

Youngsters learn more from good news than dire warnings

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Younger people are worse at adjusting their perception of risk after warnings than older people, the study showed. Credit: amandasause

It's no secret that many children and teenagers see themselves as immune to the risk of accidents and injury.

Now, new research suggests that pointing out the positive aspects of

avoiding [risky behaviour](#) may be a more effective way to modify young people's behaviour than repeated warnings about all the bad things that could happen.

The study, conducted by researchers from University College London and published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* today, involved a study of 52 volunteers aged nine to 26.

The participants were presented with a range of events, such as car crashes or home burglary, and asked to assess the risk of such an event happening to them. They were then told the real likelihood of such an event occurring.

Once provided with the information on real risk, the participants were again asked to estimate the chances of this event befalling them. They were also asked to recall the information they were just given on the real level of risk, to ensure they hadn't simply forgotten the figures.

The researchers found that the younger the person, the worse they were at appropriately adjusting beliefs about the future in response to undesirable information (such as the risk of a [car crash](#) or [sports injury](#)).

However, the researchers found that the ability to adjust beliefs appropriately in response to [positive information](#) did not alter significantly with age.

"Re-framing the information to highlight positive outcomes of desired [behaviours](#) (for example, the positive effect of reduced [alcohol consumption](#) on [sports performance](#)), rather than dangers of undesired ones, may have a larger impact," the researchers concluded.

Exploratory behaviour, which is important for acquiring new skills and independence, may involve taking a certain amount of risk, the

researchers said.

"However, it can also result in aversive outcomes, which is why vast resources have been dedicated to educating [adolescents](#) about the consequences of their risky behaviour," the researchers noted.

The findings "could help to explain the limited impact of campaigns targeted at young people to highlight the dangers of careless driving, unprotected sex, alcohol and drug abuse, and other risky behaviours," said lead author of the study, Christina Moutsiana from University College London.

Megan Willis, Lecturer in the School of Psychology at the Australian Catholic University, said the study appeared to be well designed.

"Given that it's a correlational study, we can't infer cause and effect, though. The authors did make some decent attempts to ensure that variables other than age weren't driving the effect," said Dr Willis, who was not involved in the study.

"We know that regions of the frontal lobe are still developing in early adulthood and these regions play an important role in our capacity to use feedback to guide behaviour. This study provides an interesting insight into the challenges we're up against when trying to discourage young people from engaging in risky behaviour."

"It certainly suggests that the scare mongering tactics that are favoured in advertising might not be having the desired effect," she said.

More information: www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1305631110

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