



TIMEWISE, 2ND EDITION MIDDLE SCHOOL



Session 9: Risk Taking in Leisure: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Risk taking is a very important part of adolescence. Many think that risk taking is negative, but there are many positive benefits from positive risk taking. The problem is that it is often challenging for young teens to differentiate between the two. It is hard for them to assess what might be a positive risk or a negative risk, which leads to poor or ineffective decision making.

Risk taking occurs throughout the day, and especially during free time because it is a “freer” context. Furthermore, because teens are often in social situations, the possibility for making risky decisions increases. It is also easier to experiment and explore one’s boundaries during free/leisure time.

For more information on risk taking and adolescent brain development, see the teacher notes at the end of this session. In addition, contact Healthy Lamoille Valley for additional resources on youth substance misuse prevention.

Student Goals

1. Identify and understand positive and negative risk taking in leisure.
2. Learn to identify when activities might turn into negative risk.
3. Understand the influence of being in a social situation to take a risk, both positive and negative.

Students Will Think About

1. In general, the types of risks they like to take that give them positive challenges and benefits.
2. How what they do in leisure time can provide them with positive risks.
3. What kind of risk taker they are.
4. How they can analyze a situation and be aware when it might turn into a negative risky one.

Subtopics

1. Defining risk, positive and negative risk, and risk taking
2. Risk taking in leisure time
3. Knowing when a situation might turn risky

Activity

1. Identify Positive and Negative Risks (2 activity choices)
2. Analyzing When a Situation Might Turn Risky

Materials

TimeWise teacher manual, pages 87 to 91, risk dilemma cards (Master 14).

The following are good videos to show students:

- *Risky Decisions -- They Can Be a Good Thing for Teens to Make:*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dliN2jLBbCU>
 - Risk Index, Decision Trap
 - HALT: Don't take a risk when you are hungry, angry, lonely, or tired
 - Don't cross the stupid line!
- *Teens and Risk Taking:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kh4-R9xFAys>
- *The Adolescent Brain:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0O1u5OEc5eY>
- *How Friendship Affects the Brain:*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmVpwXH4jhA>
- *The Adolescent Brain: A Second Window of Opportunity:*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1FRco3Bjyk>

Subtopic 1: Defining Risk and Risk Taking

Risk taking is a very important part of adolescence. Many think that risk taking is negative, but there are many positive benefits from positive risk taking. It is often challenging for young teens to differentiate between the two. It is hard for them to assess what might be a positive risk or a negative risk, which leads to poor or ineffective decision making.

Many people enjoy taking a risk, but some people are not risk takers at all. What do you think of when you hear or think that someone is a risk taker? What comes to your mind? [Ask class what they think.]

Examples:

- Brave
- Stupid
- Daring
- In for trouble

Risk-takers can be thought of in both positive and negative ways. First, let's start by defining risk.

Ask students what they think risk means. Perhaps record answers on the board.

In simple terms, risk is the possibility of something bad happening. Risk involves uncertainty about the effects/implications of an activity with respect to something that humans value (such as health, well-being, wealth, property or the environment), often focusing on negative, undesirable consequences. (Wikipedia)

Activity 1: Identifying the Positive and Negative Risks (2 possible choices, or devise your own)

Choice 1. Use one or more of the suggested videos (under materials) to spark a discussion about when taking a risk is a positive thing, and when it is a negative thing.

Discuss when taking a risk is a positive thing, and when it is a negative thing. What clues in the environment might lead to deciding whether a risk is positive or negative. Can the same risk behavior, e.g., [choose something that would resonate with your students], be positive in one situation and negative in the other? What factors might be present to make the risk positive or negative? (For example, when stressed or angry or in a heightened emotional state, one might react to a situation differently than if one was in control. Or, when one is

with a social group where one is trying to maintain or gain status, there may be a heightened chance for risk taking than if one was alone or with a couple close friends they don't need to impress.). Talk about how being with peers has a major impact on good decision making as well as an increased likelihood of taking a risk that will have negative consequences.

Help them learn to focus on taking a pause and exercising good decision-making. Discuss calculated risks.

Choice 2: Read or have someone read (or put on a screen) the following scenarios.

How much risk is involved in each one? Is the person taking a positive or negative risk? What do you think the consequences could be in each case?

Risk Taking Scenarios:

Cornea is late for work. She needs to cross a busy street and traffic is coming fast. The light is just changing but she runs across the street.

Samson is really very shy. But he really wants to be part of a drama group, so he auditions for a part in the play.

Taneesh's mother won't be home for another two hours. She told him to stay home and watch his younger sister, Taylor. Taneesh wants to hang out with his friends, though, so he sneaks out.

Jordan is finally getting a chance to play basketball with her friends. She has never been that good of a player, but they needed one more person for the team. At an important point in the game she gets the ball. She is surrounded by the other team, but she thinks she can make the basket so she shoots the ball. She knows her teammates are all looking at her.

- Identify the positive and negative risks.
- Discuss the possible consequences of these situations.
- Can you relate to any of these situations?
- Think about your self. What have you done to qualify as a risk taker?

In each case, there was a possibility of being injured or of suffering some other loss, such as loss of face or friends' or parents' disappointment.

Similarities in the decision-making process.

Other topics to discuss:

- Are all of you comfortable with the same amount of risk?
- How do you decide how far you are willing to go?
- There are different kinds of risk: Personal, Physical, Emotional

Many situations contain elements of positive and negative risks.

For example, imagine rafting down a river. What are some of the risks involved?

First of all, there is general risk in being on the river. There is physical risk if you were to fall out of the boat. There is emotional risk, too, if you are afraid of rafting.

But these risks are not necessarily negative. If you take the physical risk of rafting down the river, you will challenge yourself physically and may discover that you are stronger than you thought you were. And, if you are afraid, your trip down the river can be a positive risk as you face that fear and maybe overcome it. You learn from that experience that scary things can be fun, and that you can do things even when you are afraid.

Also note that as you proceed down the river, there will be different degrees of risk. In part of the river, the water will be smooth. The sun will be shining on your face as it streams through the trees. This part of the river isn't very risky.

But a few minutes later, the river can become very risky. You might hit some rapids, and suddenly the river is very risky—physically and emotionally, positively and negatively.

Subtopic 2: Risks During Leisure Time

We have discussed that some risks are good, and we seek them out to get a thrill or for excitement. What kinds of leisure activities give us positive risks or challenges?

Write on the board:

Leisure: A Time of Risk and Opportunity

Have students discuss what they think this means. As we know, risk taking occurs throughout the day. As we've discussed, in free and leisure time, the possibilities of both positive and negative risk are high among teenagers because you have more freedom and more opportunities to make your own decisions.

What risks might take place in leisure time? [harm to self or others, vandalism, substance use, violence, etc.]

What opportunities? [remind students about the benefits, including social emotional learning, dealing with conflict, time for relaxing, to develop skills, opportunity to learn from mistakes, etc.]

Desiring a Positive Challenge

There are many things we do in leisure time because we want a challenge, and often to address the challenge we have to take positive risks.

Think back to Samson's situation: Samson is really very shy. But he really wants to be part of a drama group, so he auditions for a part in the play.

Taneesh had another type of challenge: Taneesh is finally getting a chance to play basketball with her friends. She has never been that good of a player, but they needed one more person for the team. At an important point in the game she gets the ball. She is surrounded by the other team, but she thinks she can make the basket so she shoots the ball. She knows her teammates are all looking at her.

In both of these situations, the person was taking a personal risk. It was a challenge. But in each case, the person had a positive self-image and a desire to pursue an interesting leisure activity.

Things that make leisure activities a positive challenge are when a person's skill level meets the challenge.

If there is too much challenge, a person becomes anxious and there might be negative consequences. Can you think of any examples? [In the case of Samson, for example, he might have gone for the audition, felt the competition was too high, and left and got drunk to overcome his anxiety.]

If there is not enough challenge, a person is likely to become bored. Can anyone think of an example? [In Taneesh's situation, if she had been a really good player, and everyone else was not as good, she might get bored and quit the team.] What are the consequences when someone gets bored?

Too much or too little challenge can happen in all parts of our lives. We need to be aware of this and make good decisions so that we can achieve the right balance between challenge and skill – it is easiest to do this in our free time because we have the most choice during this time. Therefore, choose your leisure activities to make sure you get the right amount of risk and challenge for you, and that you don't have to take negative risks in other aspects of your life.

Positive risk—"If I do this, my peers will accept me."

Negative risk—"If I do this, my parents will be disappointed."

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?

Other Discussion Topics

1. What clues in the environment might lead to deciding whether a risk is positive or negative?
2. Can the same risk behavior, e.g., [choose something that would resonate with your students], be positive in one situation and negative in the other?
3. What factors might be present to make the risk positive or negative? For example, when stressed or angry or in a heightened emotional state, one might react to a situation differently than if one was in control. Or, when one is with a social group where one is trying to maintain or gain status, there may be a heightened chance for risk taking than if one was alone or with a couple close friends they don't need to impress.
4. Talk about how being with peers has a major impact on good decision making as well as an increased likelihood of taking a risk that will have negative consequences.

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, losing control, not being able to communicate your feelings)
- What kind of risk would that be? Personal? Physical? Emotional? Positive vs. Negative?
- What could you do to remove 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.

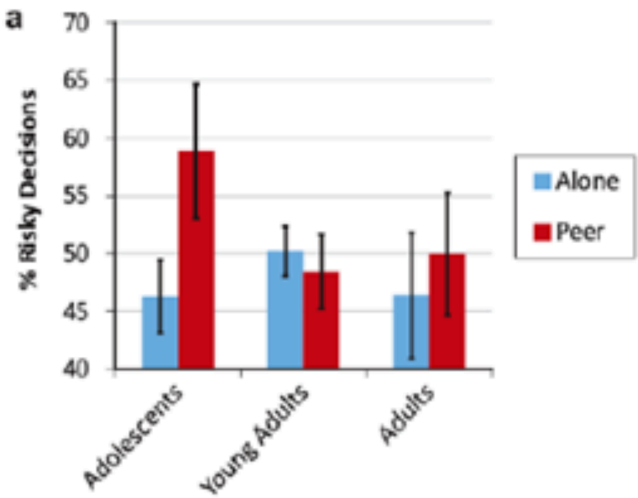
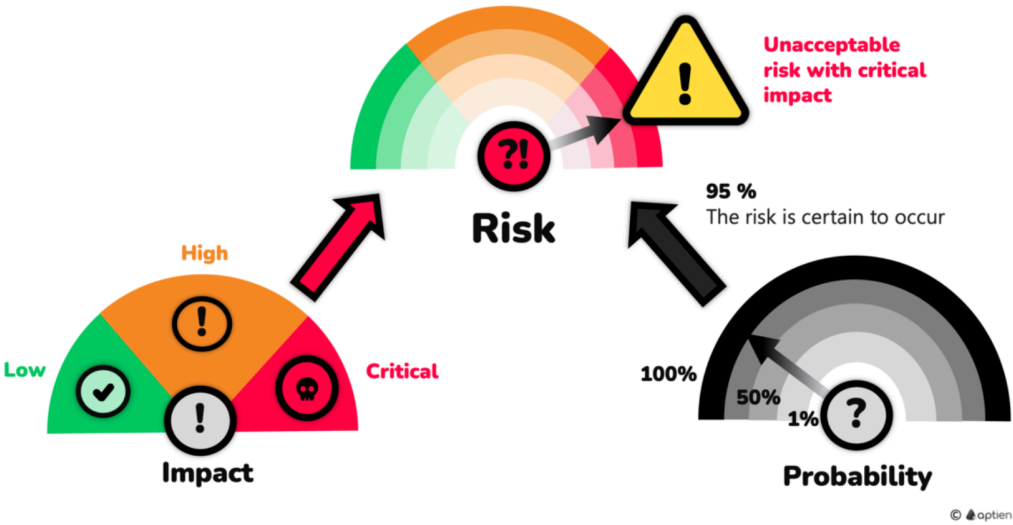
“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.”

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 TimeWise, 2nd Edition 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

