



# RISK-taking behaviours

We probably all know of someone who has had an accident that could have been prevented. Some of these accidents happen because the victim engages in risk-taking behaviour. Normally when we think of risk-taking behaviours, we associate them with adolescents who often drive too fast, drink too much and experiment with drugs. But young children also can – and do – engage in such behaviours.

## Causes

Some children with certain disabilities, for instance children with Downs Syndrome or Autism, are more prone to be compulsive climbers and may be oblivious to risks to their own safety. There are other children, however, where the behaviour is less expected and may be caused by other factors. For instance, studies show that there is a connection between violent behaviour and some inherited traits, and that they may be triggered by the biochemistry of the brain. Psychologists argue that risk-taking could have a number of possible causes. For instance, children may focus on only selected information, dismissing other relevant information (including risks) as insignificant, with the result that they are unable to connect cause with effect. Another reason for risk-taking behaviour has been attributed to the child's motivation for controlling events, regardless of the risk, rather than let adults maintain control.

## Signs

Some, or all of the following signs or characteristics, are likely to be found

in a child who engages in risk-taking behaviour:

- impulsivity;  
—underestimating uncertainties  
—overestimating the probability of a successful outcome  
—seeking excitement and novelty;
- learning difficulties;
- low IQ; and
- fearlessness.

## Anecdote

A four-year-old child was playing at preschool, spending short periods of time exploring the various activities. Suddenly he ran over to the animal enclosure, opened the gate and lay down in front of the rabbit's water container, slurping up its contents.

Both risk-taking and aggressive behaviours are more commonly found in males. At the same time, a child who takes risks or who acts violently is likely to have learnt this behaviour by watching others. Risk-taking behaviour has been connected to aggression, and in the case of a child who is also violent, he or she may be acting out behaviour observed at home or on television, or on video or computer games that he or she may have played.

Viewing either real or 'pretend' violence, as well as actions without consequences, increases copycat behaviour. As a recent study of children's television programs found, there was at least one instance of unsafe, imitable behaviour without consequences (i.e. without the person being hurt) in 47 per cent of these programs. It has similarly been found

that viewing violent behaviour on the screen increases:

- self-protective behaviours;
- mistrust of others;
- desensitisation to violence, resulting in a callous attitude to hurting others;
- appetite for violence;
- the use of violence to obtain a desired object; and
- conversely, decreases the likelihood of helping someone being hurt by others.

## Anecdote

A three-year-old boy in a child care centre climbed up to the top of a stack of 20 stackable beds, and bounced around up there, taunting his teachers: 'You can't get me, you can't get me!' A group of children gathered around the teacher, who had hurried over to the stacked beds. The teacher was encouraging the boy, who was squashing himself against the wall, to come over to her waiting arms. He avoided her, calling out to one of his friends, 'Come up here Joe, I'll let you come up!' Joe looked pleased at being singled out, and prepared to join his friend.

## Solutions

The American Psychological Association urges us to identify children who exhibit risk-taking behaviour early, and engage them in preventative programs, which should be continued through to adolescence in order to have the best chances of a successful outcome. A meeting with parents is recommended as a first step to ascertain the amount of media violence the child is exposed to

(including computer games). Parents can be encouraged to put away all violent-type toys such as guns and superhero figures for a while, and to substitute children's risk-taking/violent media viewing with more pro-social games and programs. In the child care setting an *Individual Management Plan* should be developed once observations have been completed. *The Individual Management Plan* would aim to teach:

- impulse control (e.g. taking a little time to think before acting);
- problem solving;
- anger control (e.g. identifying and expressing feelings rather than acting out);
- exploration of the difference between socially constructive and destructive risk-taking (for instance, being heroic without causing risk to

self or others); and

- decision making techniques (for instance, weighing up 'fors' and 'againsts' in taking an action).

The acquisition of the above skills can be broken down into teachable units, and child care staff can monitor improvements in the frequency of the child's risk-taking behaviours. If the risk-taking behaviours continue or even escalate despite these measures, parents should be encouraged to consult with a paediatrician and a child psychologist.

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