



PROMOTING POSITIVE ADOLESCENT HEALTH BEHAVIORS AND OUTCOMES

Thriving in the 21st Century

Adolescence is a period of immense growth, learning, exploration, and opportunity during which youth develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will help them thrive throughout life. While most youth traverse adolescence without incident, some need additional support to promote their optimal health. Sometimes such support comes in the form of prevention or intervention programs designed to encourage healthy behaviors that will follow the adolescent through adulthood.

In this report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, the expert committee uses an optimal health framework to (1) identify core components of risk-behavior prevention programs that can be used to improve a variety of adolescent health outcomes, and (2) develop evidence-based recommendations for research and the effective implementation of federal programming initiatives focused on adolescent health.

Reframing Adolescent Risk: Healthy and Unhealthy Risk Taking

Adolescence has long been considered a period when teens are especially susceptible to engaging in unhealthy risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, unprotected sex, and violence. However, “risk” is not confined to illegal or unsafe behaviors. Instead of conceptualizing all risk taking as negative, it is important to acknowledge its developmental purpose and provide opportunities for adolescents to take healthy risks that will help them learn, grow, and thrive.

In this brief, we first explain why adolescents take risks. Next, we differentiate between healthy and unhealthy risks. Finally, we describe the major contextual influences on adolescent risk taking and how these influences can be protective against unhealthy risks and promote positive, healthy risks.

Examples of Healthy and Unhealthy Risks

Healthy

- Participating in a team sport
- Trying a new food
- Reaching out for help
- Apologizing for a mistake
- Public speaking
- Asking someone out on a date
- Enrolling in a challenging course
- Applying knowledge to a new situation
- Experimenting with different values systems and identities
- Volunteering for a good cause

Unhealthy

- Driving under the influence of alcohol
- Engaging in sexual intercourse without protection
- Using coercion
- Lying
- Provoking a physical fight
- Bullying or cyberbullying
- Cheating on a test
- Skipping school
- Engaging in behaviors that go against one's ethical code
- Doing something because of peer pressure rather than personal beliefs

Why Do Adolescents Take Risks?

Risky behaviors during adolescence reflect a gap between a teen's biological and social maturity.

Hormonal changes that occur during puberty have an impact on different areas of the brain. The part that is responsible for thrill seeking and sensitivity to rewards develops more quickly, while the part of the brain that is responsible for cognitive control and critical thinking matures more slowly. It is the competition between these two areas of the brain that affect adolescents' ability to make decisions and weigh their benefits and costs.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Risk Taking

Healthy risk taking is a normal and necessary part of adolescent identity development, providing adolescents with opportunities to explore their environments, practice decision-making skills, and develop autonomy. These behaviors are risky because of the uncertainty of their potential outcomes rather than the severity of their potential costs.

Taking healthy risks also allows adolescents to examine the values, morals, and beliefs they were taught in order to develop their own identities. Likewise, healthy risk taking gives adolescents the chance to practice making decisions; test out their new problem-solving skills; and develop realistic assessments of themselves, other people, and the world around them.

In contrast, **unhealthy risk taking** is often illegal or dangerous, and can lead to health outcomes that delay or harm adolescent development. Not all adolescents engage in these behaviors often, although many experiment with them. In addition, adolescents at highest risk for negative outcomes often engage in multiple unhealthy risk behaviors, such as drug or alcohol use and unprotected sexual intercourse.

Given that there are both healthy and unhealthy risks, strategies aimed at the "discontinuation of risk" only apply to those unhealthy risk behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, unprotected sex) that can lead to negative health outcomes (e.g., diseases, unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted

infections). Instead, adults who live and work with youth can provide guidance in decision making and encourage adolescents to engage in less dangerous and more constructive risks.

Context Matters: Influences on Risk Taking

While the biological changes that take place during adolescence are the same for most teens, the diverse contexts in which these changes take place—including parents and family, peers, schools, communities—can have different impacts on adolescent risk-taking behaviors.

Parents and Family



Adolescents' increasing independence from their parents during this period requires a balance of both trust and behavioral monitoring. Parenting styles characterized by setting high expectations for behavior, establishing clear family rules, applying fair and consistent discipline, and engaging in age-appropriate supervision and monitoring can be protective against unhealthy risk-taking behaviors. Family connectedness, which refers to feelings of warmth, love, caring, and communication, is also a major protective factor against unhealthy risk taking.

For all youth, but particularly those who may not have a strong role model at home, close and positive relationships with caring adults outside of the family, such as teachers or coaches, can similarly protect against unhealthy risk-taking behaviors.

Peers



Peers serve as adolescents' primary source of information about social norms, and this influence can have both positive and negative effects on risk taking. For instance, teenagers who believe that their peers disapprove of having sex are less likely to become sexually active, whereas teenagers who believe their peers are having sex are more likely to become sexually active. Adolescents may also engage in both healthy and unhealthy risks in order to win peer approval, or at the very least to avoid peer rejection.

Schools



School connectedness and positive school climate are important protective factors for a range of unhealthy risk behaviors. Schools can foster school connectedness and positive school climate by establishing positive norms, providing clear expectations for behavior, and fostering physical and psychological safety for all students.

Adolescents need opportunities to engage as learners, leaders, team members, and workers. For this reason, in-school or after-school programs can offer healthy alternatives to unhealthy risk behavior. In addition, such programs and interventions delivered in and after school may be specifically oriented toward the prevention or reduction of unhealthy risk taking, as in the case of drug prevention and sexual education.

Communities



Neighborhood characteristics can shape adolescent risk taking. Neighborhood or community risk factors for unhealthy adolescent risk behaviors include the availability of drugs or firearms and extreme poverty. On the other hand, neighborhood resources and opportunities can protect against unhealthy risk taking by increasing structures and supports.

Local, state, and federal governments can take additional measures to discourage unhealthy risk behaviors among adolescents. One successful example is graduated driver's licensing laws, which have helped to reduce the number of car accidents involving teens. Similar legislative measures, such as raising the minimum age for smoking and drinking and providing free and easier access to contraception, can also help prevent unhealthy adolescent risk taking.

For More Information . . . This Issue Brief was prepared by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families based on the Consensus Study Report, *Promoting Positive Adolescent Health Behaviors and Outcomes: Thriving in the 21st Century* (2020). The study was sponsored by the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nationalacademies.org/adolescent-health>.

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