



RESEARCH BACKGROUND FOR FACILITATORS

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Objectives

1. To help parents understand teen risk-taking and its relationship to youth development.
2. To help parents understand the positive and negative aspects of risk-taking from the perspective of youth.
3. To help parents understand the factors which contribute to youths' decision-making about risk behaviors.

Risk-taking and Youth Development

It is important to consider youth risk behaviors in the broader context of the young person's life and development. For example, if the risky behavior takes place among a group of highly motivated and otherwise physically and emotionally healthy young people, it is unlikely that the risky behavior will, in and of itself, have extremely negative consequences. In contrast, if the risky behavior is part of a broader syndrome or "pattern" of negative or dangerous behaviors, then the risky behavior is likely to be indicative of a problem that may even require treatment or intervention (Jessor & Jessor, 1977). This means that participating in some risky behaviors, such as drinking alcohol, does not necessarily result in problems for young people (Schulenberg et al., 1997).



Positive and Negative Aspects of Risk-taking

Teens may perceive certain "benefits" from risky behaviors, such as alcohol use, drug use, and sexual activity. Alcohol use is one example. Youth drink because they think alcohol makes it easier to meet other people, relaxes their social inhibitions, and helps them have more fun. Not all individuals who drink experience negative consequences, and not all individuals who experience negative consequences are going to experience them every time they drink. The experience of negative consequences is going to be based, at least in part, on factors other than drinking; examples include drinking and driving, or drinking that leads to unprotected sexual activity or other unsafe behavior. This is true for other risk behaviors as well.

It is not simply teens' feelings of being invulnerable to risky situations that prompt them to take risks. So while adults assume that teens, knowing the risks of taking part in various activities such as drinking alcohol, using drugs, or sexual activity, will decline to participate in the activity, that is often not the case. Teens assess risk differently than do adults.

Decision-making about Risk-taking

By definition, risk-taking carries some potential for loss. Since every option is risky, the question is why people choose particular risks. An individual weighs options by considering the expected value of each option weighted by the likelihood that it will occur (Beyth-Marom & Fischhoff, 1997; Furby & Beyth-Marom, 1992). Then a decision is made based on the level of risk one is willing to accept in exchange for some benefit. However, individuals make less systematic decisions because of habit (Fischhoff, Crowell, & Kipke, 1999). One's decision is affected by mood, past experiences, thought processes, individual perception of desirable and undesirable outcomes (Neumann & Politser, 1992), social pressure, time constraints, information and skills (Fischhoff et al., 1999). As a result, one's assessment of the potential for loss is likely to be inaccurate (Yates & Stone, 1992). Further, because outcomes are typically uncertain, good decision-making does not guarantee a positive outcome; nor does poor decision-making guarantee a negative outcome (Fischhoff et al., 1999).

To fully understand youth decision-making, one must consider the full picture, the context in which youth decision-making takes place. Knowing the risks of various activities is only one factor among many in teens' decision-making. Decision-making is affected by: personality; stage of development; overall maturity; cognitive, social, and emotional development; family; peers; as well as biological factors such as brain development. Teens tend to value options and potential outcomes differently than do adults, so what may look to an adult like an uninformed decision may look to a teen like a decision made systematically.

For example, getting hurt or failing a test may not be a big deal to a teen; avoiding being teased at school may be a huge deal. Even knowing the risk and still making what parents see as a poor choice does not mean the teen is “stupid” or “irrational.”

Working to improve adolescent decision-making about risk behaviors requires understanding where youth’s decision-making process breaks down or is faulty (Beyth-Marom & Fischhoff, 1997). Learning to make decisions about risk-taking is a family affair. Parents not only try to pass along decision-making skills and family values, they also try to learn how to work with their teens, and support their learning to make decisions. Teens need opportunities to make independent decisions and deal with the positive and negative consequences of those decisions.

More specifically, youth may experience three key challenges when making decisions about risk-taking. First, there is often a mismatch between knowledge and behavior: youth choose to participate in behaviors when they are aware of the potential for negative outcomes (Selman & Adalbjarnardottir, 2000). Second, youth tend to think that you must expose yourself to a potential negative outcome numerous times before actually experiencing a negative outcome. They often overestimate their ability to identify and avoid dangerous situations (Fischhoff et al., 1999). Finally, although youth may be well informed about the potential risks associated with participating in different behaviors, when applying that knowledge to self they either deny what they know or they do not think the information applies to them (Mitchell, 1998).

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