

The word “risk” is defined as the possibility that something unpleasant or unwelcome will happen as a result of a particular action. However, when we think about teens, taking risks is more complex. Parents often think of risky behaviors as underage drinking, using drugs, or early sexual involvement. Parents also need to remember that risk-taking can be both negative and positive. Teens can learn and grow from taking risks. Much will depend on the “when, where, and what” of the risks in which teens might participate.

A different view of risk-taking

Risk-taking can be thought of not only as experiences with potentially negative consequences, but also those leading to healthy outcomes. To help accomplish that, risk-taking can be viewed as “exploration” which is a normal and healthy part of growing up.

Teens can experience risk by exploring a new activity at school, trying a new sport, learning to play a musical instrument, taking a position of leadership in a youth organization, or getting to know someone new. When this kind of healthy exploration occurs in a healthy, supervised, and supportive atmosphere, it can help teens build confidence, learn to trust their own judgment, and learn to deal with disappointment and frustration. Exploration can also help teens learn to interact with peers, make decisions that fit their values and knowledge of what is right, and figure out more about themselves.

In other words, healthy exploration gives teens the chance to experience “risk” in a positive, supportive setting which can lead to positive outcomes – without the long term and potentially dangerous consequences associated with risky-behaviors such as riding with someone who has been drinking or trying drugs.



Teens make decisions differently than adults

Risk-taking cannot be talked about without discussing decision making. As teens consider any decision, whether it is about a potentially risky behavior or something we might consider healthy exploration, they will use a decision-making process, but one that is different from adults. Teen decision-making will include:

- Weighing both the benefits and consequences of choices.
- Noticing from their own experiences and the experiences of their peers that participation in many risky behaviors does not often lead to negative consequences.
- Considering what their peers are saying or doing. Sometimes this might mean acting in a way they know isn't right but gains them approval or acceptance from peers.
- Overestimating their ability to identify and avoid a potentially dangerous situation. Even when they weigh the pros and cons, they might think “I won't get caught the first time” or “Nothing bad will happen to me. It only happens to other people.”

Every teen is an individual when it comes to choices

As teens make choices, it is important to remember that age, maturity level, emotions, and past experiences all make a difference. Other things that impact teens decisions are:

- Influence from parents, family, and peers.
- Personality characteristics and interpersonal skills.
- Quality and quantity of information about a particular choice.

What parents can do

Parents are key in supporting teens as they explore new ideas, try something they are interested in, or connect with a different group of friends. Parents need to:

- Be involved in their teen's everyday life.
- Talk about core family values – share your own values with your teen and ask teens about theirs.
- Encourage their teen's interests.
- Help teens find opportunities to explore their interests.
- Assist teens with learning how to think through decisions.
- Model decision making skills.
- Help teens think about how their decision could affect not only themselves but others, in the short- and long-term.

Teens need community support

Many parts of the community including neighborhoods, schools, youth organizations, and faith based institutions have a huge role in providing opportunities for youth for healthy exploration in the supervised and supportive atmosphere described here. It is vital to make sure all teens have opportunities that meet their needs and interests.

Where you can go for more information:

Families with Teens – University of Minnesota Extension
www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/

Teen Talk Fact Sheet: But Everybody's Doin' It... – University of Minnesota Extension

www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/fact-sheets/teen-talk-everybody.pdf

Club Drugs

www.clubdrugs.org

PAUSE

www.fox.com/PAUSE/

Parents: The Anti-Drug

www.theantidrug.com

Talk with Your Kids

<http://talkingwithkids.org>

You may also want to look at:

Ponton, L. E. (1997). *The romance of risk: Why teenagers do the things they do*. New York: Basic Books.

Steinberg, L. (2011). *You and your adolescent: The essential guide for ages 10-25*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Strauch, B. (2003). *The primal teen: What the new discoveries about the teenage brain tell us about our kids*. New York: Random House.

Walsh, D. (2004). *Why do they act that way? A survival guide to the adolescent brain for you and your teen*. New York: Free Press.