

# Teenagers and risk taking

## Why teenagers take risks and why that's okay

Taking risks is a normal part of growing up. It's how we learn, explore, and start becoming independent. Sometimes the risks we take—like running across the road at a red light—feel totally logical in the moment. But there's a reason why our choices don't always make sense to adults.



## Your brain is still connecting the dots

Even though we're capable of logical thinking and can estimate risks, the different parts of our brain aren't fully connected yet. That means we sometimes rely too much on instinct, or not enough. So, we're still learning how to balance risk and reason.

## Risk helps us to grow

Believe it or not, taking risks is part of how we prepare to leave the nest and build a life of our own. Every experience (yes, even the embarrassing ones!) helps shape who we're becoming. It all starts off with which psychological and cognitive stage of development your teenage brain is in.

Robert J. Sternberg, a psychologist, described the complex teenage brain as being like a car, with an excellent accelerator but a weak brake. The big question is.... Who is your brake? Your brake is the person you trust the most and who always supports you. Your brake might be more than one person, or a group of people.







## Peer pressure and the brain

Teenager's brains are wired to take more risks when they are with their friends. You might worry about what your friends might think of you and your choices, even at times when you aren't together.

Think of a situation where there might be a risk involved. For example, let's imagine you're at a party and there is alcohol. All your friends are drinking and are asking you to join in. But you're under the legal drinking age and your parents wouldn't want you to have an alcoholic drink. What do you do? You know it's wrong, but your friends are pressuring you. Do you give in to peer pressure, or do you listen to your parents' voice in your head?

This is what's happening in your brain...

1. Socio-emotional system: Reward processing is amplified in the presence of your peers and this may cloud your judgement.
2. Cognitive control: The presence of peers appears to deactivate cognitive control regions of your brain.

As we're developing into adults, many of us become hyper-aware of what others are thinking of us, especially our friends. So, we try hard to impress them.





## Why your brain speeds up around friends

The Steinberg (2004) experiment involved 40 teenagers whose brain function was monitored during the experiment using MRI scanning.

Professor Steinberg ran an experiment where teenagers and adults played a driving game. They had to decide whether to stop or drive through an amber traffic light. Half the time, they played alone, and the other half, they were told two friends were watching nearby.



Now is a good time to ask yourself: Would you drive differently if your friends were watching?

Here's what happened:

- Adults drove the same whether alone or observed
- Teenagers drove similarly to adults when alone
- But with friends watching, teenagers drove through 40% more amber lights and had 60% more crashes than adults



The takeaway? We make riskier decisions when friends are around. That's because the brain's reasoning and decision-making systems are still developing during adolescence. Our cognitive abilities, how we think, learn, and understand, are still catching up.

Welcome to the science behind peer pressure!



**Risk, respect and peer pressure: What's really going on**

When we're on our own, we make decisions differently than when we're in a group. In a friendship group the reward often shifts, from being respected by society to being respected by peers. This can lead us into situations we wouldn't normally choose, which is why peer pressure in groups such as gangs can be risky and shouldn't be taken lightly. What starts as a group of mates at school can quickly become something more serious.

**Risk-taking is part of growing up**

Taking risks is a normal part of being a teenager. It helps us learn, grow and figure out who we are. But risk-taking often links to peer pressure—doing something we wouldn't usually do just to seem cool or rebellious in front of others.

This kind of pressure can be tough. It can lead to choices that don't feel right and put strain on your mental and emotional wellbeing.

**Take risks for you, not for them**

Not all risks are bad. Some help you grow and discover what matters to you. The key is knowing the difference—and making choices that feel true to who you are, not just to fit in.

This resource has been created with the help of Lily, age 16.

**If you would like to learn more about your brain development and how to support your emotional health, join our learning pathways for all preteens and teenagers and continue your learning journey. Head to our website below to discover more.**