

A parent's guide to why teens make bad decisions

January 22 2018, by James Mccue



Teenagers may not make the decision they know is right if they're pressured, stressed or seeking approval from mates. Credit: Unsplash/steinar engeland, CC BY

From getting beyond drunk at a friend's party, to some seriously

questionable outfit choices, teenagers often do things that seem outlandishly stupid. But we now know why: the areas of the brain that control decision-making don't fully develop until early adulthood.

A teen's developing brain places them at greater risk of being reactive in their decision-making, and less able to consider the consequences of their choices. So how can parents help their teenagers learn and apply good decision-making skills?

The difference between what teenagers know and do

Most children demonstrate an understanding of "right" and "wrong" behaviour from an early age. As language develops, children are able to give clear reasons as to why certain behaviours are undesirable.

But children and teenagers [have been found](#) to be [poor decision-makers](#) if they feel pressured, stressed or are seeking attention from peers.

So it's reasonable to expect a 15-year-old to know they should not steal. But they are less adept at choosing not to steal in the presence of coaxing peers whom they wish to impress.

The difference between what teenagers know and what they choose can be explained in terms of ["cold" and "hot" situations](#). Cold situations are choices made during times of low emotional arousal. During these periods, teenagers are able to make well-reasoned and rational decisions.

Hot situations refer to choices during periods of high emotional arousal (feeling excited, anxious, or upset).

Hot situations [increase the chance](#) of [teenagers engaging in](#) risk-taking and sensation-seeking behaviours, with little self-control or consideration of the possible consequences of their actions.

The impact of [emotional arousal](#) on decision-making explains why teenagers might discuss, for example, the negative consequences associated with drinking and drug-taking, but then engage in those very behaviours when with friends.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The biology of bad decision making in teens

[Brain studies show](#) the frontal lobe – [which is responsible for](#) decision-making, impulse control, sensation-seeking, emotional responses and consequential thinking – does not finish developing until our early-to-mid 20s.

The relationship between brain development and the risk of making poor

choices, particularly during hot situations, is referred to as [psychosocial maturity](#).

[Research has shown](#) youth aged 12 to 17 years are significantly less psychosocially mature than 18 to 23 years who are also less psychosocially mature than adults (24 and older).

Overall, teenagers' psychosocial immaturity makes them more likely to:

- seek excitement and engage in risk-taking behaviour
- make choices on impulse
- focus on short-term gains
- have difficulty delaying gratification
- be susceptible to peer pressure
- fail to anticipate consequences of their choices.

Helping teenagers make good decisions

Gradual increases in autonomy and practice with independent decision-making are vital for teenagers to become confident adults with good emotional and social well-being. Although parents know [poor choices](#) are part of becoming an adult, most want to protect their [teenager](#) from making very serious, or illegal, choices.

Good decision-making skills can be learned, and there are six key steps parents can employ to encourage better teen decision-making:

1. Be aware of upcoming events that may present teenagers with decisions that need to be made. Listen to their expectations about the events (such as whether they expect to drink alcohol)
2. Present scenarios which may present a risk, or will require a decision (such as missing the train home, friends becoming intoxicated) to explore healthy, or safer choices

3. Encourage your teenager to stop and think. Help them recognise "when in the moment" to temporarily remove themselves from a situation to help them make decisions away from direct pressures (go to the bathroom, make a phone call, text a friend)
4. Provide a [decision-making](#) compass. Although teenagers are not able to consider all of the potential consequences of a situation, to check whether a decision is a good one, get them to consider whether they would tell you about their decision ("would I want mum/dad/grandma/grandpa to know about what I'm about do?")
5. Remind teenagers to ask for help. They don't have to make choices alone. Ensure they save contact details of people who can be available to talk through options if they're in a difficult situation (siblings, parents, or extended family)
6. Use mistakes as learning opportunities. Teenagers may make some wrong choices. Use these lived experiences to generate discussion about where the decision making went wrong, and how to make better choices in the future.

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