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# Lawn Mower Safety

## Keep the kids away

BY BROBSON LUTZ M.D.



“You need to get the word out about lawn mower injuries. Summer is on the way,” said Dr. Katherine Faust as I was fishing for health topics a few months ago.

“Children end up with mangled fingers, hands, and feet. I saw my first lawn mower injury when I was in medical school at LSU. As a resident at Tulane, I saw many more. They are really nasty injuries.”

Dr. Faust has both New Orleans and hand surgery in her DNA. She was born in the hospital across the street from her now office on Napoleon Avenue. After medical school and an orthopedic residency, she left for specialty hand and upper extremity training with microvascular surgical techniques at Duke. Then she completed an additional fellowship in pediatric hand surgery in Atlanta before returning to New Orleans two years ago. Like daughter, like father, Dr. Donald Faust, is a hand surgeon with a reputation for tackling complex hand problems.

“Like my father, I find the hand an extremely interesting appendage. Hands are subject to a variety of congenital, medical, and traumatic problems. I like to craft ways that allow people to get back some functions they may have lost,” said Dr. Faust when I asked her how she ended up in her father’s specialty. “I like making treatment

decisions with patients that allow them to resume sports, hobbies, and other recreational activities.”

Nationwide over 17,000 children sustain lawnmower injuries each year including 75 or so deaths. Toddlers 1 to 3 years old and teenagers are most at risk. Gunshot wounds and summer drownings get more press, but New Orleans homes probably harbor more lawn mowers than guns and swimming pools. In cooler climates, the lawn mower hibernates for winter, but in New Orleans grass cutting can be a year around chore. The lawn mower is a below the radar childhood hazard.

Children’s Hospital sees one to two children a month with serious lawn mower related injuries according to Dr. Faust. These injuries are more commonly emergency referrals from rural areas, but lawn mower injuries from burns to amputations are not uncommon in the metropolitan New Orleans area.

“Last summer a parent in rural Louisiana was operating a riding lawn mower with a small child in lap. The mower hit a bump, and the child fell off with a hand going under the mower causing a near-amputation. Only skin was holding three of her fingers to the hand. She was rushed to a local hospital which arranged for her to be helicoptered to Children’s Hospital here in New Orleans,” said Faust.

The child had emergency surgery to clean the wound and reattach two fingers followed by multiple follow-up surgeries. Dr. Faust and her team were able to reattach tendons and save the girl’s middle and index fingers. Recovery included extensive hand therapy. Besides missing a ring finger, the child has at least a mostly functioning hand.

“These lawn mower injuries are dirty wounds involving twisted and mangled tissues. Blood vessels are not cleanly cut like say knife wounds. These injuries usually involved long hospitalizations, antibiotics to fight infections, and multiple returns to the operating room for wound washouts and staged repairs.

“The worst mower injury I have seen was a 9-year-old boy whose foot was mangled. It was so infected that his leg had to be amputated,” Dr. Faust said.

Riding mowers are more dangerous than walk-behind models. Children should never be passengers on mowers. The Pediatric Orthopedic Society compares the rotating blade of a power lawn mower to a 0.357 Magnum gun. For their specific recommendations and commentary, check out [orthokids.org/Safety/Lawnmower-Safety](http://orthokids.org/Safety/Lawnmower-Safety).

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