

Teenage risk-taking: how to handle it

Taking risks is a normal and common part of adolescence. There are things you can do to help your child stay safe – and ease your own anxiety.

Why teenagers take risks

Although it can be stressful for parents, adolescence and risk-taking go hand in hand. This is because teenagers need to explore their own limits and abilities, as well as the boundaries you set. It's part of their path to becoming independent young adults.

Also, the parts of the [teenage brain](#) responsible for impulse control don't fully mature until about age 25. This means teenagers are more likely to make impulsive, emotional decisions without thinking through the consequences.

And teenagers want to be accepted by their peers. Some teenagers take risks because of peer pressure.

Common teenage risk-taking behaviours that can cause parents concern include:

- fighting
- [truancy](#)
- risky sexual behaviour
- [alcohol use](#)
- illegal substance use (mainly smoking marijuana)
- tobacco smoking
- dangerous driving
- illegal activities like trespassing or vandalism.



did you know

One study found that teenagers who like heavy metal music scored higher on sensation-seeking. There might be a reason why your teenager likes both loud music and thrill rides!



Risk-taking is an important way for teenagers to learn about themselves. It can include less concerning behaviours, such as trying new tricks at the skate park, or expressing an unpopular opinion. It peaks at around 15 to 16 years and tends to tail off by early adulthood.

Reducing risk-taking

Knowing that it's normal doesn't make teenage risk-taking any easier to live with. Here are some ideas to limit risk-taking and keep your child safer:

- Help your child learn to assess risk. You can talk about other people's behaviour and its consequences (for instance, in movies or on the news). For example, 'If he hadn't been speeding, he wouldn't have lost his licence. Now he's going to lose his job as well'.
- Work out some agreed ground rules with your child. Explain to her that your role is to keep her safe, and her job is to experiment, so you need to find a compromise between the two. Decide together on what the consequences should be if the rules are broken. You'll need to be flexible and adapt the ground rules as your child grows and shows she is ready for more responsibility.
- Talk about values – the earlier the better. Knowing what's important to your family will help your child develop a sense of responsibility and personal values.
- Keep an eye on your child. Knowing who he is with and where he is can help you prevent some risk-taking behaviour.
- Keep the lines of communication open. Try to stay connected to your child. Strong connections with parents reduce the chance of risky teenage sexual behaviour, for example.
- Be a good role model. Teenagers are guided by how their parents behave. If your child sees you applying double standards – from speeding to excessive drinking or aggressive behaviour – she might not respect your rules.
- Encourage a wide social network . You probably can't stop your child from being friends with a particular person or group – but you can give him the chance to make other friends through sport, church or family activities. Make your child's friends welcome in your home – you'll know where he is at least some of the time.
- Give teenagers a way out . If your child feels pressured to take risks to fit in, you could help her think of ways to opt out without losing credibility. For example, she could tell her friends that smoking gives her asthma. Let her know she can send you a text message anytime she needs to be picked up, without worrying that you'll be angry.

Encouraging 'safe' risk-taking

Teenagers need to take some risks to learn more about themselves and test out their abilities. This means that wrapping them in cotton wool is likely to backfire.

Instead, try channelling your child's risk-taking tendencies into safer and more constructive activities. Adrenaline-charged sports like rock-climbing, martial arts, canoeing or mountain biking can supply plenty of thrills. Attention-seekers might find they love the 'rush' of performing in drama or creative arts.

Another strategy is to give teenagers autonomy and independence in some areas, so that they can explore their freedom without resorting to rebellion.



For example, you might not like it if your teenager chooses blue hair or dresses in ripped clothing, but these are safe ways to experiment. For more information, read our article on [shifting responsibility to your child](#).

Getting support

Risk-taking is a fairly normal part of adolescence, and most teenagers will not take it to the extreme.

If your child occasionally stays out past curfew, you might not worry too much. But if he regularly does things with dangerous consequences – like using drugs, getting into fights, drinking or breaking the law – consider seeking help and support. Also seek help if you're worried that your child's behaviour is self-destructive or might be a sign of a deeper problem.

The best place to start is to ask your family GP for a referral to a psychologist or other mental health professional.

If you're having a hard time talking with your child about risk-taking, it might help to ask a relative or trusted family friend to broach the subject. Some teenagers find it hard to talk about sensitive issues like sex and drug use with their parents, but they might be willing to talk to somebody else. You could also ask your child's school counsellor for advice.

More information about teenage risk-taking

Risk-taking behaviours vary according to gender. Boys are more likely to experiment with fighting and skipping school. They also tend to drink more than girls. Girls have slightly higher rates of smoking. They are more likely than boys to binge-drink.

Some teenagers are more likely to behave in risky ways. Research suggests this might be because they are 'sensation-seekers'. That is, they enjoy the 'rush' of adventure and want new and exciting experiences.

Other teenagers might see risk differently from their parents. Therefore, they don't see any real danger in what they're doing. When teenagers think their actions will have negative consequences, they do think more carefully about acting (although it's not certain whether they actually change their behaviour).

Some teenagers also take risks because of peer pressure. They want to be accepted, so they do what is considered 'normal'. Some teenagers want to perform, impress, show off or be different. In fact, risk-taking among teenagers doubles when peers are around.

Rated ★★★★★ (8 ratings)

More to explore

- Mental health and wellbeing in adolescence: an overview
- Peer pressure and teenagers
- Teenage friendships
- Scenes, trends and fashions
- Alcohol and other drugs in adolescence: how to help
- Tricky conversations

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