

## **Fatal Mix--Forklifts and Young Workers**

Young workers are involved in a disproportionate number of forklift accidents. Lack of training, inexperience, and risk taking are all culprits in these accidents. But they are no excuse. Federal laws and regulations require you to protect your young workers and prevent forklift-related incidents.

OSHA's Powered Industrial Truck standard (29 CFR 1910.178) requires you to "ensure that each powered industrial truck operator is competent to operate a powered industrial truck safely, as demonstrated by the successful completion of the training and evaluation."

The Fair Labor Standards Act prohibits workers under the age of 18 from using forklifts in nonagricultural industries (for agricultural industries it's under the age of 16).

There is a very good reason for these rules. They protect young workers from dreadful injuries.

### **Case in Point**

A teenage male we'll call "Joe" was hired as a summer helper to label bins and move stock by hand around a Massachusetts warehouse.

The warehouse had a forklift, and it was common practice to leave the key in the ignition when the forklift was not being used. Prior to the accident, Joe was observed operating the forklift several times. He was advised several times by a number of employees that he shouldn't be using the forklift.

Joe, you see, was not trained nor was he certified as competent to operate the forklift. And so, according to the company's policy, he wasn't authorized to drive a lift truck. But nevertheless, there was Joe driving around in a forklift.

There were no witnesses to Joe's accident. But it's believed that he boarded the forklift, without putting on the seatbelt, raised the forks with an empty pallet to a height of approximately 10 feet, and drove down the left side of the loading dock ramp. The ramp sloped away from the building at an angle of approximately 33° degrees on the left side near the street level.

There was a stack of empty pallets across the bottom of the ramp, and it appears that Joe was attempting to place the empty pallet on top of the stack. With the forks raised to a height of approximately 10 feet on a 33°-degree slope, it's likely the forklift's center of gravity shifted, creating an unstable condition, and causing the forklift to topple sideways.

*Joe was crushed to death under the lift truck.*

This is just one of many, many stories documented by OSHA and NIOSH involving young workers, forklifts, and fatalities.

The accidents are partly a matter of inexperience, poor judgment, and lack of training and supervision. But they're also due at least in part to the fact that young people--especially young males even into their 20s--are more likely to be risk-takers than most other people. They're less likely to think about the consequences of their actions--that something could go wrong and they could get hurt.

So a young worker jumps in a forklift and uses it because it's fun and it's easier than hauling things manually. And then things get out of control.

# ***Safety News***

**Here's another example of what can go wrong when young untrained, inexperienced workers get behind the wheel of a forklift:**

Tom, a young guy who had just been hired by a feed store, decided an hour into his first day on the job to use a forklift without authorization. He had to get some bales of hay for a customer, and apparently he didn't fancy hauling them by hand. And besides, the forklift was just sitting there with the keys in it.

Tom drove the forklift across the yard to where the hay was stacked. The hay bales were stacked seven bales high, so he raised the mast to get the top bale. With the mast raised high in the air, Tom backed the forklift over a rain gutter built into the asphalt yard. He lost control of the forklift and it overturned, pinning him underneath as he attempted to jump free.

*Tom died a few hours later in the hospital.*