in simple English, should be available for parents. The Red Cross and the American Heart Association have appropriate materials to address this need.

A more comprehensive list of recommendations for interventions in Old Order communities is available in a previous report in the *Journal of Agromedicine*.[6]

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