

The Red Flags of Risky Behavior

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Drugs. Sex. Smoking. Dating Violence. Eating Disorders. Alcohol.

These are among the risky teen behaviors that trigger the parental worry reflex like few others. We read the headlines. We hear the statistics. We become hyper-aware of stories about kids who have taken forks in the road that have led to life-altering consequences. We wonder: *will that be my kid? Is that my kid?*

It's hard not to panic if you suspect that your child is engaging in risky behavior such as substance abuse or early sexual activity, but it's important to remember that even if your child *is* doing something dangerous, there is hope for their future. Most adults walking around at any given moment can tell you about something they engaged in as teenagers that was risky, unwise or even problematic, but they lived to tell the moral of the story.

That said, it is equally wise to be aware of the warning signs – the “red flags” – that often indicate that a child is wading into unsafe waters:

- **Red Flag #1: Obvious Evidence.** Sometimes traces of unhealthy choices present themselves with very little detective work—a vodka bottle inadvertently left in a car, a lighter found in your teen's jeans pocket during a laundry sort, a small plastic bag containing pills tucked under a damp towel. If you stumble on contraband like this, resist the temptation to confront your teen in the heat of that unsettling moment.

Take Action! Find a time when you and your child are both calm, then simply share your discovery without lecturing or probing. You will likely get anger and denial, but try not to be ruffled by the pushback. Explain that the choice to engage in dangerous behavior represents a breach of trust, and that some of life's freedoms (time with friends, car keys, screen time) will need to be cut short until trust is restored.
- **Red Flag #2: Subtle Signs.** Changes in school performance, unusual mood swings, or shifts in motivation and responsibility may be more difficult to link to a cause. They may be *signs of depression as well as indicators of risky behavior. Talk to teachers and other caring adults in your child's life and ask for their own observations.

Take Action! Gently share your observations and concerns with your child and listen carefully to the responses you get. Continue to restate the expectations you have for healthy life choices. Even if you get an eye-roll or two, rest assured that you are still being heard.

- **Red Flag #3: Physical Changes.** When you talk to your child, what do you see in his or her eyes? Are they clear and bright or heavy and bloodshot? Are the pupils unusually dilated? Be aware that some prescription and street drugs can cause these conditions.

Take Action! Really pay attention to your child’s physical appearance. If you notice any unusual physical changes in your child – from bruising to rapid weight gain or loss to changes in physical coordination – it’s best to consult with a physician who can guide you in an investigation of the cause.

- **Red Flag #4: Social Shifts.** Choosing one’s friends is an important part of growing up. Kids will meet new people, join new groups, change friends, and develop new relationships many times before they truly find the group that they “fit” with. Although it’s somewhat normal behavior for teens, it’s still important to take note of changes in your child’s social circle, especially when these changes trigger other red flags.

Take Action! In general it is best not to forbid contact between friends (including boyfriends and girlfriends) – even when you suspect risky behavior. Instead, set some parameters. Make it clear that your son or daughter’s friends are welcome in your home (even if you have to swallow hard before you say it). Set a clear expectation that an adult must be present when your child spends time at a friend’s house. Don’t hesitate to make a friendly call to the friend’s parent to make sure that everyone is on the same page. Yes, this will drive your teen crazy – but adult solidarity is very important here.

So, you’ve heeded the warning signs, and you’ve discovered that your child is taking unhealthy risks. Now what?

- **Leave the Superheroes to the Comic Books.** Helping your child through this difficult period will likely feel like one of the most wobbly times in your parenting career. You may feel embarrassed, fragile, and scared, but don’t let these feelings keep you from linking arms with people in your community who can help – school counselors, mental health professionals, trusted friends and family members, supporters from your faith community. *Research indicates that these other adult relationships are a crucial lifeline for you and your child. You might be surprised to find out how often you’ll be able to return the favor down the road by supporting others who are going through the very same thing.
- **Seek Healthy Excitement and Adrenaline.** Teenagers are naturally wired to take risks, but challenge and excitement do not have to be dangerous. Martial arts, computer trouble-shooting, drumming, working with animals, creative writing, rebuilding an engine—these are all healthy risk activities (also called *sparks) that teens can do to replace the pull of riskier behaviors like drugs or alcohol. Discovering your teen’s spark may take time, but you’ll never regret the effort.
- **Never, Never Give Up.** Continue to support your child, even when the communication feels very one-sided. If tensions are high and conversations quickly escalate into fighting words, try the non-verbal route—a short note left on a pillow or an impromptu text can help express what every child wants to hear, no matter the age or the stage: “I love you and I am on your side.”

* Depression: <http://www.parentfurther.com/high-risk-behaviors/depression-suicide/signs>

*Developmental Assets Research: <http://www.parentfurther.com/why/developmental-assets>

*Sparks: <http://www.parentfurther.com/your-childs-spark>