

No Risk, No Reward

By GRACE NAYAK | Illustration by MADDIE ROCKAFELLOW

High school is all about taking risks. Colleges seem to be looking for the students who step out of their comfort zones and try new things. Meanwhile, in this awkward spot between childhood and adulthood, teenagers are individually pushing their boundaries as they strive to become more independent.

But, what does it really mean to “take a risk?” Are there positive and negative risks? And, as high school students, how should we take risks in a safe and beneficial manner?

A risk, as defined by Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary, is “the possibility of loss or injury [or] peril.” Risk taking can certainly be dangerous or harmful, from experimenting with drugs, to texting and driving, to succumbing to peer pressure in an online challenge. High school students are especially prone to this kind of risk taking; as stated before, adolescence is a time of pushing boundaries and gaining independence.

A person’s mind will not fully finish developing until they are 25 years old. As stated in an article by the American Psychological Association, it has

been commonly believed that “adolescents were risk machines who lacked the decision-making powers of a fully developed prefrontal cortex—and liable to harm themselves and others as a result.” The brain also develops in other ways: “Gray matter in the cerebral cortex tends to thin, while white matter that connects various regions of the brain generally increases in volume,” according to the Association. “Functional connections between regions, which researchers measure with brain scans that track oxygen usage in blood, also undergo widespread changes during adolescence.”

Other than the developing brain, are there other reasons why teenagers seem unusually inclined to keep taking negative risks, even if they do well in school, are kind, respectful and responsible?

Kashfia Rahman, a Harvard graduate from Brookings, South Da-

kota, posed a similar question when she noticed her teenage peers’ increased tendencies to succumb to pressure and make careless, even dangerous, decisions.

“What was [really] alarming to me,” she said in her 2019 TED Talk, “was that the more they exposed themselves to these harmful risks, the easier it became for them to continue taking risks.”

Rahman then conducted a scientific research study at her high school. She conducted trials with 86 high school students, asking them to complete a computerized simulation of risk-taking twelve times each while wearing an EEG, a headset that objectively monitors brain waves and emotions.

The study revealed that, “the more [that students] were exposed to the risks through the simulator, the less fearful, guilty and stressed they became,” Rahman said. “This caused a situation in which they were no longer able to feel the brain’s natural fear and caution instincts.”

This process of emotions desensitizing as a result of continued risky behaviors is called habituation. In other words, as high schoolers, we need to be aware of the risks we are taking and pay attention to the guilt, fear or anxiety associated with the decisions we are making.

But, as Rahman realized, there can also be good risks—risks that challenge us to explore the world, learn new things and gain more independence in a healthy way.

For example, freshman Anna Petchesky (’27) joined the Kent Denver speech and debate team for the first time this year. Since she decided to step out of her comfort zone, she is “better at talking in front of people [now] and [gets] less nervous,” she said.

These positive risks are the ones colleges are looking for; the ones that give high schoolers new experiences and knowledge. So, while it is vital to recognize the negative emotions associated with risk-taking, it is also important to prevent them from holding us back from new opportunities. As high-schoolers navigating this uncertain time, if we are not sure whether or not a decision we are making will help or harm us, we should look to trusted adults in our lives with similar experiences. After all, high school is both a time of taking risks and learning new things. The risks we decide to take now will undoubtedly affect our experiences in college and beyond.

