The positive side of risk-taking

by Natasha Duell
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The narrative that risk-taking is detrimental to young people’s well-being is overused and misleading. In fact, risk-taking is a normal part of healthy development.

People tend to perceive risks as inherently negative. This is untrue. Risks are choices with uncertain potential outcomes that can be desirable or undesirable, like winning or losing money in a gamble. Risk behaviors fall along a spectrum: On one end of the spectrum are negative risks, which are generally antisocial or dangerous. On the other end are positive risks, which are socially acceptable risks with the potential to benefit adolescents’ well-being and with less severe potential consequences.

There are incredible real-world examples of adolescents taking positive risks. Consider teen Olympic snowboarder Red Gerard (gold medalist at age 17), female education activist Malala Yousafzai (Nobel Prize laureate at age 17), climate change activist Greta Thunberg (nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize at age 16), and the Parkland High School students who organized the March for Our Lives demonstration in support of US gun law reform.

Adolescents have a general propensity for risk-taking that can be manifested in both positive and negative behaviors. Even teens who take negative risks (e.g. binge drinking, substance use) also take positive risks (e.g. school sports, civic engagement). This risk propensity is normative and adaptive. Meeting developmental milestones such as establishing one’s identity and independence requires that youth be willing to try things they might not like or at which they may fail, which requires a tolerance for risk-taking.

Schools may be an ideal setting to promote positive risk-taking. Within the classroom adolescents can practice “academic risk taking”, or pursue academic goals (like solving a math problem) without fear of failure or embarrassment. Outside the classroom, youth have opportunities for positive risk-taking through extracurricular activities and social events.

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Reciprocally, preliminary data from my research suggests that more positive risk-taking may also foster greater school engagement. School engagement represents adolescents’ investment in their academic performance and the extent to which their performance is related to their sense of identity. More negative risk-taking (e.g., using substances, speeding on the highway, or stealing from a store) is associated with less school engagement, whereas adolescents who report greater positive risk-taking (e.g., initiating friendships, joining school clubs, or standing up for one’s beliefs) evince higher school engagement.

The association between positive risk taking and school engagement is likely reciprocal. Youth who take more positive risks may be more engaged in their academics, and being engaged in one’s academics is likely to increase opportunities for positive risk-taking. These youth may have long-term goals for academic or personal success and feel they have more to lose by taking negative risks, which motivates them to take risks in acceptable forms.

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Positive risk-taking may also create opportunities for youth to develop a sense of purpose (e.g., by exploring new interests) and personal responsibility (e.g., playing sports on a team), as well as goal setting (e.g., by taking a challenging class at school). These activities allow youth to form stronger bonds to their parents and communities because youth are more likely to receive support from their community for taking positive risks than negative. For example, schools can be an excellent source of support for youth interested in playing sports, connecting with their peers, or developing their leadership skills.

Ultimately, it is important that communities provide young people with opportunities to direct their propensity for risk-taking toward constructive activities. Although more research is warranted, schools may be an ideal place to start exploring the potential benefits of positive risk-taking.

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The Flux Congress acts as a forum for developmental cognitive neuroscientists to share their findings, expand their knowledge base, and be informed of translational approaches. This conference, taking place in New York August 30th – September 1st, 2019, is designed for scientists who use neuroimaging techniques to understand age related changes in brain function and structure.

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