Slate Magazine

http://www.slate.com/id/ 2243436/

No Brakes! The best way to guide your teenager through the high-risk years.

By Alan E. Kazdin and Carlo Rotella Posted Friday, Feb. 5, 2010, at 7:10 AM ET

Our last article summarized the current state of research on teens and risk. That research demonstrates that teenagers do not suffer from some special inability to reason. Larry Steinberg and other researchers explain the steep rise in risk-taking behavior that comes with puberty by elaborating the interplay between two brain systems. The social-emotional system, which develops robustly in early adolescence, seeks out rewarding experiences, especially the sensation afforded by novel and risky behavior, and is also activated by the presence of peers. The cognitive-control system, which undergoes its great burst of development in later adolescence, evaluates and governs the impulses of the social-emotional system.

During the years of greatest risk-taking, which peak somewhere around the age of 16 and during which the presence of peers greatly increases risk-taking, the adolescent brain is like a car with a powerful accelerator (the sensation- and peer-seeking social-emotional system) and weak brakes (the risk-containing cognitive-control system). That being the case, it's clear why some common approaches to reducing risk-taking by teenagers—explaining why drunk driving is dangerous, asking them to pledge to abstain from premarital sex—don't work very well.

A couple of qualifications are in order. First, the social-emotional system is not always "active." When adolescents are emotionally excited, stimulated, or with peers (which amounts to the same thing, as the brain sees it), the social-emotional system is likely to kick in and exert influence that leads to risk taking. Yet, even those early adolescents most prone to risky behavior can often exert cognitive control and regulate their impulses under conditions in which there is little or no arousal—when peers are not around, for instance.

Second, knowledge of the interconnections among brain function, hormones, behavior, and interpersonal influences is advancing rapidly, so it's likely that the current understanding offers only a partial picture and account. It's also a one-size-fits-all explanation for a process that shows a great deal of variation. We don't yet have a good predictive understanding of who will and will not show high-risk behaviors.

But there's enough clarity in the current research to warrant a second look at some common beliefs about teenagers and risk and some common parental approaches to dealing with it. Having started

out in our last article by debunking myths and criticizing some common approaches to reducing risk-taking, we hasten to add that the research also supports the efficacy of some tried-and-true approaches.

Now, if you're expecting modern science to produce a magic-bullet gimmick—or a pill—to contain teen risk, you're going to be disappointed. The parental responses supported by recent research are as mundane as they get. They may strike you as obvious, but that doesn't mean they're unimportant or necessarily easy to pursue. Dealing with adolescent risk seems to be a challenge best addressed not with sudden drastic measures but by sticking to the fundamentals of good parenting over the long haul.

To begin with, the research underscores that the company your child keeps is important. Because early adolescence is a period of increased susceptibility to peer influences, having friends who engage in risky behaviors increases an individual's likelihood of engaging in these behaviors. Affiliating with deviant peers is one of the strongest predictors for adolescents engaging in substance use and abuse.

And don't underrate the value of simply playing for time. It can seem defeatist to tell yourself, "If I can just get my kid through adolescence in one piece, everything will be all right," but there's wisdom in that common parental resolve. The research shows that the earlier the onset of risk behavior, the more likely that there will be negative consequences—poorer mental and physical health later on in life, less economic productivity, and so on. Postponing the onset of risky behaviors through other activities, including out-and-out distraction and pandering ("Let's go clothes shopping again!") is not the worst strategy. Postponing and limiting contact with peers who engage in risky behavior can also help.

How do you do this?

1. Monitor your child

Monitoring means keeping track of where your child is, what he's doing, and whom he's with. The teenage children of parents who monitor their whereabouts and activities are much less likely to engage in sexual activity and illicit drug use. Also, more intense monitoring is associated with greater reduction in risky behavior. This is referred to as a dose-response relation: The more of the dose, the greater the impact. If you feel awkward and uncool about hounding your poor child, remember that there's a strong dose-response relation between monitoring and decreased risk.

One reason proposed for the finding that boys engage in more risky behavior than girls is that parents monitor teenage girls more closely than they do boys. For example, girls have earlier curfews and more household chores to do. There's nothing fair or enlightened about this gender difference, but it has the effect of reducing girls' risk-taking.

But there is more to monitoring than coplike surveillance, and quality matters as much as quantity. The members of families in which parents monitor have stronger ties, are more involved with one another, have warmer relationships, and are more cohesive and communicate better. A more askable, approachable parent with a warm relationship to a child will have more success in monitoring without turning into a warden. To that end, it helps to make monitoring normal and mutual in your household—which you can model by talking to your children about your day at the dinner table or during rides in the car—and to begin early. Monitoring will not work if all of a sudden when your child hits age 12 you develop an intense interest in her whereabouts that takes the form of verbal waterboarding. Also, making your home a place where your child can bring friends while you are there is a form of low-key monitoring that strikes a compromise with the adolescent brain's craving for contact with peers.

For those reasons, the research tends to support the mass media campaign sponsored by the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, "Parents—the Anti-Drug," which encourages parental monitoring to deter teen drug abuse. That would seem more promising than "Just Say No."

2. Build and model bonds to conventional values

Maybe they no longer sound quite so conventional, but valuing schoolwork, time with family, and extracurricular activities are still rewarded in the long run in our society. Building these habits early in life, in elementary school, has been shown to decrease later risky activities. Establishing routines and rituals within the family—special holidays, meals, weekly errands done together with a child, activities in the home that are a regular part of everyday life—can facilitate bonding to the family. Your valuing of reading and learning, teachers and their mission, doing well in school, and other aspects of education will be helpful in a preventive way later. This doesn't mean expecting perfect or high achievement, but it does mean explicitly valuing academic effort and an appreciation of school. And it also obliges you to model the behavior you want: not only respect for school but also moderation, reason, hard work, whatever you expect of your children. The research shows, for instance, that parents who talk about the riskiness of substance abuse and who do not engage in it themselves measurably reduce their children's risk.

3. Develop competencies in the child

Many parents send their children to all sorts of lessons, the familar scheduling overkill, but it's perhaps more reasonable to find one or two areas the child likes and encourage the extended development of skill in them. There's no need to insist on world-beating talent, but it is important to build some competence—in a musical instrument, sport, hobby, or other skill, anything from singing to taking care of animals—and it would be preferable to include an activity in which peers are involved and that might continue into adolescence. The peer component often includes structured activities, like practices and games, or rehearsals and concerts, which the parent can monitor and in which peers are engaging in prosocial activity most of the time and under the supervision of some adult. These typically establish protective influences for when the child is likely to go through the risky period.

4. Parent-child relationship

Of course, this relationship is always important, but it's worth underscoring in this context. For instance, when there's more parent connectedness—a child feeling close, loved, wanted, listened to, and satisfied with the relationship—a child is at much less risk for engaging in dangerous behaviors. The research also shows that parents' presence in the home at key times during the day—before and after school, at dinner, at bedtime—helps reduce the likelihood of risky behaviors.

More generally, a parent's being too loose (permissive, uninvolved) or too tight (authoritarian, controlling) is associated with more antisocial behavior by the child. So, yes, it's important to set up consistent expectations for responsibilities at home and at school, but it's also useful to go out of your way to have discussions in which you listen to your child's view and make as few decisions as possible based on "Because I say so." Compromise when you can and let some things go when you can. Consider bedtime, curfew, messy room, and weird personal appearance as areas in which you can give a little. When you give a little there, you can gain credibility, control, and reasonableness when the topics shift to tattoos, rings through unlikely orifices, and taking two years off high school to learn about the latter-day hippie network in the Southwest.

Parents are often devoted to slippery-slope logic—"If I let this one go, I lose control, and my child will become a barbarian"—but that's typically the opposite of what happens. Go to war over every minor thing and you lose both the minor and the major. And the metaphor of losing battles but winning the war is misguided because it starts out by pitting you against your child. A better metaphor: You are sailing the ship toward a goal of a well-adjusted, functioning, non-freeloading adulthood for your child. This requires tacking, which can look like one is veering away from the goal, but tacking is often the best path to the goal.

This all makes it seem as if you're hanging on while the hurricane of adolescence blows through your child's brain and your home. That's what it can feel like. But to say that much of the impulse toward risky behavior seems to be biologically driven does not mean that it's biologically determined, an ineluctable fate. We have learned from brain as well as genetic studies that environmental changes can have enormous impact on biological processes, and changes in those processes can importantly change behavior. Your choices as a parent are a major part of your child's environment. The scope of

such environmental changes' effect on young people's risky behavior is not clear yet, but some influences have been studied, do have an effect, and provide useful guidelines for parents entering the home stretch of child rearing. Here are some resources for parents and some leading examples of research in the field.

Teen risk behavior fact sheet.

Facts about teen drivers, from the CDC.

Lac, A., & Crano, W.D. (2009). Monitoring matters: Meta-analytic review reveals the reliable linkage of parental monitoring with adolescent marijuana use. *Perspectives in Psychological Science, 4*, 578-586.

Steinberg, L. (2008). A social neuroscience perspective on adolescent risk-taking. *Developmental Review, 28*, 78-106.

Wolfe, D.A., et al. (2006). *Adolescent risk behaviors: Why teens experiment and strategies to keep them safe*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.