# PRESCRIPTIONS FOR PARENTS -

### MAKING SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PRACTICAL FOR FAMILIES



### **BENEFITS OF RISK TAKING**

Sometimes the word "risk" gets a bad rap. It is common to assume that a "risk" represents an unhealthy or unwise behavior. Although that is sometimes true, there are times when risk is good.

For instance, if an 8 year old sees a snake by the garden, watching that snake poses a risk to some extent, but that observation can also lead to learning about poisonous and non-poisonous snakes, snake habitats, and when and how to handle a snake. The "risk" is a learning tool with real potential rewards.

In the hope of protecting our children, some parents want to reduce all risks. However, children and teens normally seek risks in order to establish their own identities, develop a frame of reference for their environment, and establish self control. When children are not given good risks to explore, they may seek out unhealthy risks such as drugs.

Children are healthier and more confident when they learn that they do have power in their world, that they can address challenges alone, they can accept difficult situations and respond with self-control. How can parents encourage good risk-taking and build competent, content young adventurers?

Potts, Doppler, Hernandez. Effects of Television Content on Physical Risk-Taking in Children J of Experimental Child Psych 1994; 58:321-331.

Byrnes, Miller, Schafer. Gender differences in risk-taking: A meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin 1999; 125:367-383.



## INFANTS and TODDLERS

- Toddlers inherently take risks as they learn to pull themselves to stand, crawl and walk - and fall down numerous times. The excitement of mobility outweighs the fright of the fall - although some children's hesitant temperaments temporarily inhibit their curiosity. Your response to this early risk taking may either encourage or discourage your toddler in his future exploits. Be careful to demonstrate encouragement rather than dismay when you see him fall.
- 2. Parents of first borns often provide "mixed" messages on appropriate risk taking for their toddlers. They encourage the toddler to climb the stairs on the playground slide, and then suddenly realize the dangers of heights and frighten their child with a yell to get down.
- 3. Try to "look ahead" and see what dangers might be present as your child is exploring her environment. Child proofing your home becomes crucial at this stage! But also be far sighted and show your child how to navigate the stairs on the slide without causing fear for you or your child.



### **PRESCHOOLERS**

- 1. Why do so many preschoolers say, "I can't do it?" when asked to try a new (or even old) activity? Sometimes they are just preoccupied or tired of showing you their accomplishments - but sometimes it is because they have already developed a fear of failure. We want to prevent these feelings from developing or help our preschoolers overcome them!
- 2. Break the task down into smaller steps and consider demonstrating the activity. "First you put one foot on this step. Now you can move your other foot up to the step. Can you move your hand up higher now?"
- 3. Encourage your preschooler with your words and smiles at each step. "See how you made your feet climb!"
- Praise the attempt and effort - not just the end result. Praise is specific -"I liked how you tried climbing today and put one foot up first, then put the other foot up on the step." or "I'm really proud of you for learning to climb." Don't speak in generalities such as, "You were wonderful". This message is meaningless, doesn't teach your child, and can in many cases cause the child to internalize a message that says, "I am not really



### **ELEMENTARY**

- 1. This is the age for children to experiment with many new activities but they often need your encouragement to try the new skill, sport, art class, or instrument.
- 2. Parents often struggle with how much to "push" their child to try something new versus accepting a child's fear or anxiety. Trust yourself - you know your child better than anyone! If you can see that your child is too anxious to step into the swimming pool, stop the lesson. Take some time to rethink how important the class is, and be creative in ways to help vour child overcome her fears. (If you feel your child is more anxious than most other children, please speak with your pediatrician.)
- 3. Tell your child a story about a time when you took a positive risk. Admit your feelings of fear or how you hesitated. Acknowledge the difficulty, and then the excitement that came with your accomplishment. Smile a lot your expression should match your enthusiasm!
- 4. One of the attractions of video games is the constant positive feedback a child seeks and often receives as he moves toward higher levels. It is difficult for real life situations to compete with



#### **ADOLESCENTS**

Brain research now documents what parents have known for centuries: the teenage brain is made for "risk taking"! Dopamine is the hormone in the brain that causes us to feel excitement - and dopamine levels are much higher in the teenager's brain. Unfortunately, it also takes much more stimulation (i.e. more excitement and risk taking behaviors) to cause higher dopamine levels, so adolescents are constantly looking for a way to "feel good".

Your adolescent MUST have positive risk taking experiences - with you and your family - or she will look for alternative (and often negative) risk taking experiences that have the potential to cause her physical and emotional harm (such as using alcohol).

- 1. Look for opportunities for your teen to experience "risk taking behaviors" that are positive. Can your teen go with you or go to a camp where he can kayak, participate in archery, water ski, snow ski, go white water rafting, back packing, rock climbing?
- 2. Make sure your adolescent has enough sleep. There is research that teens who are sleep-deprived are more likely to take negative risks. Telzer,

wonderful. My parents just don't know me."

video games - in rewards, accomplishments and heroism. However, it is important for your child to learn to appreciate the rewards that come from overcoming difficulties, learning new skills, and accomplishing goals in the *real world*. This is just one more reason to place firm limits on the amount of time a child plays video games.

See the "shared risk experience" information in the previous newsletter on Connected Parenting! et al. *Neuroimage* 2013; 71:275-83.

- 3. Help your teen find an area in which he can excel. Competition fuels excitement and dopamine release.
- 4. When you "catch" your teen doing something healthy and constructive, reinforce that behavior by showing your approval. Teens need acknowledgement and respect.

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