

# Risky Business

Can student leaders do anything about their peers' attraction to taking chances?

## Teenagers are reckless.

Take your group on a trip and you'll see several occasions when you will have to nudge them back from risky behavior.

But risky behavior overall is serious—and a growing problem. Risk taking is the leading cause of death among teens, with nearly half their deaths (16,000 per year) unintentional and likely the result of risky behavior, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The most serious threats to the health and safety of adolescents and young adults are preventable. They result from such risk-taking behaviors as fighting, substance abuse, suicide, and sexual activity. Each year, 1,700 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die from alcohol-related injuries, including motor vehicle crashes.

In a recent issue of *Developmental Review*, Laurence Steinberg of Temple University looked at “the high rate of risky behavior among adolescents relative to adults.”

He says “that risk-taking increases between childhood and adolescence (as) a result of changes around the time of puberty in the brain's socio-emotional system that lead to increased reward-seeking, especially in the presence of peers.”

Risk-taking declines, according to Steinberg, “between adolescence and adulthood because of changes in the brain's cognitive control system—changes which improve individuals' capacity for self-regulation.” These changes occur within the prefrontal cortex and its connections to other brain regions, and this maturation process is not complete until the mid-20s.

We understand teens on three levels—physical maturity, intellectual maturity, and emotional maturity. Physical maturity takes place in early teens, followed by rapid intellectual maturity, which peaks at around 16 to 17 years of age, while emotional maturity and increased self-regulation occurs around the mid-20s, Steinberg says.

During the period when physical maturity is complete and intellectual maturity is peaking, there is an accompanying change in the brain that increases reward seeking and the likelihood of risk-taking behavior.

Steinberg notes that this reward seeking occurs early and is abrupt in onset, while its opposite, the increase in self-regulatory competence occurs gradually and is not complete until the mid-20s.

In another study in the journal of the Public Library of Science, a team led by psychiatrist Gregory Berns of Emory University in Atlanta shows that adolescents who engage in more dangerous activities have white-matter pathways that appear more mature than those of risk-averse youths.

White matter is essentially the brain's wiring, according to *Time* magazine—the neural strands that connect the various gray-matter regions, where the actual nerve cells reside, that are otherwise independent of one another. Maturation of white matter is important because it increases the brain's processing speed; nerve impulses travel faster in mature white matter.

This article in *Time* suggests that we should examine the idea that teens just make dumb decisions because their brains are immature. The authors suggest that some risk taking among adolescents is evidence that they are trying out more adultlike roles.

Another possible explanation is that some teenagers whose brains develop more quickly than others become uncomfortable with the gap between their biological capabilities and the social rules they must follow.

What your student leaders can do:

- Make students aware of risky behaviors and the reasons they might participate in dangerous activities. Run a “Be smart” campaign that attempts to portray risky actions as not just dangerous but silly. Provide data.
- Have community emergency personnel come in to talk about how often emergency calls and serious injury and death are a result of taking chances.
- Get adults in the school to report once a day on the announcements about a risky behavior that affected their lives—their own dangerous action that almost cost a life, or the death of someone they know that was caused by risky behavior. ■