

Risk taking

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Adolescence is often accompanied by a range of risk taking behaviours as adolescents explore values and peer norms. This is normal as young people move towards independence and adulthood.

The main problem for young people lies in evaluating the potential risks and consequences of everyday behaviour and understanding how mental health, sexual health and drug issues often interrelate. For example, if a teenager engages in risky behaviour and doesn't suffer the expected consequences, they are likely to conclude that the behaviour is not risky at all. This is often the case with drug and alcohol use.

Often teenagers do not see drinking, drug use and driving as potentially risky in the same way as adults. For them, the risk is in social rejection – not being seen as cool - if they don't do what their friends are doing.

Sometimes one risky choice can lead to others. For example, drinking alcohol to intoxication will impair judgement and may result in unwanted sexual activity or violence that would otherwise have been avoided.

Families, school and the community have an important role to play in supporting young people to be happy and socially connected, to provide opportunities and challenges which will encourage responsible choices.



Drug use

Adolescence are influenced by many socio-cultural factors. Family role models and peer influence have been documented as the most influential factors that shape young people's values and behaviours relating to drug use. Having a close and supportive family with strong bonds and low conflict, as well as good parental control and clear family rules, has been shown to decrease the risk of initiation to illicit drugs.

Patterns of substance misuse developed in youth can continue in adult life. Many young people who experiment with tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs do not go on to abuse them as adults, but the earlier the age of initiation, the greater the risk of later substance misuse.

For many young people, alcohol consumption is a group behaviour, with peer group norms influencing their alcohol use. Young people who use alcohol can be at risk of a number of adverse outcomes, particularly those who engage in binge drinking. Binge drinking can increase the risk of injury from falls, assault, road accidents, fights and other forms of violence, and can foster coercive sexual activity and unprotected sex. (Australia's Young People: their health and wellbeing 2003, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Canberra.)

The 2002 Secondary Students and Sexual Health survey by Latrobe University indicated that most common reasons cited for unwanted sex were being drunk and pressure from a sexual partner. In relation to the most recent sexual encounter 22.7% of respondents indicated that they were drunk or high at the time.

Being young and male is a significant risk factor for experiencing alcohol related violence. The younger people start drinking, the more likely they are to experience alcohol-related violence.

Young people are more likely to verbally or physically abuse someone while under the influence of alcohol as well as to be verbally or physically abused