

SAFE Summer: Guidance for Parents and Caregivers on Reducing Behavioral Risks for Youth

Purpose

As the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic shifts, the exhaustion, excitement, and uncertainty following changes to many safety protocols is likely to increase behavioral risks for youth and adolescents this summer. There may be a significant need on the part of many youth to “blow off steam” and “let loose” following what has been an extremely challenging academic year. This document discusses the different ways youth might engage in risk-taking behaviors, and how they can reduce potential harm to themselves and others through preventative behavior. This guidance document is intended to provide information for parents, caregivers, mentors, and other adults to support the safety and good decision making of youth during the spring and summer months of 2022.

Background

Research has found that psychological distress is associated with health and decision-making related behavior.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has affected various aspects of people’s mental health, including issues arising from isolation and pandemic fatigue. This can lead to higher rates of decreased worry, lessened awareness of risks, and increased stress. As a result, youth may be in danger of engaging in more risk-taking behavior.^{2,3}

Many adolescents had more consistent daily routines prior to the pandemic, but the disruption over the last two years has led to a generalized increase in levels of individual stress. It is clear that the pandemic has also affected adolescent well-being and development. The disruption caused by the pandemic has created challenges for many youth during a key stage of development, a time during which most individuals develop and acclimate to patterns of behavior that persist into adulthood.⁴ Adolescents are particularly sensitive to stress, and the disruptions of the pandemic may increase the risk of greater stress later in life.⁴ However, it is possible for youth to be educated about personal effects of the pandemic, and increase knowledge of tools and strategies for better supporting themselves.⁴

Engaging in risk-taking behaviors may be very tempting for those who want to regain a sense of control over the effects of this pandemic.³ During the summer, with warmer weather and vacations from school providing more free time, youth may be more likely to yield to risky behaviors after the long years indoors, restrictions from activities, and limited contact with friends.

What Helps With Risk-Taking Behavior In General

Despite its typically-negative connotation, peer influence can create positive experiences for youth.⁵ Researchers have determined that youth have the capacity to encourage other young people to change expectations towards positive goals, such as following social distancing rules needed during

the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ The remainder of this document breaks down various categories of risks and offers suggestions for parents and caregivers about how to reduce them.

Peer Influence

Youth as a group may have difficulty resisting peer influence, and a poor ability to consider future impacts of their behaviors. This is due to their limited social experiences and exhaustion from the pandemic. Youth are often poor judges of actual risk, which can lead to poor management of their behaviors, emotions, and risk-taking behavior.^{7,8}

In one study with 394 youth ages 14 – 17, researchers found that peer pressure was a key factor in risk-taking behavior.⁷ Youth are more likely to engage in reckless behavior, such as substance use, when they are in social settings with other peers, than when they are alone.⁹ Youth also show similar behaviors on social media, which may increase the rate of peer influence on risky behaviors. Youth adopt behaviors to “fit in” with their peers.^{10,11} For youth, peers’ social exclusion outweighs any negative potential outcomes from risky behaviors, even threats to youths’ health or legal repercussions.¹²

How Parents And Other Adults Can Help With Peer Pressure:

- Discuss what peer pressure is and the risks of peer pressure when making dangerous decisions. Talk to the youth in your life about peer pressure and what it means. Help them understand how their opinions can influence other adolescents, and vice versa.
- Get to know your child’s friends and social circle by talking with their friends and getting to know their parents.
- Identify yourself as a safe resource for your adolescent and their friends. This can look like offering rides when needed, or simply making your home a welcoming place for them to spend time.
- Check in with your child frequently. Know where they are and who they’re with.

Substance Abuse

Just like adults, many youths may manage pandemic-related distress by engaging in behaviors such as smoking or alcohol use. Smoking may worsen COVID-19 symptoms,¹ and alcohol use may result in overdependence in times of stress.¹ As the pandemic has progressed, data show the most vulnerable for developing alcohol abuse are those who reported alcohol intake before the start of the pandemic. These individuals rarely adopted more positive strategies for coping with pandemic stress; instead, they suffered from depressed moods and worse states of mental health.¹ Young adults who suffered from lowered quality of mental health often engaged in alcohol use to cope, and were more prone to negative consequences related to drinking, including alcohol-related accidents.¹

Education and frank conversations can result in a decrease in reckless behavior. To deter dangerous driving and substance use, conversations about these topics may deter driving while using alcohol or drugs. Encourage your child to come to you if they are in trouble or need help. This includes letting your child know that you will pick them up if they are unable to drive in any circumstance. In addition, knowing about resources available for youth to talk with other youth may be helpful in reducing the dangerous behavior. For example, ALATEEN meetings are available both in communities and online.

How Parents And Other Adults Can Help With Issues Related to Substance Use:

- Ensure a proper education on drugs and the dangers of overdose.
- Encourage open dialogue between you and your adolescents on these topics.
- Coach youth around how to establish boundaries between their friends and others on drug use.
- Monitor the social circles of your adolescent. Youth who are friends with peers that don't use alcohol and drugs may be less tempted to experiment.
- If you know drug usage is occurring provide them with resources for medically supported addiction treatment and recovery, or assist your youth in accessing drug test kits, and clean needles,
- Discuss the consequences of mixing substances.
- Emphasize the importance of engaging in substance use only if a trustworthy friend is on hand and can help with safety.
- Have conversations about the long-term legal and health consequences of dangerous drug and alcohol use.

Dangerous Driving And Substance Use

Dangerous driving and drug use are safety issues for adolescents in normal circumstances and have only been intensified by the ongoing stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The high rates of loss, grief, and stress for the general population are associated with individuals being more likely to drink after a tragedy, which highlights an increased risk for adolescents during the pandemic.² Some research has shown increases in drinking, with 14% of the participants drinking more since the start of the pandemic.² Researchers also found that participants turned to alcohol because they felt they believed that they couldn't turn to more positive activities.

Recommendations to Deter Risks Related to Dangerous Driving:

- Encourage and model safe driving habits when youth are passengers in your car, including maintaining safe speeds, adhering to traffic signs, and monitoring you own reactions to other drivers.
- If youth are working towards their permit or learning to drive, ensure they have a trusted adult with them in the car as they learn.
- If youth go out with friends for a night, encourage them to arrange rides with a trusted driver and not to get in a car with those who are inebriated. This is an opportunity to establish yourself as a safe resource for your youth and their peer group.

Violence, Dangerous Or Illegal Activities, And Reckless Behaviors

Researchers have found that pandemic fatigue can lead to risk-taking behaviors as a way for many to express the strong emotions related to the impact of the pandemic.³ Not knowing when the pandemic will end may cause pandemic fatigue, which can lead to further abandoning of COVID safety recommendations.³ According to research, certain individuals may lash out with reckless behavior when safety measures are mandated.³ Due to anxiety and uncertainty from the pandemic, people feel a lack of control around their lives. To reduce anxiety, sometimes people, and youth particularly, engage in reckless behavior to regain their sense of control.³

The warning signs for youth violence have been well documented:¹³

- Loss of temper on a daily basis
- Frequent physical altercations

- Significant vandalism or property damage
- Increase in use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Increase in risk-taking behavior
- Detailed plans to commit acts of violence
- Announcing threats or plans for hurting others
- Engaging in animal cruelty
- Carrying a weapon

Many paths can lead youth to violence. Generally, peer pressure to engage in violence stems from feeling a need for attention or respect, feelings of low self-worth, early childhood abuse or neglect, and witnessing violence at home or in the community.

How Parents And Other Adults Can Help With Risks Related to Violence, Dangerous And Illegal Activities, And Reckless Inhibitions:

- Encourage youth to create an open dialogue with you
- Ask youth what alternative activities they want to engage in safely (join clubs, engage in new hobbies, etc.)
- Consider if youth need an outlet or professional help to cope with the feelings behind these actions

To Protect Against Youth Violence, The Following Approaches Are Recommended ¹³:

- Learn to recognize violence warning signs in someone else
- Act to protect yourself and others
- Do not remain alone with people who show warning signs of violence
- If physically safe to do so, remove the person from the situation that is triggering them, or remove yourself from the situation.
- Tell someone you trust and respect about your concerns and ask for help. This could be a family member, guidance counselor, teacher, school psychologist, coach, clergy, school resource officer, or friend.

Sexual Risk-Taking And Teen Pregnancy

One in five youth reported incorporating new sexual activities such as sexting, trying new sexual positions, and experimenting with sexual fantasies, as a result of their lives during the pandemic.¹⁴ Youth who live alone, or feel stressed or lonely are at higher risk of taking sexual risks.¹⁴ As more people become vaccinated against COVID-19 and we continue to return to former social norms, a rise in meeting with others will occur, which may lead to increases in intimacy. Increased risk-taking sexual behavior may occur and lead to negative consequences. Wearing condoms helps deter the risk of STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) and STIs (sexually transmitted infections), but condoms do not prevent all forms of STDs and STIs.

With resources and education, youth engage in less high-risk sexual behaviors. Open and honest conversations with sexual partners can help ensure that each party is safe and healthy. Availability of various forms of birth control may help reduce the risk of unintended pregnancies, and condoms can help avoid the spread of STIs and STDs. While no form of birth control is 100% effective, efficacy increases with proper knowledge about use. Various medications or medical conditions may interfere with the effectiveness of birth control.

How Parents and Other Adults Can Help Reduce Risks Related to Sexual Behaviors and Teen Pregnancy:

- Establish yourself as a safe resource for your child by having discussions about sex and relationships with them and allowing them to ask questions.
- Create a safe and open environment that does not shame or stigmatize sex to encourage your child to come to you or ask for help if they have questions or need help.
- Help your child find a clinic or doctor they trust and can go to if they have medical questions about sex, would like to receive birth control, or test for STDs, STIs, or pregnancy.
- Help youth to understand the concept of consent, and coach them on how to set and uphold boundaries around what they are and are not willing to do.
- Educate youth on the consequences of risky sexual behavior. Encourage avoiding dangerous situations such as engaging in sexual activity with a stranger, without birth control or protection, or while drunk or using substances that may impair judgement, including illegal drugs or prescription medications.
- Encourage youth who are sexually active to have safe sex by discussing consent with sexual partners, using condoms with new people, testing for STDs and STIs regularly, and identifying resources and service providers in your area. Health professionals recommend individuals obtain testing for STDs and STIs regularly if they are sexually active with multiple people.
- Help youth find a healthcare provider or clinic they can go to for their healthcare needs including sex information, birth control, and more.
- Encourage youth to carry a condom if they are sexually active.
- Encourage youth, especially female, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+ individuals, to take self-defense classes. Carrying pepper spray with a laser site, an alarm, or a taser can result in self-protection.

Sexual Violence: In-person And Online

Sexual violence can occur in many forms, whether in-person or online. The widespread use of technology for dating and connection may increase the risk of victimization.¹⁵ The internet and online dating apps not only increase the accessibility of creating relationships, but provide predators the ability to disguise themselves and gain their victims' trust before meeting them in-person.¹⁶ The online environment fosters an environment where perpetrators can target vulnerable individuals and develop relationships more quickly than in-person, creating potentially dangerous situations.¹⁶

How Parents And Other Adults Can Help Deter Sexual Violence In-person And Online:

- Establish rules or enact parent controls on your child's personal technology devices for online dating apps, message boards, and other online spaces.
- Discuss the dangers of online dating due to the inability to confirm who you are speaking to. Provide information on the prevalence of predators that use online chat rooms and forums to connect to youth.
- Have conversations about the importance of consent and setting boundaries during sexual activity. Empower your youth to communicate what they are and are not comfortable doing sexually.
- Identify yourself as a safe person to talk to regarding dating and sexual activity. Listen and offer advice if they have questions, and make it clear their health and safety comes first and before any punishment.

Vandalism And Trespassing

Youth may participate in illegal activities such as vandalism and trespassing. For instance, spray painting, a form of vandalism, may be particularly appealing to youth. The sensory and physical experience of spray painting can be very appealing as a pencil and paper may feel more disconnected.¹⁷ Vandalism is generally not done alone and may be more appealing to youth who are more isolated as it can create a sense of community.¹⁸ Some youth may participate in illegal activities for the thrill.¹⁷

How Parents And Other Adults Can Help Deter Vandalism And Trespassing:

- Have conversations about the legal implications of vandalism and trespassing with your youth.
- Encourage your youth to explore artistic hobbies such as photography, mural painting, and others that mimic spray painting.
- Create a space for your youth at home that is devoted to their hobbies, whether artistic or not, to provide them with a safe space to learn and experiment with their interests.
- Help your youth share their art on social media or in the community to help them connect with other artists.
- Encourage youth to pursue adrenaline-creating activities such as rock climbing, paintballing, laser tagging, or bungee jumping. A shift to more physically stimulating activities may give your youth an outlet for safe and legal fun.

COVID-19 Exposure

Pandemic fatigue and ongoing exposure to preventative health measures can desensitize people to the severity of the virus and can lead to more risk-taking behavior and activities that may increase chances of COVID-19 exposure.³ It may be tempting to engage in more risk-taking activities such as attending large parties or events, traveling, sharing food and beverages with other individuals, and avoiding preventative health behaviors such as mask wearing, physical distancing, hand washing, and so on.³

Recommendations For Reducing Risk Related to Potential For COVID-19 Exposure:

- Stay up to date on COVID-19 health protocols and recommendations in your local region, and anywhere else you may be visiting.
- Get tested before and after large events or gatherings if you are showing any symptoms.
- Have household discussions about COVID-19 health and safety measures that are important to you or your youth to make decisions everyone feels safe with.
- Encourage youth in your life to have a fun summer while still getting tested if they have symptoms. Keep rapid tests on-hand at home.
- To decide whether to attend an in-person event, youth should be encouraged to weigh the benefits and the risks, such as whether or not the event or gathering is outside, the number of attendants, if attendants need to be vaccinated or present a negative COVID-19 test, and so on.
- Discuss setting household rules about attending gatherings, events, concerts, and other social gatherings if anyone in your household or inner circle is immunocompromised or has health issues that put them at a high-risk of contracting COVID-19.

Other Recommendations: Going Outdoors

As the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted adolescents profoundly in terms of development, previous research has shown that contact with nature can improve physical health and overall mental well-being, including increased resilience related to stress.⁴ Outdoor activities that specifically involve a high frequency of activity and moderately intense physical activity, such as hiking or biking, result in greater improved health.⁴ A recent study showed that youth who had high rates of outdoor play before the pandemic tended to do better in terms of their well-being. In addition, those that continued to engage in outdoor play during the pandemic were also found to be less prone to the negative aspects of the pandemic, as exercise served as a positive coping mechanism for pandemic-related stress.⁴

Recommendations For Enjoying The Outdoors:

- Encourage your youth to spend time outdoors this summer by taking the family hiking, camping, fishing trips, and other outdoor-based group activities.
- Find day or overnight summer camps that your youth may enjoy.
- Invite family and friends over for outside barbecues, sports, or swimming (either at home or at a park or pool).

Summary

Although risky activities may be tempting, youth who are aware of both potential negative consequences as well as safe, healthy alternatives can maintain their health and avoid negative outcomes of risky behavior. Many possible alternatives to risky activities exist for youth to enjoy an engaged summer. To best prepare youth, emphasize appointing a designated driver, have a condom on hand, carry pepper spray or an alarm for self-protection, wear a mask at indoor gatherings, and be comfortable setting boundaries and speaking up.

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