



Parenting teenage daredevils

Managing teenagers who have a little too much zest for life, diving head first into situations without thinking them through requires an understanding of both their inner and outer worlds, writes Lakshmi Singh.

If you were constantly holding your breath or administering first aid as your child was growing up, you probably were raising one of those thrill-seeking, adrenalin-charged, daredevils who loved to experiment and take risks in order to entertain themselves.

As they approached their teenage years, these risks might have evolved to being more sophisticated than just jumping off the top of a tree or the “look mum, no hands” type of stunts. From binge drinking to irresponsible driving to train surfing, your teenager may be indulging in risky behaviours that may ultimately change the entire family’s life.

The teenage years are some of the most valuable years of a person’s life and can also be the most vulnerable, therefore it is highly important that parents and carers understand what is driving this behaviour and know how to manage these tendencies of their daredevil child.

HORMONES

Andrew Fuller, author of the book *Tricky Kids* (Finch Publishing, \$26.95) highlights four hormones that influence a teenager’s ‘mood’. Adrenaline – responsible for generating the feelings

of being ‘revved up’ and on a ‘red cordial high’, cortisol – the stress hormone contributing to defensive, exaggerated actions, dopamine – which can create the ‘switched-on, pumped-up state’ and serotonin – the “most powerful antidepressant known to humankind.”

The former two chemicals are what you want the least of when raising teenagers, says Fuller. “Once a tricky kid gets an adrenaline rush, trying to change her behaviour is a complete waste of time,” he says. Stress from family life, school or peers can also increase cortisol, so it is important for families to provide low levels of stimulation and develop routines to lessen the strain and make their children feel safe from violence, ridicule or humiliation, he adds.

In contrast, dopamine and serotonin are what you want to see more of, says Fuller. Children low in dopamine display tired and lethargic behaviour, which is why they seek out excitement through risky stunts to lift their mood and achieve that ‘pumped-up high,’ explains Fuller.

BOYS vs. GIRLS

The different goals of each gender within their social groups also influence teenagers’ actions, says Parenting Ideas’ own Michael Grose. The focus for girls at this age is often on achieving social success and they may engage in risky behaviour such as alcohol consumption and unprotected sex. He refers to the book *Queen Bees & Wannabees* (Random House, \$24.99), where the author Rosalind Wiseman describes girls and their social hierarchies to include a ‘Queen Bee’ and her group of ‘Wannabees’. Most girls are ‘Wannabees’ says Wiseman and are trying to be accepted by the ‘Queen Bee’. This may involve doing all the dirty work just to “please the person who’s standing above her on the social totem pole.”

In comparison, Grose says that boys don’t want to be seen amongst their peers as being foolish. “Boys will look at each other and do what the group does,” he says. This may mean taking risks and pushing boundaries to prove that they are a worthy member of the group.





Furthermore, Grose explains that the Amygdala, commonly known as the reptilian brain - responsible for fostering curiosity and entertaining aggression, is 16% bigger in boys than in girls.

BRAIN NOT MATURE UNTIL MID-TWENTIES

Regardless of the gender, however, Dr. Fiona Martin, principal psychologist at Sydney Child Psychology Centre points out that, the part of the brain that is responsible for impulse control isn't fully mature until about age 25.

"Risk taking behaviour is quite normal for teenagers. It is one way they learn about themselves. But, there is a whole spectrum of risks - from learning new tricks on the skateboard to stealing a car and being involved in a high speed car chase with police following you."

It is therefore important for parents to help them understand the impact of their actions by setting appropriate ground rules, keeping lines of communication open and discussing the behaviour of good role models, she says.

LINK TO PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS

The extent and severity of risk taking behaviour could also reveal something about a teenager's mental health, says Fuller. "The longer tricky kids stay in one emotional state, the more familiar it becomes to them," he says. "Middle adolescence (15-17 years) is a peak time for developing depression, and young women are at least twice as likely as young men to develop it."

If teenagers start displaying strange behaviour like sleeping in odd places, being more generous than usual in giving away personal items or not washing regularly, it is important to step in and seek professional help, says Fuller.

Experts' tips for managing your daredevil teenager:

- ▶ Involve teenagers in repetitive movements like table tennis or swimming to naturally increase the level of dopamine and serotonin.
- ▶ To avoid heated arguments and theatrical displays of teenagers storming out of the room, give kids some space and talk to them when sitting down or shoulder-to-shoulder in a car, rather than face-to-face to remove some of the pressure.
- ▶ Redirect your teenagers' built up desire for experimentation by involving them in adrenalin-charged sports like rock climbing, martial arts or mountain biking to release pent up energy.
- ▶ Develop the art of forward planning - an important skill that daredevils and teenagers in general lack, by participating in games that require the formation of plans and strategies - like card or board games.
- ▶ Encouraging real life social situations and promoting them as being more valuable could help reduce the risks teenagers take through social media. For example, volunteering at community events, taking classes or enrolling in competitions where they can display their talent are all good alternatives to excessive social media usage.

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