

The Risky Business Developmental Series: A New Approach to Reducing Adolescent Risk.



Each year the United States spends billions of dollars trying to reduce adolescent risk. These efforts have often been successful at changing adolescents' knowledge, but have had surprisingly little impact on how adolescents actually behave.

Dr. Laurence Steinberg, a leading psychologist and researcher on adolescence notes in his new book, *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (2014):

We need to start thinking about adolescence differently. Fortunately, over the past two decades, there has been a tremendous growth in the scientific study of adolescence. The good news is that the accumulated knowledge, which comes from behavioral science, social science, and neuroscience, provides a sensible foundation that can help parents, teachers, employers, Health care providers and others who work with young people to be better at what they do. Parent more intelligently, teach more effectively, supervise and work with young people in ways that are more likely to succeed.

The bad news, though, is that a lot of this knowledge has yet to influence the ways in which we raise, educate, and treat young people. (pg.3)

To forge a new approach to stemming adolescent risk we need to first have a good understanding of what makes adolescents tick. The old traditional model of viewing teens as being swept away during this developmental stage by the upheaval of hormones doesn't help. Leaving us even more in the lurch is the amount of cutting edge research on adolescent development over the past two decades that has not filtered down to professionals, schools, communities and parents. This, of course, renders the adults who work with teens without clear and helpful ways to respond to them.

What we know about brain development.

Many adults do not understand why teenagers behave in an impulsive, irrational or dangerous way. At times, it seems like teens don't think things through or fully consider the consequences of their actions.

There is a biological explanation for why adolescents differ from adults in the way they behave, solve problems, and make decisions. Studies have shown that the brain continues to mature and develop throughout childhood and adolescence.

Scientists have identified a specific region of the brain called the **amygdala** that is responsible for immediate reactions including fear and aggressive behavior. This region is essentially the ‘seat of emotion’ and develops early. Metaphorically, it is the teen in a speed boat out in the middle of the ocean going in every direction as fast as possible. We refer to this teen as the ‘sea captain.’

However, the **frontal cortex** (behind your forehead), the area of the brain that controls reasoning and helps us think before we act, develops later. Metaphorically, we call this the ‘sea police’ and they are asleep. We know this from CAT Scans and MRI’s of adolescent brains. They are off-line. This part of the brain is still changing and maturing well into adulthood.

Here is the rub. These two parts of the adolescent brain are not working together. For a teen to be in control, to self-regulate, the two parts of the brain must be working together like two horses pulling a cart. If one horse (the emotional horse—the amygdala) is way out in front of the other horse (the intellectual horse, the frontal cortex), the cart will naturally go off the road. The idea is for the two horses to ride in tandem as they pull the cart. Obviously this is not happening in adolescence. We are discovering that providing information about risk does not lead the two horses to work together. This is a major problem!

Another change in the brain during adolescence is **mylinization**, a slow increase in the connections between cells and making the brain pathways more effective. This is evident when you compare a 6th grader to an 8th grader. The 6th grader doesn’t process information very quickly, in fact the teen can look like a deer caught in the head lights. As mylinization proceeds the teen, over time, processes information faster, the way adults do. All of these changes are essential for the development of coordinated thought, action, and behavior---the two horses riding in tandem.

Changing Brains Means that Adolescents Act Differently from Adults

CAT Scans and MRI’s of the teen brain show that their brains work differently than adults’ when they make decisions or solve problems. Their actions are guided more by the emotional and reactive amygdala and less by the thoughtful, logical frontal cortex. This becomes even more complicated as the ‘reward center’ of the adolescent brain lights up when teens are with their peers. This is neurological and automatic and leads teens to follow their peers, often into risky situations. Ironically, when a teen is alone or with an adult the reward center does not light up and the teen’s judgment is more effective.

Based on this stage of their brain development, adolescents are more likely to:

- Act on impulse
- Misread or misinterpret social cues and emotions
- Get into accidents of all kinds
- Get involved in fights
- Engage in dangerous or risky behavior

Adolescents are less likely to:

- Think before they act
- Pause to consider the consequences of their actions
- Change their dangerous or inappropriate behaviors

A New Methodology for Teens to Improve Decision Making and Manage and Reduce Risk

Our team has developed a methodology over the past two decades to teach teens:

- To bring their two horses together using a psychological prosthetic device until maturation and development kick in;
- Three skills they can internalize and use to enhance their ability to better protect themselves;
- Through a process called ‘contagion’ to help protect themselves as well as their peers. They learn to impact and infect their peers with what they have learned:
- A method to collaborate on tasks with their peers which will:
 1. Increase their ability to more effectively interact in more positive ways with their peers
 2. Enhance academic learning
 3. Enhance interpersonal connectivity
 4. Decrease risk
 5. Enhance better decision making as a peer group task

The Program Format for Middle School and High School Programs

1. Teens are taught a risk model that helps them identify and react to 4 prototypes (social roles, not personalities) found in every peer group. These prototype have been developed through a psycholinguistic analysis of the videos which are the basis for the Risky Business Developmental Series. They are:
 - **The Instigator-** The boy or girl who pushes the group for good or for bad. You can push to do homework or you can push for a fight. We are interested in this peer because he or she falls into the category of ‘perpetrator.’

- **The Dupe-** The boy or girl who gives up his or her autonomy for the inclusion and protection of the group. This is the follower. We are interested in this peer because he or she falls into the category ‘victim.’
- **The Enabler-** The boy or girl who is the informal leader of the group. This is usually the smartest member of the group who keenly watches the Instigator to see if he will help or hurt the group. We are interested in this peer because leadership is very important for the group. In our country we are not very good at picking leaders and leadership skills are an important factor in any group.
- **The Hero-** This is the boy or girl on the hot seat who has to make a decision about the risky situation or behavior he or she is confronted with.
The Hero is the main character and the effort here is to help every teen become the best Hero they can be, advocating and protecting themselves.

Students watch a series of naturalistic observations. These unscripted vignettes feature groups of peers interacting with one another around specific age-related risk factors. Students’ ability to identify these prototypes are measured and students receive feedback. Over time, students learn to measure their awareness, acuity and insight about whom they are with and what roles they and their peers are playing at a particular time. It is the repetition of this training that allows teens to internalize and use this risk model.

2. Three skills of ‘cognitive empathy’ are taught that arm each student to ‘read’ their peers, learn to identify ‘cues’ and decipher ‘intention and underlying motivation’ of their peers. These skills (used as a psychological prosthetic device) serve as an ‘inhibitory mechanism’ to slow the teen down so he or she can see and think about who they are interacting with. Studies going back to the early 50’s and 60’s have taught us that empathy and aggression are two opposing psychological processes; you can’t be aggressive towards a peer if you feel empathy for him.
3. The use of role plays, replicating the vignettes students have watched, provide additional experiences to internalize and use these skills. This also serves as additional reinforcement for the development of an ‘inhibitory process’ to reduce impulsiveness and poor decisions.
4. Students, working in groups of 5, are given role play cards to enact an episode involving the four prototypes working together on a task. They learn to use the risk model and the three skills of empathy to navigate their interactions, set limits and boundaries, and develop, for the moment, healthy alliances with group members to bring about positive outcomes. The underlying dynamic, an inhibitory mechanism, is reinforced so students can slow down, dissect the problem and help one another make better decisions and provide insights to students who are impeding the process. The value of this experience is to help students bring their two horses together in tandem.

For the Adults Who Work With Teens: How to Help Teens Manage and Prevent Risk

The last rung of the training ladder features a bold, innovative approach to teenage violence, self-defeating actions and risky behavior by focusing on the adults who provide the critical direction and guidance that teens rely upon. To date, teen intervention has focused exclusively on only one half of the vital problem of teen risk, which neglects the all-important role of the adult in the child's growth and development. It is easy to understand why this has occurred. Adolescents in schools, clubs and teams comprise a captive audience and are easily accessible. Adults, on the other hand, are elusive, busy, unavailable, overwhelmed and geographically scattered. Yet their role in reducing adolescent risk, within the family, the school and the community at large is crucial and the relationships that they form constitute the backbone of the adolescent's, and ultimately the community's, defenses against risk and violence.

The Risky Business Developmental Series programs (Elementary, Middle School, High School, and Adults) have been conducted by many public school districts across the nation, some for as long as nineteen years, including **New York** (Yonkers, New York City, Hempstead, Wyandanch, St. Ignatius Loyola Private School); **New Jersey** (Bergenfield, Leonia, Alpine, Clifton, Montclair, West Orange, Newark, Berkley Heights, Edison, Monmouth County Vocational Schools, Youth Consultation Services); **Pennsylvania** (Philadelphia); **Maryland** (Baltimore); **Washington D. C.; Illinois** (Chicago); **Ohio** (Cleveland, Lima); **Colorado** (Denver, Fort Collins, Logan School for the Gifted); and **California** (Los Angeles, San Diego).

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