

A LINE ON LIFE

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Teen Decision Making *

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Most parents want to help teenagers to deal effectively with the risks of adolescence. However, among those who are 10-19 years of age, the incidence of STDs, unwanted pregnancies and suicide have increased dramatically in the last few decades. How can we help teens to make better decisions involving these risks?

Currently, we inform teens of the risks they are taking. However, psychologists have found that these messages are less effective than training adolescents in the social, emotional and decision-making skills that help them to resist peer pressures. Even so, this training needs to analyze the decision-making process from the teens' point of view.

In contrast to adults, teens seemed to see themselves as more immune to risks. However, a recent psychological study of 199 teenagers (12-18 years old) and their parents contradicts this assumption. When all were asked to judge the level of risk for various activities, both the teens and their parents responded similarly. In fact, they shared the same **feeling of invulnerability**. In relation to risks like being mugged, becoming an alcoholic, or having a traffic accident, both parents and teens indicated that they were "*less vulnerable than others*." In the words of psychologist Baruch Fischhoff of Carnegie Mellon University:

"Despite parents' qualms, teens are about as good — or bad — at appraising risks as are their parents. It's not that teens are great at it — but they're not any worse at it than we grown-ups. We all feel invulnerable to some degree."

However, if teens are missing some important facts, this can alter their perception of the risks involved. Teens can know much about the dangers of AIDS, but if they think people who are HIV+ can be easily detected, this weakens the other knowledge. Similarly, even though teens may know the danger of drunken driving, they may not view beer as intoxicating as other beverages.

"You need to take the time to find out what a given risk looks like from the kids' perspective."

If you ignore your children's viewpoint, the kids will "*tune you out*." This will keep you from finding out what they need to know to make good decisions. When adults view the decision-making behavior of teens, they only see the risks. Without the youngster's feedback, parents cannot be aware of the emotional impact of making decisions in relation to the child's self-concept and relationships.

"Teenagers need to be involved in making their own rules."

Recent research indicates that a major portion of the problem lies in balancing adult authority with a respect for the adolescents' need for independence. In general, teenagers would make better risk-taking decisions, if they are allowed more say in creating their own rules than they usually have at home and at school.

As kids enter junior high, they are struggling to become independent. At the same time, adults become uncomfortable with their children's emerging sexuality, their exposure to alcohol and other drugs, and other risks. Not only do parents tighten restrictions, but junior high schools — more so than grade schools — place a greater emphasis on discipline. This offers little opportunity in student decision-making. This occurs at a time when these children see themselves as more capable of making their own decisions. In

contrast to the teens' personal need to participate in decisions that affect them, adults think they — not the children — should make the decisions. The conflict between these views peaks in early adolescence.

Researchers have long been confused why the junior high years lead to such a drop in self-esteem and motivation among so many children. Typically this was attributed to "*raging hormones*", dating anxieties, and worries about peer acceptance. In contrast, several studies indicate that teens "*feel better about themselves and are more enthusiastic about their school work*," if they are allowed to participate in family decision-making. In a 1987 study, early-maturing sixth-grade girls reported lower feelings of self-esteem than their undeveloped classmates.

However, this drop was not found in early-maturing girls who indicated that they were "*given a say*" in family decisions.

"Peers are important sources for style and taste in fleeting fashion and entertainment, but not for enduring values. Adolescents complain that there is no one to talk to about their concerns and feelings. It is to their parents they would turn first about the really important issues."

Parents need to continue to guide their children and set limits. But parents not only need to talk with their children, they need to *listen* to them too. To demonstrate real listening, information from teenagers should be used in making decisions that affect them.

* Adapted from Daniel Goleman's "Teen-Agers Are Shrewd Judges of Risk, New Studies Show," *The New York Times*, March 2, 1993. Reprinted in *Themes of The Times: Psychology*, Prentice Hall, 1993, page 11-12.