Young Workers and Health & Safety: What UK Employers Must Do

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Why Young Workers Need Special Consideration

Taking on a school leaver, apprentice or work experience student can be a genuine asset to your business, but if you employ anyone under 18 you take on legal duties that go beyond your standard health and safety arrangements. Young workers can be at greater risk of harm, and the reasons are well understood: limited experience of real work environments, a tendency to take risks without recognising them, unfamiliarity with machinery and substances, and a reluctance to question an instruction or admit they do not understand.

None of this is a reason to avoid employing young people. It is a reason to put the right controls in place before they start, rather than discovering gaps after something has gone wrong.

What the Law Requires

The core legal duty sits in the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. Regulation 19 requires every employer to protect young persons from risks arising from their lack of experience, their lack of awareness of existing or potential risks, and the fact that they have not yet fully matured. Regulation 3 also requires you to assess the risks before a young person starts work, taking particular account of those factors. This applies to every worker under 18, not just those on formal work experience placements.

The Working Time Regulations 1998 add further restrictions. Workers aged 16 or 17 generally cannot work more than eight hours a day or 40 hours a week, and are entitled to a 30 minute rest break if they work more than four and a half hours, at least 12 hours' rest between working days, and two days off each week. Night work is restricted, with limited exceptions set out in the regulations. The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 places the same general duties on you towards young workers as towards other employees, and sector specific rules on machinery, hazardous substances, manual handling and noise apply in full.

The Young Person Risk Assessment: What It Must Cover

Regulation 3(5) sets out what your young person risk assessment must take particular account of. These include the young person's inexperience, lack of awareness of risk and immaturity; the layout of the workplace and workstation; exposure to physical, biological and chemical agents; the work equipment they will use and how it is handled; the organisation of processes and activities; and the health and safety training they will receive.

This has to be a genuine assessment of the actual tasks the young person will do, not a copy of your general risk assessment with a new date on it. Think through each task, identify the hazards, and decide whether your existing controls are enough given the person's age and lack of experience. Often they will not be, so add measures such as closer supervision, restricted access to certain equipment, or a longer and more structured induction. Review the assessment whenever the young person's duties change, and it is sensible to check it again within the first few weeks, since early assumptions about what someone can manage often need revising once you see them at work.

Prohibited and Restricted Work

Regulation 19 also restricts certain work for young people. Employers must not give a young person work that is beyond their physical or psychological capacity, that involves harmful exposure to agents that are toxic, cause cancer or chronically affect health, that involves harmful radiation, that carries accident risks a young person is unlikely to recognise because of inexperience, or that risks health through extreme cold, heat, noise or vibration. The regulation allows some of this work for those above compulsory school age where it is necessary for their training, they are supervised by a competent person, and the risk is reduced to the lowest level reasonably practicable.

This matters particularly in construction and manufacturing and engineering, where apprentices are often keen to get hands on with plant, tools or chemicals before they are ready for it. If you are unsure whether a task is restricted, get proper advice before the young person goes near it, rather than assuming it will be fine because an experienced colleague is nearby.

Supervision, Induction and Training

Supervision is one of the most effective controls available to you. A properly supervised young worker is far less likely to improvise, take a shortcut or put themselves in a position they are not equipped to handle. Supervision does not mean standing over them all day, but it does mean

regular check-ins, a clear named person to go to, and an experienced colleague who understands they carry real responsibility for that young person's safety.

Induction needs to cover more than fire exits and the first aid box. Young workers need to understand the specific hazards of their actual working environment, what protective equipment is required and why, how to report a concern without feeling awkward, and who to ask when they are unsure. Deliver the induction in stages rather than one long session, and check understanding by asking questions rather than simply collecting a signature.

Formal training can reinforce the induction. Manual Handling Awareness and COSHH Awareness courses give young workers a proper grounding before they are exposed to lifting tasks or substances. Integral Safety is an IOSH approved training provider and runs both of these courses, alongside Fire Awareness training, which suits any young worker new to a workplace.

Parental Notification and Working Time Records

If you are taking on a child of compulsory school age for a work experience placement, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations require you to give their parent information about the risks identified by your assessment and the control measures in place before the placement starts. This is a legal requirement, not a courtesy, and many employers who are not used to hosting school placements are unaware of it.

You should also keep records that show you have met the working time limits for under 18s, including daily and weekly hours, rest breaks taken, and any night work exceptions applied. In practice your rota or timesheet system needs to flag workers under 18 distinctly, rather than relying on a manager remembering their date of birth. Keep the young person risk assessment, the induction checklist and the working time records together in one file for each young worker, and retain them for as long as the employment lasts plus a reasonable period afterwards.

Common Mistakes with Young Workers

The same failings come up repeatedly: businesses rely on a general risk assessment instead of a specific young person assessment; young workers are given access to machinery or substances that should be restricted, without enough supervision; induction is delivered too fast or relies too heavily on written material; the risk assessment is never revisited as the role develops; and working time restrictions are overlooked because nobody flagged the worker's age in the rota system.

If your business regularly takes on apprentices, work experience students or younger part-time staff, treat young worker safety as a standing procedure with a template risk assessment, a documented induction process and a clear supervision plan, rather than something worked out fresh each time someone new arrives.

- Carry out a task-specific risk assessment for every worker under 18 before they start
- Check whether any part of their role falls into a prohibited or restricted category
- Put a named supervisor in place and set a realistic, staged induction
- Flag under-18 workers in your rota system so working time limits are never missed

- Notify parents of school-age work experience placements before the placement begins
- Keep the assessment, induction record and working time log together and review them when duties change

Integral Safety supports employers across Coalville and the wider East Midlands with this kind of groundwork, from reviewing young person risk assessments to advising on supervision arrangements and delivering the training that gives new starters a solid foundation. If you would like help getting your arrangements right before your next apprentice or work experience student arrives, contact us today.

Talk to Integral Safety Ltd

We are health and safety consultants based in Coalville, Leicestershire, working with businesses across the East Midlands. If anything in this guide applies to your workplace, we can help.

Phone	01530 382 150 or 01664 400 450
Email	info@integralsafetyltd.co.uk
Website	integralsafetyltd.co.uk

This guide is general information about UK health and safety law and practice, correct as at 11 November 2026. It is not advice on your particular circumstances. The latest version is at https://integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/young-workers-health-and-safety-employer-duties-uk.