

Plans to Farm Take Root Early



What influences a child to choose a career on the family farm, and when is that decision made? A new University of Illinois study of pre-teen farm youth suggests that the foundations for this life choice are set early and that maternal influence, rather than paternal expectations, may be key.

Although previous studies have focused on high-school-aged youth, Angela Wiley's training in child development led her to believe farm kids would be influenced toward or against farming earlier than that. "Research implies that an important life decision such as this would be rooted in the early activities, education, and relationships of farm children," she said.

Wiley, an assistant professor in human development and family studies, surveyed 40 farm children aged 10 to 13 and also interviewed their parents. She found that children who did more work at home were more likely to plan to farm, that mothers had more influence than fathers on farm children's future plans, and that perceptions of parental worry over the family farm's future also affected children.

"We found that 10- to 13-year-old children in farm families do a surprising amount of work," said Wiley. "They not only reported doing two hours of farm work per day during the busy farm season, but they also did a surprising amount of work around the house year round."

"Like Glen Elder, author of the pioneering study of farm families 'Children of the Land,' we found that mothers have a strong influence on farm children. It may be that children, as they work around the house,

have more opportunity to take in their mother's attitudes toward farming. If she is positive about farming as a career choice and a lifestyle, it may affect the child's later decision," Wiley said.

A father's desire for the child to work on the family farm or a child's gender had little influence on these children's plans, Wiley said. But almost all of the respondents reported high levels of getting along with their parents.

Wiley speculated that these good relationships could be partly attributed to the amount of time parents and children spend working side by side, in the house or in farm activities. "Children this age are unlikely to be doing farmwork alone. The more likely scenario is that they're helping in some way, almost as apprentices," she said.

Although farm parents were careful to keep anxiety about the farm operation from their children, Wiley's respondents picked up on it anyway. If they believed their parents were worried about the farm, there was a "let-me-make-it-better" effect, said Wiley, that led the children to plan to continue in the family business.

"They seem to have taken on a sense of responsibility from an early age that 'this is a family endeavor and I need to do my part,'" Wiley said. "Their plans to farm later may be an attempt to ease their parents' worries and to ensure the continuance of the family enterprise."

Wiley believes her study adds to a growing body of work that shows that children benefit from doing work that matters. "When children are engaged in work that's part and parcel of making the family function, there are some very positive aspects to that. These kids report having a tightly bonded relationship with their parents, direction for the future, and higher self-esteem.

"Seen through the eyes of their children, we have to say that many farm mothers and fathers are doing a really good job in their parenting. Despite stresses and worries, they are finding time to talk and be with their children," said Wiley.

And this investment is likely to pay off in the future not only in terms of children's development and adjustment, but also in terms of the viability of family farms, she concluded.



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