

Too often, a lark turns to tragedy

Rides on mowers lead many child amputations

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WHILE DRIVING NEAR MY house in Washington Twp. in late April, I saw a woman zipping around her yard on a lawn tractor. Attached to the tractor was a small trailer, just the right size for the boy, about 5 years old, who was enjoying the ride around the yard.

I assumed that the woman was simply giving the boy a pleasure ride. But when I slowed my car to take a closer look, I saw that there were grass trimmings flying out of the chute. The blades were in use. It put me in mind of an experience I had last summer.

In July, I drove to a small town in Mississippi just south of Memphis for a gathering of parents and children that I have been associated with as a mentor. There were about 200 of us staying at the Holiday Inn. The families were a cross-section of America. There were doctors, business people, farmers, laborers, single mothers and many, many children. What distinguished this group from most other groups of families on summer outings was most evident around the swimming pool, where carelessly discarded prostheses were nearly everywhere. Small plastic and steel legs and arms were dropped casually at poolside, while their young owners swam.

Most of the children in the pool were amputees.

In spite of the company, it took me a while to get past the reticence I always feel at a swimming pool, to strip off my T-shirt, revealing my own stump of a left arm, and dive in to play with the kids and give a little instruction and some encouragement.

After I got out of the water and as I was toweling off, I talked with a man about my own age who was the paternal grandfather of one of the boys in the pool. The boy was 7 years old and was missing his left arm, just below the elbow. The boy, his younger sister, their parents, and grandparents had all driven down to see what they might get out of such a gathering. By all appearances, they were very happy with their decision to be there.

The grandfather and I talked for an hour or so. Eventually, he said he had not had a good night's sleep since the boy had lost his arm, because the accident that had taken his grandson's limb was his fault. Several years back on a warm summer evening, he had been hurrying to get the lawn cut before dark. His then-4-year-old grandson, who was visiting, had asked for a ride on the mower.

"It only took a second. He fell off and his arm was gone. I have never forgiven myself, and I have never talked with the boy about it. Do you think I should? What should I say?"

Each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 15 children are killed in lawn-mower accidents. A Kansas City hospital reports that of the 10,000 children involved in reported mower accidents each year, 75 percent lose at least a finger or a toe; half lose one or both legs. In the vast majority of these cases, loving parents, grandparents or other adult relatives unwittingly allowed the accidents to happen.

I spent several days with these parents and children last summer. I watched the kids play, talked with parents and other mentors. I came away with feelings of hope, yet I felt a deep sadness. I never came up with an answer to the grandfather's questions. Although I assured him that as the boy grew older they would find a way to talk about the accident, I am not sure they ever will. There is not really much to say, after all.

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