

Subtopic 3: When a Situation Might Turn into a Negative Risky Situation

Some situations can quickly turn into a **risky** situation, even if they were not risky a few minutes earlier. Let's analyze situations to identify why they might turn into a risky situations.

Research suggests that because teens are often in social situations, the possibility for making risky decisions increases due to its more emotional laden context. It is also easier to experiment and explore one's boundaries during free/leisure time, which often involves risk taking (both positive and negative). For example, teens can be very supportive in encouraging someone to try a new activity or take on a leadership role that might seem risky for that person.

Therefore, it is important to think about when a situation might turn risky with negative consequences. This will help you think ahead and prepare to make good decisions about what you do in free time and other time.

Activity 2: Analyzing When a Situation Might Turn Risky

Distribute the following scenarios. Discuss:

- Is this a risky situation? Why or why not? What kinds of risk are involved?
- What could happen to make it negative? (e.g., vaping, too much beer, loosing control, not being able to communication your feelings)
- What kind of risk would that be? Personal? Physical? Emotional? Positive vs. Negative?
- What could you do to remover yourself from the situation, or change the situation to avoid negative consequences?
- What are other risky situations you might find yourself in?
- Why are they risky?
- Sometimes when we are impulsive and don't think through options, we get into trouble.

Scenarios (or design your own)

1. Hanging out alone late at night with girlfriend or boyfriend.
2. Having nothing to do, just sitting around talking under a tree.
3. You are sitting at home and no one is inside. Everyone is out visiting.

4. Your friends are trying to figure out what to do for some fun. You think they are going to find some beer, but right now you are all just sitting around talking.
5. You are sitting in class and no one is volunteering to answer a question, but you know the answer.
6. You and your friends are just talking, and another group of kids your age walks by.

If you are not prepared to think about how a situation can turn risky, you can't avoid a negative risk. In some situations, there are different risks that compete with each other. For example, you can risk parental disapproval and you can risk your peers not liking you. So you have to make a decision what to do and manage peer pressure.

You have to weigh those kinds of risk against each other, and make the right decision. What is the most important consequence in the short term and long term?

Summarize

Reasonable risk-taking behavior allows teens to develop skills in making choices, being independent, and taking responsibility for their actions. It allows them to understand themselves better. Also, exploring one's boundaries and identity are important things for teens to do. Risk taking can be very healthy, provide benefits, and contribute to one's development.

On the other hand, teens often misjudge not only how much risk a situation holds, but that they will be able to avoid negative consequences of they go along with the risk. It is especially true when teens are hanging out with their friends. An important skill is to learn to analyze the situation and be aware of factors that might turn the situation from a positive situation to one with negative consequences.

Notes for Teachers

Research suggests:

Adolescents understand the concept of risk. They typically don't underestimate risk, they tend to overestimate. But they generally have an optimistic bias, thinking they protect themselves more than their peers.

Hormones (testosterone and oxytocin) increase empathy and trust for their in group and heighten the need for affiliation and social success. Thus, especially young teens, are more

likely to take risks when in the presence of their peers. You can see by the graph that the presence of peers significantly increases the likelihood of making a risky decision.

Because of brain development, teens are vulnerable to intense emotions and misinterpretation of others' intentions and emotions.

Teen brains are also biased toward sensation seeking, which can be both positive and negative, and the free time context offers many opportunities for sensation seeking.

These factors contribute to why substance use starts for most people during their teenage years. Teens are much more likely decide how to act in a situation or to express a preference for something faster than adults would in a similar situation. Mature decision makers have had more experience and pay attention to relevant information and exclude extraneous other things going on.

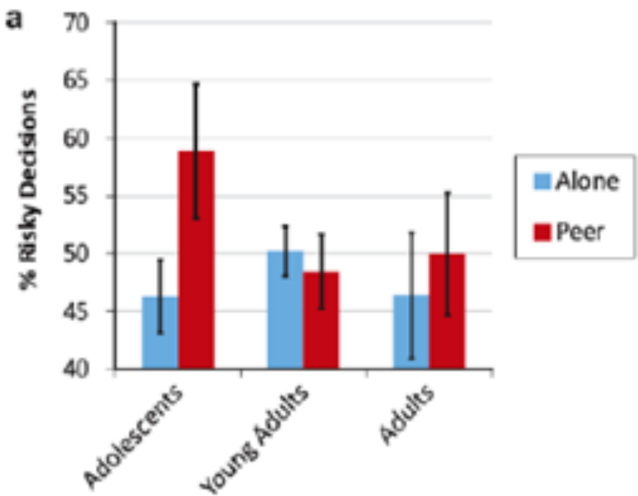
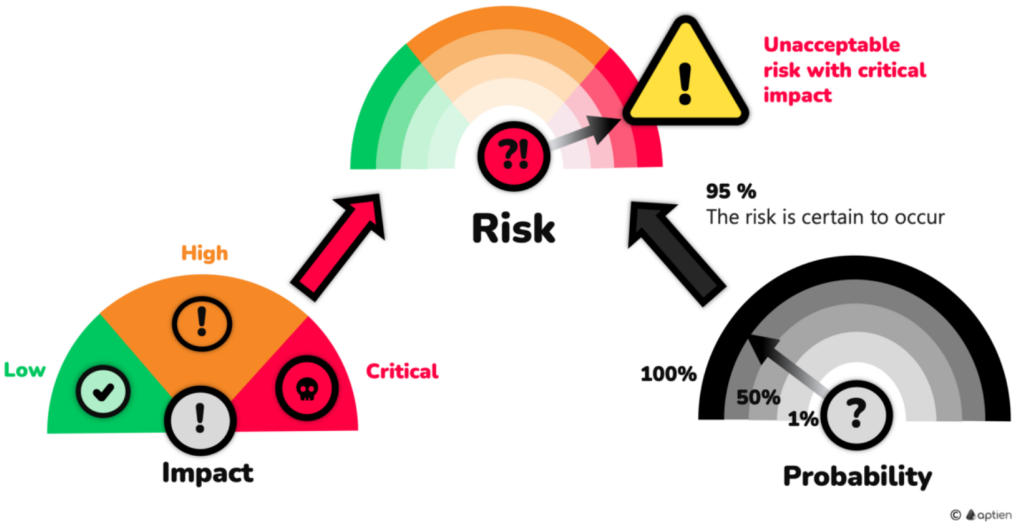
“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.”

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

Research has shown that bombarding teens with risk information won’t help them make better decisions, they will just know more. So, it is not very effective just to try to improve their accuracy of risk perception. Practice and discussing emotional salience work better. Learning how to think about risk and reward is helpful.

An aspect of brain development in teens pertinent to Live TimeWise is that goal directed behavior increasingly becomes important, which dovetails nicely with providing opportunities to make decisions and learn skills by scaffolding experiences so that teens have more and more responsibility for planning and making decisions. It is also a ripe time for teens to develop passions that will persist into adulthood.

What is a Risk



Why Do Adolescents Really Take Risks?

- + Brain maturation is not yet complete
 - + Driven by reward
 - + Hormones & early puberty
 - + Peer effects
 - + The pain of social exclusion
 - + Behavioral contributions
- = a HUGE Evolutionary Advantage for human survival (but not an advantage for individuals)
- ▶ In other words, the adolescent brain isn't an accident – rather, it's a perfect evolutionary design

