Factors Influencing Teen Decision Making & Behaviors
Presenters: Bill Corson & Laura Doerflinger, MS, LMHC

In recent years, researchers have shed light on the many factors influencing teen behaviors. Well-intended, involved parents are not immune from facing challenges with their students.

The goal of this program is two-fold:

· To improve parents’ understanding of the complex mix of factors that can result in questionable decision-making by any of our students.
· To provide parents with reasonable strategies for guiding & monitoring their student.

Content:

1. WHAT IS OUR GOAL? To raise healthy, happy adults… How do we do that? Let’s look at the following information to assess that:

2. Healthy risk-taking versus unhealthy:

   - **Healthy risk taking:**
     - Gaining something positive.
     - Lose little or nothing of value.
     - Willing and prepared to deal with the possible consequences.
     - Cause little or no harm to myself or others.

   - **Unhealthy risk taking:**
     - Gain little positive.
     - Lose something of value.
     - Not willing and prepared to deal with the possible consequences.
     - Cause harm to myself or others.


4. Origins of Risk-Taking: Family, school, community taught values around behavior, law, rule-breaking, use of alcohol as well as connection to family, peers, community. **Developing good judgment?**
   - **From the rules we set, the consequences imposed and carried out.**
   - **From trial and error**
   - **From open discussions about all kinds of things.**
   - **Assessing risk.**
5. **Question for parents to help teens analyze decisions**, remembering that the way you approach your child’s decision making (shame, blame, guilt) determines your inclusion in sharing future decision making challenges.

- Do you feel pressured to make risky choices by friends?
- How are you going to feel after you participate in the behavior?
- Do you feel rushed into decisions?
- How do you feel when you participate in high-risk behaviors? Is there a difference in enjoyment depending on the healthy versus unhealthy behaviors?
- What do you consider when you are making a decision about a risky situation?
- Do you ever have a voice in your head saying, “I shouldn’t be doing this.” Do you listen to that voice or ignore it?
- What could I do as a parent to help you make the best and safest decisions?

6. **The teen Brain - why judgment is so poor.**

**KEY FACTS:** [http://www.act4jj.org/media/factsheets/factsheet_12.pdf](http://www.act4jj.org/media/factsheets/factsheet_12.pdf)

- During adolescence, the brain begins its final stages of maturation and continues to rapidly develop well into a person’s early 20s, concluding around the age of 25.
- The prefrontal cortex, which governs the “executive functions” of reasoning, advanced thought and impulse control, is the final area of the human brain to mature.
- Adolescents generally seek greater risks for various social, emotional and physical reasons, including changes in the brain’s neurotransmitters, such as dopamine, which influence memory, concentration, problem-solving and other mental functions. Dopamine is not yet at its most effective level in adolescence.
- Adolescents commonly experience “reward-deficiency syndrome,” which means they are no longer stimulated by activities that thrilled them as younger children. Thus, they often engage in activities of greater risk and higher stimulation in efforts to achieve similar levels of excitement.
- Adolescents must rely heavily on the parts of the brain that house the emotional centers when making decisions, because the frontal regions of their brains are not fully developed.

7. **Discipline during the teen years. Power? Control? Influence…**


- 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.
- Healthy adolescent risk-taking behaviors that 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 and community, and others. Inherent in all of these activities is the possibility of failure. Parents need to be aware that what may seem to them as easy may not be for their teen.
- 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 and others.

- Unhealthy adolescent risk taking may appear to be rebellion, or 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.

- 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 developing a full eating disorder.

- Red flags that help identify dangerous adolescent risk taking can include psychological problems, such as depression or anxiety, that go beyond more typical adolescent moodiness.

- Some adolescents need the adrenaline rush they get from taking risks. Parents need to help these teens find ways to experience this rush from healthy activities (such as rock climbing, scuba diving or skiing).

- Adolescents often offer subtle clues about their negative risk-taking behaviors through what they say about the behaviors of friends and family. 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 and to let teens know that mistakes can be learning experiences.

- 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.
  1. What do I hope to get from this choice?
  2. What are the possible outcomes of this choice?
  3. Am I willing to handle whatever outcome happens?
  4. What is my plan for handling these possible outcomes?
  5. Which choice will come closest to fulfilling the outcome I want?

- Parents may need to pay attention to their own current patterns of risk taking as well. Teenagers are watching and imitating their parents, whether they acknowledge this or not.

**Bill Corson** is the current Redmond Junior High School Resource Officer. He has served as a school resource officer in this area for 7 years. In addition to 29 years in the police force, he has worked with teens in a variety of settings for over 30 years spending much of his spare time leading teen and adult groups on wilderness adventures. He is the parent of 4 adult children. Mr. Corson has a passion for serving youth & a great deal of insight into understanding adolescent behavior from many perspectives including law enforcement, parenting & recreation.

**Laura Doerflinger**, MS, a licensed mental health counselor, is the Executive Director of the Parent Education Group in Kirkland. She has been counseling families for 17 years & has a great deal of experience working with students in the Lake Washington School district. Ms. Doerflinger has two children ages 12 & 15. She understands the importance of establishing communication strategies within families. She is a wealth of
information on how to access services appropriate to individual family needs. For more information about her work, go to www.parenteducationgroup.com or email Ms. Doerflinger luna@parenteducationgroup.com