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# **Risky Business**

*By Tracey Middlekauff*

*• For most teens, making risky decisions comes naturally.*

One day while working as a cashier at the Dairy Queen in LaGrange, Ga., straight-A high school student Demetrice Tuttle decided to take $20 out of the cash register. It was a big risk, and it didn't pay off. Tuttle's first time stealing would also be his last: He was caught and lost his job.

"The relationships I had with my coworkers, uncle, and boss were the most negatively impacted," Tuttle, now 19, recalls. "Most of my friends were taken aback due to the fact that it was extremely out of character [for me]. To say the least, everyone was shocked and dismayed at my choice."

What made him pocket the cash? At the time, "I thought I was proving something by doing something thrilling and new," Tuttle says. "I wanted to be different than that straight-A student everyone saw. I thought I was untouchable."

Tuttle, like many other teens, decided to take a risk. Some risks are harmless and fun, such as riding the scariest roller coaster in the amusement park. Others, such as drinking and driving, can be downright deadly. What makes a perfectly sensible teen behave in ways that adults might view as crazy? There is no single reason but rather a whole soup of contributing factors.

**Your Brain**

Taking risks starts deep in your skull. The brains of teenagers are physically and chemically different from adults' brains. Therefore, your tendency to take risks really is, in part, all in your head.

For one thing, the frontal cortex, which regulates impulse control, is not as developed in teens as it is in adults. It works like this: Your amygdala, which lies in the center of your brain, tells you whether a situation is dangerous. The striatum, near the front of your brain, alerts you to attractive situations. If something seems simultaneously attractive and dangerous, the frontal cortex must choose what to do. Teens are much more likely to be swayed by those seemingly attractive situations than adults would be, says Dr. Monique Ernst, a scientist with the National Institute of Mental Health. In other words, the benefits will often falsely appear to outweigh the risks.

There's also a theory that teen brains are more sensitive to dopamine, a brain chemical that, simply put, produces a feeling of pleasure. The thrill of taking a risk--or even making the decision to take that risk--can flood your brain with dopamine. That gives you a feeling of euphoria or exhilaration. Dopamine provides the rush people may feel when doing something like bungee jumping.

**Your Experience**

Despite your parents' arguments that you should know better, you might not. Sometimes the lack of life experience can lead you to make a risky decision. When you learn the hard way--as Tuttle did when he was caught stealing--you're less likely to make the same mistake again.

Lack of experience also contributes to many teens' feelings of invulnerability, that sense that nothing bad could ever happen to you. For most teens, says Ernst, "there's just no feeling associated with the risk of dying or being injured." That's one reason some teens take up a dangerous habit such as smoking, even though they know that cigarettes kill many people.

**Your Friends**

Have you ever done something with friends and later realized it was a terrible idea? You're not alone. The group is a powerful risk-taking motivator; in fact, impulsive, emotional risk taking often occurs in group settings. Gunnar I., 16, from Baltimore, has felt the lure of the group. "Usually me and my friends formulate crazy plans or misadventures," he explains. Some of those episodes included borrowing a friend's mom's car without asking and going pool hopping after curfew. "I take risks only if I know they're not too crazy but something that has a thrill," Gunnar says.

**Choose Wisely**

You are not doomed to take silly or dangerous risks. Here are some ways you can make smart choices.

**Remember your mistakes, and plan for next time.** Everyone makes mistakes--that's how people learn. "Take a step back and remember how lousy you felt when you made that mistake," suggests Jill Weber, a licensed clinical psychologist in Vienna, Va. "Ask yourself what would have happened if you had done things differently, and plan what you could do the next time you're in that situation."

In other words, be aware of situations that might come up. Then you can prepare plausible reasons for not participating--reasons you're comfortable with. The more prepared you are, the less likely you are to make impulsive, emotional decisions.

**Find someone to confide in.** Whether you're feeling peer pressure or the pressure of your pleasure-seeking brain, talking to someone you trust can be a huge help. That may be a friend whose decision-making skills you respect, peer counselors who have been there and done that, a professional therapist or counselor, or even your parents, who, believe it or not, probably took their share of foolish risks when they were your age.

Tuttle suggests turning to peer counselors and staff at a local youth organization, such as the Boys & Girls Club of America (BGCA). "Someone who doesn't know you is an unbiased source of information," he points out. Tuttle says his involvement with the BGCA throughout high school helped him come to grips with his mistake and move on. In fact, his positive experiences there so inspired Tuttle that in 2007, he entered--and won--the group's prestigious National Youth of the Year competition.

**Channel your energy into something positive.** Some personality types--"sensation seekers"--are genetically hardwired thrill seekers, according to Anthony Kontos, associate professor of sports and exercise at Humboldt State University in Areata, Calif. See "Are You a Natural Born Risk Taker?" (below) to gauge your appetite for risk. If you are, channeling your energy into positive outlets is crucial.

Every teen can benefit by putting that natural risk-taking energy into something challenging yet structured. Taking a calculated risk--through supervised sports such as BMX racing or surfing, for example--is an excellent way to turn a potential negative into a positive, Kontos points out. If sports aren't your thing, you can find other ways to channel your energy. The key is to find something you think is thrilling and challenging, whether that's acting in a school play, learning a musical instrument, or playing chess.

**Accept yourself for who you are.** That certainly is easier said than done. However, real inner confidence can help you stay on track and make the right decisions. Finding something you're passionate about and pursuing it, Kontos believes, is a great self-esteem builder.

Tuttle believes that not accepting himself for who he was--a terrific student--played a big part in his theft. Fortunately, he says, the BGCA helped teach him that being himself is OK. "You have to know and be comfortable with who you are," Tuttle says. "Then you can say, 'This does not feel right to me.'"

**Take smart chances.** Risks add interest to life, notes Salem, N.H., high school senior Lauren H. Sometimes there's a big payoff, such as the time she entered a student competition at the suggestion of her business class teacher. That meant spending a lot of time working on her entry and getting her hopes up. The risk Lauren faced was disappointment at not being chosen. Instead, she says, "I got rewarded $500 for winning first place!"

## Are You a Natural Born Risk Taker?

For most teens, taking risks is a phase. For others, it becomes a permanent way of life. How do you know which category you fall into? Look for these clues:

*•* You have a really hard time waiting for things you want.

*•* You crave challenges and new situations.

*•* You have a strong drive to be successful.

*•* You need more stimulation than most people do in order to feel something--for example, needing to speed to feel exhilarated.

Possessing those traits is not a bad thing. Many risk takers, points out psychologist Jill Weber, go on to become successful because of that drive to try new things and achieve. "You just need to monitor it and channel it into positive activities," she says.

## Before Reading

*•* Have the class list risks that teenagers commonly take.

## Discuss

*•* Are all risks dangerous? (*No; some are harmless fun, and others can help young people grow and mature.*)

*•* How does a teen's age affect his or her risk-taking potential? (*He or she may not have enough life experiences and may feel invincible.*)

*•* How can sensation seekers manage their appetite for risk? (*They can channel it into a safe but thrilling activity, such as sports.*)

*•* What is one risk you have taken and learned from? (*Answers will vary.*)

## Resource

*• I've Got This Friend Who...Advice for Teens and Their Friends on Alcohol, Drugs, Eating Disorders, Risky Behavior, and More*, edited by Anna Radev (Hazelden, 2007)

## Risks and Rewards

**Directions:** Read the article "Risky Business". Circle the correct answers for the questions below.

1. Teens can get help thinking through decisions by talking with

a) a sensible friend.

b) a peer counselor.

c) their parents.

d) all of the above.

2. Which part of the brain *doesn't* play a role in risk-taking?

a) the amygdala

b) the striatum

c) the frontal cortex

d) the brain stem

3. What risk did Demetrice Tuttle take?

a) taking money from the cash register at his job

b) drinking and driving

c) borrowing a friend's mom's car without asking

d) breaking curfew

4. Which group helped Tuttle learn from his risky mistake?

a) Junior Achievement

b) Boys & Girls Club of America

c) Students Against Destructive Decisions

d) United Way

5. In response to a risky situation, dopamine in the brain can cause feelings of

a) sadness.

b) irritation.

c) euphoria.

d) anxiety.

6. How did Lauren H.'s smart risk pay off?

a) She got to go onstage at a rock concert.

b) She aced a big test.

c) She won a drag race.

d) She won first place and $500 in a contest.

## Answer Key

1. d, 2. d, 3. a, 4. b, 5. c, 6. d.

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