

## The Risky Business of Teenagers

Every year, as high school ends for the year, the level of teen partying increases. Warm weather summer evenings are for outdoor gatherings and the celebrating of another year's end. Who can blame them? They just want to have fun. Unfortunately, along with the energetic, enthusiastic celebrating inevitably comes a tragedy – a fatal car accident, a drowning, major property damage, or a fatal drug overdose.

The most puzzling and dismaying part of these unfortunate tragedies is that sometimes normally responsible teens can do some unbelievably risky things – with horrible consequences. As a parent of teenagers, most of us can think back and shudder at the many risks we took when their age. Do you remember retelling those stories of crazy things done as this kind of 'rite of passage' or some other justification for our outrageousness? Afterwards, upon reflection, we may have known we were acting really immaturely, foolishly and dangerously.

So why do perfectly normal, usually responsible, teens act at times like little kids? Why do they lose their good judgment? A flurry of research of the brain over the last decade provides many of the answers.

While a teenager may resemble an adult on the outside, a peek inside his/her brain tells a very different story. The cerebral cortex is still growing and undergoing massive change. Neurotransmitters radically transform in number and type, creating a desire for risk taking. New connections are being forged to areas of the brain responsible for higher conceptual thinking. The prefrontal cortex, the seat of higher judgment, wisdom and forethought, is the very last area of the brain to develop. A mature frontal cortex can multi-task, evaluate, and decide with relative ease. Whereas, the newly forming frontal cortex of a teen, is much more easily stressed. Ask them to multi-task, evaluate and decide and they are likely to fall apart or throw a temper tantrum. Impaired with alcohol, or distracted by cell phone while driving can be disastrous.

Risk taking and thrill seeking are not always destructive. They also have the positive function of helping teens explore the world, cultivate interests and eventually leave home. Teens need parents, teachers and adults to help them manage their lives while the brain matures. We need to act as their prefrontal cortex at times. Despite what they may want, we are not just here to serve them -- provide the car, fill the fridge with food they like, and dispense money like a human ATM!!

## **What can a parent do to reduce the risks?**

### **Know their friends.**

Friends look out for each other. When parents know and like their teenager's friends, it is easier to feel confident that the peer influence will be positive. Remind your teenager of the importance of friends helping each other make good choices.

### **Don't try to control your teenager. Try to have influence.**

Control from above will result in power struggles. The influence of you as a coach from the sidelines will be more effective. Nurture respect, acceptance and other positive aspects of your relationship. You have to give respect to get it. When they are not with us, we hope that our ideas (influence) will be whispering in their heads when faced with difficult choices.

### **Help them be assertive to negative peer pressure.**

Are you confident that they know the dangers they may face? More importantly, do they know what to do or say to be assertive with peers who may be pressuring them to do something they think is dangerous, like getting into a car where the driver has been drinking or trying a new drug.

### **Make it clear to them that there is no shame in calling for help.**

We want our teenagers to call us or another responsible adult when in trouble. Try to help your son or daughter see you as non-judgmental, so when they do something foolish, drink too much, for example, they will call you. Reassure them of their good judgment to call when they do.