

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Are our kids ready for weaning?

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska



Not long ago, I found myself on a small ridge gazing across a beautiful high-country pasture where

our cattle grazed contentedly. As I watched the calves play, I began to think about the timeline for their weaning. As part of our grazing rotation, they would spend between nine and 19 days in new pastures throughout the summer and early days of autumn before returning to the headquarters to prepare for weaning.

Riding next to me that day was my 25-year-old son. It occurred to me that he, too, had experienced a journey from “calfhood to adulthood,” having transitioned through his own set of metaphorical pastures that ultimately led him to independence.

Weaning, the process of transitioning the young from the protective care of a parent into a more autonomous state of existence, is a significant period of transition accompanied by some level of stress for both the offspring and the parent. An effective weaning protocol sets individuals up for success in the future, while a poorly implemented process may negatively affect the long-term performance of the individuals in question.

Weaning calves

In the case of cattle, the transition of calves from the care of their dams involves teaching calves to drink from a tank and eat from a bunk, building their immune system, and helping them lose their fear of humans and other novel stimuli. Reducing the stress on both cows and calves is critical to assuring overall productivity and health. The application of a sound herd vaccination program, the practice

of effective stockmanship and other effective management protocols all play a role in achieving a smooth transition through the weaning process.

Weaning children

But what about the transition of human beings from childhood to adulthood?

I couldn't help but consider that question as I thought about Sean and the hundreds upon hundreds of newly weaned freshmen college students I have encountered during the past three decades. What are the best practices — the keys — that lead to successful transition into university and, ultimately, adult life?

As I have examined those young people who have best navigated the transition, there are five skill sets and core competencies needed for independent living:

1. Experience and overcome failure. Dealing with disappointment and the consequences of poor choices, and facing the reality that every swing of the bat doesn't produce a hit are skills that have been delayed, if not lost, in far too many young people.

Character, wisdom, resilience and internal fortitude are born from adversity and mistakes. Protecting young people from these experiences limits them and constrains their capacity to effectively solve problems. Knowing how to deal with hardship is key to success for young adults.

2. Build relationships and develop skills to connect with people outside your comfort zone. This of course means that



developing experience in face-to-face communication and even phone conversations is important.

While the age of technology may enable communication on some levels, the virtual world is more likely to trap young people into the mindless cycle

of gaming, instant gratification and communication without empathy. Relationship building goes far beyond email and social media when learning to deal with folks from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. There is power in a handwritten thank-you note, a professional follow-up phone call, and in having superior conversation skills. These skills should be developed as early as possible.

3. Cultivate curiosity while developing the ability to weigh and compare the validity and value of new information.

Learning to connect the dots is critical to becoming a systems thinker and a capable problem solver. Problem-solving is rooted in struggle and experimentation that makes Point 1 even more important. In too many cases, learning has become a rote activity driven by

an unhealthy focus on grade-point average.

4. Develop healthy habits relative to diet, exercise, sleep, money management, interpersonal relationships and self-awareness.

5. Standing strong on one's core values without anger is a hallmark of maturity. Those who have been overly protected from criticism and probing questions about belief systems tend to struggle in the social arena. Conducting a civil discourse is rapidly becoming a lost art, and its demise is equally as damaging as the most virulent of pathogens.

Preparing and facilitating the transitions that are part of the weaning process are critical for success in the cattle business. The success of our republic lies in our ability to transition young people into engaged and dedicated citizens. |

Editor's note: In “Outside the Box,” a regular, separate column in both the *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, author Tom Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching. Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he holds the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship.