

# Teens may be hard-wired to take risks. A new book explains why.

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By Sarah Maraniss Vander Schaaff October 30 at 8:00 AM

Books on parenting are a lot like mix-tapes. They are as much about where we were and what we were going through at the time as they are about their contents. And when you look back at your collection of either, you're reminded of a certain embarrassing innocence.

It was with this recognition that I picked up Jess Shatkin's new book on the adolescent brain, "Born to Be Wild: Why Teens Take Risks, and How We Can Help Keep Them Safe." I remembered my quiet evenings more than a decade before when I could read "What to Expect When You're Expecting" at my leisure, and those moments during nap time when I eagerly read "The Happiest Toddler on the Block." Even "1-2-3 Magic," a book a pediatrician recommended during a phase of foot-stomping, seemed part of the halcyon days when our world was still filled with bunnies and juice boxes and boo-boos at the sandbox.

But adolescence invades like a midnight army, with the pituitary gland orchestrating a covert operation before your watchful eyes. It's not just that you wake up one day and their shoes don't fit, they need a new bra, and you've somehow gotten shorter. It's that suddenly there is another player in every battle, every truce and nearly every decision. Peers, friends, other adolescents; call them what you will, as a parent, you're outnumbered.

"Born to be Wild" is best read when you've had a sense of this new reality. It's also best read with a cup of strong coffee, a highlighter, and the mind-set of a student in a rigorous class. The author is a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry and pediatrics at NYU School of Medicine, and he has a master's degree in public health. His dual perspective is helpful because our ability to raise adolescents capable of managing risk depends on the bigger policies affecting their health and education. You don't have to look much further than the issues of sleep, homework load and early school start times to see the connections. Shatkin highlights those links on many topics, from driving, to drug use, to mental illness.

When reading this book, there are times you want to beg the professor to slow down. But to get to the helpful chapters on what we *should* do, we need to understand why what we've been doing doesn't work. Shatkin is willing to walk us through the

complicated biological and psychological reasons underlying teens' behavior. Adolescence is complicated, fascinating and necessary for evolution, and this book is Shatkin's personal ballad. There is nothing "easy-listening" about it, though.

Shatkin presents new research, as well as insights as a clinician and a father, and offers a few tales about the stupid things he did as a teenager. These stories impress upon us the idea that if this successful and analytical guy once climbed a 30-foot, rusty ladder near live electrical wires just because some kid in Germany "dared him to," then our own brilliant offspring are no less immune to risk-taking.

Shatkin gives us ample evidence to come to terms with a radical statement: The adolescent's brain is designed to make him a successful adolescent. Nature intended these young people to take risks.

"Our hormonally driven, fiery limbic system and immature prefrontal cortex make adolescents highly responsive to strong emotions and once upon a time drove them to explore new territories and fight wild beasts. Terrific. But by and large, we no longer need to fight animals. So, why have these traits persisted? It's not just that evolution takes its time. It's that the same risky behaviors that threaten our adolescents also impart to them advantages for survival." And nature, he reminds us, will sacrifice thousands to save millions.

Contrary to what we often assume, however, adolescents do not believe they are invincible.

"Adolescents believe they're highly vulnerable. In most cases in fact, they think they're more vulnerable, sometimes far more vulnerable, than they actually are to every possible bad outcome imaginable, from low-probability events like earthquakes and hurricanes to higher-probability occurrences such as accidents and pregnancy."

The big takeaway here is that policies that focus on scaring teens, or driving home hard facts about risk, (D.A.R.E., *Scared Straight*, "Zero-Tolerance") don't work. Strategies that do work understand adolescent behavior, brain development, hormone activity and thought patterns. Teens are wired to accept more ambiguity in risk than adults because they see both fear and the possible reward.

Shatkin believes we can help our growing adolescents develop self-efficacy and manage their behavior and emotions and, importantly, stay safe. To do this, he's a fan of behavioral parent training, sometimes called parent management training. It focuses on positive reinforcement, effective commands ("be home by 10" instead of "how about getting home around 10?"), selective ignoring and scheduling. Children raised in this environment will suffer less anxiety and depression and have better self-control as they age, it is believed, because an environment of positive parenting slows the growth of the brain's flight or fight response.

Adolescents' desire for immediate reward is strong, so parents should learn how to work with that. Shatkin writes about an oncologist who was having trouble getting her 15-year-old patient to take his medicine. Saying, "If you don't take this medication every day, you may die," was not working. Threatening adolescents with death, Shatkin maintains, even in a situation like this, is not effective. It's better to focus on immediate rewards such as the opportunity to drive a car, spend time with friends, go to amusement parks or date, he says.

To address managing risk, he suggests role-playing, or rehearsing scenarios that let your adolescent make decisions. He also suggests identifying some situations as red alerts or nonstarters. If your child is not ready to have sex, hanging out with a significant other when no parents are home would be a red alert. You should identify red alerts, and so should your kids.

In my own household, adolescence arrived pretty much with allergy season, compounding the irritation and watery eyes. It was useful to read Shatkin's description of why some actions or behaviors get to parents. We fear that we haven't done a good job. We want a solution, as much for ourselves as for our growing children. But reading "Born to Be Wild" helped me appreciate that when my adolescent acts like, well, an adolescent, it is a sign that everything is going exactly as planned.

Point taken, universe.

Back to the issue of peers and the watery eyes, Shatkin relates the work of Naomi Eisenberger, who identified the parts of the teenage brain that register physical pain. It turns out it's the same area that is activated when we experience social exclusion.

Shatkin concludes, "Kids might, in fact, do all sorts of things to avoid social exclusion, which to their brain feels just like pain or severe hunger. They might smoke marijuana, drink alcohol, or have sex because the pain of rejection is just too great. The sensation of pain is so strong that acetaminophen (Tylenol) has been shown to make adolescents feel emotionally better when faced with peer exclusion and emotional distress."

Many of us want to spare our children from the pain we felt as teenagers. We want to teach them what we know now, or explain why their reactions are overblown and the risks they are drawn to are unnecessary or foolish. This book is a clear argument to stop putting ourselves in our children's shoes, and to try putting ourselves in their minds, instead.

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