

## Ten Tips for Parents: Understanding Your Adolescent's Behavior

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- (1) All teenagers take risks as a normal part of growing up. Risk-taking is the tool an adolescent uses to define and develop his or her identity, and healthy risk-taking is a valuable experience.
- (2) Healthy adolescent risk-taking behaviors which tend to have a positive impact on an adolescent's development can include participation in sports, the development of artistic and creative abilities, volunteer activities, travel, running for school office, making new friends, constructive contributions to the family or community, and others. Inherent in all of these activities is the possibility of failure. Parents must recognize and support their children with this.
- (3) Negative risk-taking behaviors which can be dangerous for adolescents include drinking, smoking, drug use, reckless driving, unsafe sexual activity, disordered eating, self-mutilation, running away, stealing, gang activity, and others.
- (4) Unhealthy adolescent risk-taking may appear to be "rebellion" -- an angry gesture specifically directed at parents. However, risk-taking, whether healthy or unhealthy, is simply part of a teen's struggle to test out an identity by providing self-definition and separation from others, including parents.
- (5) Some adolescent behaviors are deceptive -- a teen may genuinely try to take a healthy risk that evolves into more dangerous behavior. For example, many adolescent girls fail to recognize the trap of dieting and fall into a pattern of disordered eating, sometimes even developing a full eating disorder. Parents need to be well informed in order to help their adolescents with such struggles.
- (6) Red flags which help identify dangerous adolescent risk-taking can include psychological problems such as persistent depression or anxiety which goes beyond more typical adolescent "moodiness"; problems at school; engaging in illegal activities; and clusters of unhealthy risk-taking behaviors (e.g., smoking, drinking and driving recklessly might be happening at the same time, as might disordered eating and self-mutilation, or running away and stealing).
- (7) Since adolescents need to take risks, parents need to help them find healthy opportunities to do so. Healthy risk-taking, not only important in itself, can help prevent unhealthy risk-taking.
- (8) Adolescents often offer subtle clues about their negative risk-taking behaviors through what they say about the behaviors of friends and family, including parents. Parents often stay silent about their own histories of risk-taking and experimenting, but it can be important to find ways to share this information with adolescents in order to serve as role models, to let teens know that mistakes are not fatal, and to encourage making healthier choices than those the parent may have made during his or her own adolescence.
- (9) Adolescents look to their parents for advice and modeling about how to assess positive and negative risks. Parents need to help their teens learn how to evaluate risks and anticipate the consequences of their choices, and develop strategies for diverting their energy into healthier activities when necessary.
- (10) Parents need to pay attention to their own current patterns of risk-taking as well. Teenagers are watching and imitating, whether they acknowledge this or not.