

HOW DOES RISK-TAKING DIFFER BETWEEN ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS?

Adolescents tend to take big risks—even when faced with unlikely but consequential outcomes.

It's no secret that adolescents take risks. Some of these risks may be inconsequential, but others can go on to negatively impact the trajectory of a teenager's entire life. And while the U.S. has been pumping billions of dollars into a myriad of different programs intending to mitigate adolescent risk-taking—such as substance abuse education—most don't have a strong impact.

To better understand the mechanisms underlying risk-taking, Vinod Venkatraman, along with graduate student Gail Rosenbaum and Temple College of Liberal Arts Professor Jason Chein, investigated whether the likelihood of specific outcomes—either described in percentages or experienced first-hand—led to adolescents and adults taking different rates of risk.

The researchers found that adolescents took more risks than adults when situations had unlikely, but greatly consequential, unfavorable outcomes—such as getting into a vehicle with a tipsy driver. Furthermore, adolescents were even more likely to make these risky decisions when experiencing the situation first-hand, as opposed to having the outcome probabilities described to them.

These findings underscore the need for risk prevention programs to move beyond simply educating on the consequences of risky behavior, and instead be tailored in consideration with how adolescents are actually experiencing risk as they navigate their lives.

MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- Risk-taking behavior in adolescents impacts not only those taking the risks, but can go on to affect society at large.
- Adolescents were more likely than adults to take big risks with unlikely, but consequential negative outcomes.
- Programs may be able to improve risk-prevention by considering how adolescents experience and learn about risk in their daily lives.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- Adolescents and parents
- Students and educators
- Society at large

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- Do adolescents always take more risks than adults? A within-subjects developmental study of context effects on decision making and processing. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0255102