

# NORTH DAKOTA FARM CHILDREN'S WORK CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FARMING OPERATION

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The contention that children are an economic liability in contemporary families is commonly heard today. Not only the general public, but family scholars seem to have concluded that children no longer contribute work efforts that have a significant impact on the family budget (Bernard, 1981; Bigner, 1979; Hoffman and Hoffman, 1973; Rice, 1983). Moreover, the cost of raising a child to 18 years of age has been reported to be approximately \$80,000 (Berger, 1983).

When considering the work role of children, it is important to note that these family scholars have based their conclusions on research conducted on families residing in urban areas. Farm children have traditionally worked at various meaningful tasks from a very early age (Stratton, 1981). Recent studies indicate that farm children continue to make significant work contributions (White and Brinkerhoff, 1981). Additionally, farm families are less likely than urban families to distinguish between the work of boys and girls, particularly in tasks outside the house.

## Purposes of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to explore the work contributions, as reported by their mothers, of North Dakota farm children under 20 years of age. A second purpose was to identify differences in the work contributions of the children according to their age and according to their mothers' work involvement in the farming operation, number of children in the family, educational level of mothers and fathers and age of mothers.

## The Sample

The data for this study were drawn from a larger study of 2000 randomly selected North Dakota farm women who were mailed several research instruments. A total of 755 usable instruments were returned. Two hundred sixty three of the women who returned the research instruments had children, all of whom were under the age of 20 years. Those women comprised the sample for this study.

The subjects' average age was 34 years. They had been married an average of 12 years and had an average of 13.6 years of formal education. Their husbands' average years of formal education was 12.9 years. Approximately 44 percent of the women were employed outside their homes.

## The Research Instrument

The questionnaire was designed specifically to elicit data for this study. In addition to biographic and demographic information, the women were asked if their children helped with farm and/or household chores. Subsequent questions regarded the amount of help their children provided.

## The Results

According to the mothers who participated in this study, many North Dakota farm children begin helping with farm and household work at an early age. An increasing number are involved in work as they get older, until in adolescence 100 percent are reported to be involved.

Twenty-three percent of the mothers reported their four-year-old children helped with farm chores, and 68 percent of children this age were reported to help with household chores. The majority of the mothers (54 percent) reported their seven-year-old children helped with farm work, while 100 percent of the seven-year-olds were reported to with household chores. The 100 percent involvement with household chores continued through age 12 years. At this age, the percentage of children reported to help with household work begins to drop, until at age 18, 85 percent are helping.

On the other hand, the percentage of children involved in farm work increases to 100 percent at age 11 years and continues at 100 percent through age 19.

## Amount of Help

As might be expected, younger children help with farm work less than do older children. Twenty-nine percent of the children 12 years and under were reported to help "very little", 50 percent helped "some", and 21 percent helped "a great deal". The majority (57 percent) of children between 13 and 16 years helped

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"some", 35 percent helped "a great deal", and 8 percent helped "very little". The majority (57 percent) of children 17 years and older helped a "great deal", and only 3 percent helped "very little".

A lower percentage of children at all ages were reported to help with housework "a great deal". Fourteen percent of the children 12 years or younger helped "a great deal", while 62 percent helped "some" and 24 percent helped "very little". In the 13-16 year old group, 22 percent helped "a great deal", 69 percent helped "some" and 9 percent helped "very little". Thirty-nine percent of the children 17 years or older were reported to help "a great deal", 55 percent helped "some", and 6 percent helped "very little".

### Characteristics of Mothers

Because 100 percent of the children 11 years and older were reported to help with farm chores, only mothers whose oldest child was 10 years or younger were studied to determine characteristics of those whose children helped and those whose children did not help. Chi-square and analysis of covariance test revealed the following differences.

Women who reported their children helped with farm work had 2.77 children compared to 1.75 children for those women whose off-spring did not help. Mothers who reported their children helping also had less education, 13.55 years compared to 14.14 years, than mothers whose children did not help. Their husbands' education was 12.55 years versus 13.79 years for their counterparts.

For all families with children 20 years or younger, the mothers' involvement with farm work did significantly affect the work contribution to their children. Only 55 percent of the women who did not operate farm equipment reported their children helped with farm work. A greater difference was found in the reported work contribution of children whose mothers cared for livestock and those who did not. Seventy-two percent of the women who cared for livestock reported their children helped with farm chores; only 56 percent of the women who did not care for livestock reported their children helped. Women's involvement in farm work did not significantly affect the children's help with housework.

### Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that North Dakota farm women perceive their children as contributing a significant amount of help with farm and household chores. It is interesting to note that 100 percent of the mothers reported that their adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 helped with farm chores. While this study did not ascertain the economic value of the work, the

results do not appear to support writers who argue that children no longer are an economic asset.

A larger percentage of young children help with household work that could be assumed less demanding of physical strength and less dangerous than farm chores. Help with household chores peaks with the 7-12-year-old group. Then, as the child reaches adolescence, and physical strength and endurance increases, they are more involved in farm chores.

Vast changes in family life have been proposed by the news media and scholarly research as more mothers enter the labor force. Findings in the present study indicate that mothers' employment did not affect the work contributions of the children. Generally, even though the mother is employed outside the home, she continues to have responsibility for the housework.

However, the mothers' work role on the farm did make a difference; a significantly higher percentage of children helped with farm chores whose mothers operated farm equipment and cared for livestock. This suggests that mothers serve as role models for farm work of their children.

The North Dakota farm children in this study appear to be contributing members of their family - to the work of their farming operations and their households. This is especially true of adolescents' contribution to the farm labor, seemingly dispelling the popular idea that teenagers, at least in North Dakota, are not economic assets to their families.

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