

# UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD



S O L I H U L L   A P P R O A C H

## Teenagers and risk taking

Taking risks in the teenage years is a normal part of development.  
It is part of growing up to be an adult.

As teenagers we have a tendency to take unnecessary risks that definitely make sense at the time like running across the road at a red light. Real cool! Surprisingly, we are actually capable of logical thinking and even estimating risks. Unfortunately for us though, the connectivity in different parts of our brain is not yet fully complete. This means we have a tendency to pay too much attention to our instincts in some situations. On the other hand sometimes we don't pay enough attention to them. So a risk free life is not in the cards for us just yet.

You might not believe me when I say this, but for us to be able to leave the nest and start crafting one of our own, away from the parental unit, all our experiences we make while taking risks is vital in becoming our own person. Even the embarrassing ones we wish would be erased from existence. It all starts off with which psychological and cognitive stage of development our teenage brain is in.

Steinberg described the complex teenage brain as a car with an excellent accelerator but a weak brake.

The big question is.... Who is your brake?? Your brake is the person you trust the

most. The person who you know will always have your back and will always have your best interests at heart. Your brake can be more than one person. It can be a whole group of people. It's your choice.

Teenager's brains are wired to take more risks when they are with their friends. Teenagers are worried about what their friends might think even when they are not with their friends at the time.

In our teenage brains, there is an incredibly strong relationship between peer pressure and risk taking.

If you were in a situation, let's say you are at a party and there is alcohol. All your friends are drinking and are chanting for you to join in. However you are underage and you know what your parents would say in this situation. What do you do? You know it's wrong but your friends are pressuring you to have a drink. Do you cave under peer pressure or do you listen to your parents?

This is what's happening in your brain.

**1. Socio-emotional system** – reward processing is amplified in the presence of adolescent peers and may cloud their judgement.

**2. Cognitive control** - the presence of peers appears to deactivate cognitive control regions of the adolescent brain.

**It's a well known fact that while we are developing into adults, many of us become hyper aware of what others are thinking of us, especially our friends. So we strain to impress them.**

The Steinberg (2004) experiment involved 40 teenagers whose brain function was monitored during the experiment using MRI scanning.

<http://www.temple.edu/psychology/lids/documents/Risk-TakinginAdolescenceCDPS.pdf>

Professor Steinberg set up an experiment. Teenagers and adults played a video driving game where they had to decide to stop or drive through an amber traffic

light. Half the time they played alone. Half the time they were told two friends were watching next door.

The teenager's results were compared with adults who participated in the same experiment.

Before you read on just ask yourself.... How many amber lights would you drive through on your own and how many do you think you would drive through with your friends?

Adults drove the same whether friends were watching or not. Without friends watching, adults and teenagers ability was about the same. With their friends watching, **teenagers went through 40% more amber lights and had 60% more crashes than adults.**

What a surprise! The experiment concluded that we make much riskier decisions in the presence of our friends than on our own. As it turns out, our cognitive ability has sadly not yet fully increased. In case you're wondering what cognitive means, it is in relation to cognition, which means 'The mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses.'

Behold... the art of peer pressure!

Now as an individual, we make different decisions and have a different mentality than when in a gang. There, the reward is a lot bigger to be respected by the gang than respected by the society around us. This can put us in very difficult situations that we otherwise would not be in, which is why gangs are very dangerous and shouldn't be taken lightly. They can easily escalate from a school ground group of friends into something much more serious when under the influence of peer pressure.

To come to a conclusion, risk taking is all part of being a teenager, so we shouldn't be afraid to live a little as it adds to the construction of our development into adulthood. However, risk taking does link in with peer

pressure - doing something we would not usually do because we want to look cool and rebellious in front of our friends. This is not healthy as it can put a lot of strain on us. Take risks for yourself not because of others.

Adapted by Lily, age 16