

5 Fast Facts

About Exploration and Risk Taking in Adolescence

Taking risks during adolescence is an essential part of learning and healthy development. In our adolescent years, we're more motivated to explore the world by trying new things in ways that help us discover who we are, expand our skills, and ultimately move beyond the familiarity of home. Following are five facts about the importance of taking healthy risks during adolescence.

1 During adolescence, **we're more willing** to take risks and lean into uncertainty compared to adults.

This tolerance of unknown outcomes is fundamental to learning and development in these years. Attempting to learn a new skill, trying out for a team, asking someone out, and standing up for a cause all feel very risky—especially during adolescence, when most of us are trying these things in new ways or for the first time.

2 Brain development during adolescence helps motivate us to try new things, and these new experiences help build new neural connections.

During adolescence, our brain **releases more of a neurotransmitter called dopamine** compared to children or adults, increasing our sensitivity to positive feelings that come from trying new things. A surprising or unexpected reward causes an extra dopamine release, which alerts other parts of our brain that the activity or situation is new and deserves attention. This is a kind of amplified learning that's actively shaping the connections between neural systems in our brains.

3 The rewarding feelings from trying something new are **heightened when peers are present**.

Although adults often associate peers with more dangerous risk-taking behavior, peers can also **encourage and motivate youth to take positive risks**. Engaging in activism, standing up for causes that they believe in, or sticking up for someone else all happen in peer contexts.

4 Opportunities for healthy risk taking are not equally available to all adolescents.

Due to long-term underinvestment resulting from racial and economic inequalities, many schools and neighborhoods lack resources for healthy risk taking activities. In addition, racism and other forms of bias often result in **more extreme consequences** (such as suspension, expulsion, arrest, or incarceration) for risks taken by youth of color that might be labeled “learning experiences” when made by white adolescents.

5 Youth need access to activities that can provide positive outlets for their motivation to take risks.

Without healthy outlets, the attraction of risk and novelty can make us more vulnerable to unhealthy behaviors such as reckless driving or excessive drug and alcohol use. Adults can support healthy outcomes for youth by ensuring that opportunities to explore, take positive risks, and learn from mistakes are available equally to all young people. Activities including student leadership, youth activism, and adventure recreation like mountain biking and rock climbing have all been shown to support positive development for adolescents.

For more research-based information about exploration and risk taking in adolescence, visit developingadolescent.org/core-science-of-adolescence/exploration-risk-taking.