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DUBAI HEALTH AUTHORITY

Protecting Adolescent Wellbeing Guide:

Understanding and Addressing Risky Behaviours

Purpose of This Guide

This guide aims to help parents and caregivers understand risky adolescent behaviours, recognise early warning signs, and respond to them effectively and supportively, and to prevent physical and psychological harm associated with risky challenges, especially digital ones.

Introduction

Adolescence is a period of rapid physical, emotional, and social development. During this stage, some teenagers may experiment behaviours that place their & others' health or safety at risk. Understanding these behaviours helps parents respond calmly, effectively, and protectively.

What are Risky Teen Behaviours?

Risky behaviours are actions that may lead to physical, psychological, social, or educational harm to the adolescent or others.

These include:

1.

Behavioural risks:
Aggression, truancy, self-harm, rule breaking.

2.

Substance-related risks:
Smoking, vaping, other

3.

Digital risks:
Online challenges, cyberbullying.

4.

Emotional risks:
Anxiety, depression.

5.

Social risks:
Peer pressure, isolation.

6.

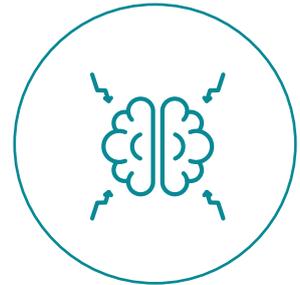**Others**

Why Teenagers Engage in Risky Behaviours?

These behaviors are due to several overlapping factors, most notably:

Peer pressure and desire for acceptance and belonging & fear of rejection or ridicule.

Increased sensitivity to reward and excitement.

Ongoing brain development affecting impulse control and decision-making.

Academic pressure and fear of failure.

Emotional stress, anxiety, or depression.

Identity formation curiosity and boundary testing.

Lack of clear rules or parental supervision.

Seeking attention on social media.

Influence of social media and digital trends.

Online Risky Challenges and Digital Trends

These are behaviours promoted through digital platforms to gain attention, likes, or views. They often do not show the real consequences or resulting injuries, which increases the risk of imitation. Through the following platforms:

1.

Short-form video platforms to amplify imitation.

2.

Messaging apps that increase secrecy and peer pressure.

3.

Gaming and live-streaming platforms that may encourage risky performance.

Dangerous Dares and Challenges Students May Face

1 **Breath-holding or choking challenges:**
- Breath-holding until loss of consciousness.
- Choking or blackout games.

2 **Extreme physical challenges:**
- Jumping from heights.
- Running into traffic or across roads.
- Climbing buildings or riding on moving vehicles.

3 **Pain-tolerance or harm-based dares:**
- Burning the skin.
- Slapping or hitting challenges.
- Consuming extremely spicy or harmful substances.

4 **Self-harm challenges:**
- Cutting or scratching behaviours.
- Starvation or dehydration dares.

5 **Abuse or bullying-based dares:**
- Filming or sharing humiliating pranks.
- Forcing peers into embarrassing or degrading acts.

Health Consequences of Dangerous Challenges

It is essential that parents are familiar with the fact that these challenges can lead to serious health consequences, including:

Breath-Holding or Choking Challenges May Lead To:

- Loss of consciousness.
- Brain damage due to lack of oxygen.
- Seizures.
- Cardiac arrest.
- Sudden death.

Dangerous Physical dares May Lead To:

- Head injuries or concussion.
- Fractures and spinal injuries.
- Internal bleeding.
- Permanent disability or death.

Pain or Injury Challenges May Lead To:

- Burns and infections.
- Nerve damage.
- Permanent scarring.
- Chronic pain.

Imitating Self-Harm Increases the Risk of:

- Repeated self-harm.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Serious self-harm thought.

Substance-Use Challenges May Lead To:

- Poisoning.
- Respiratory failure.
- Addiction.
- Long-term damage to the brain, liver, or lungs.

Humiliation and Bullying Challenges Are Associated With:

- Severe psychological distress.
- Anxiety and depression.
- School refusal.
- Self-harm thoughts.

The Role of Parents

Parents are the first line of protection. Through guidance, emotional support, supervision, and clear boundaries, parents help reduce risk and promote healthy development. Through:

(A)

Talking to Your Teenager

How should parents talk to their teenager?

- Choose a calm and appropriate time.
- Listen without judgment or criticism.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Focus on safety rather than punishment.
- Build trust and mutual respect.

(B)

Setting Healthy Boundaries

Clear, age-appropriate boundaries provide structure and safety. Rules should be discussed openly, applied consistently, and reviewed regularly as the teenager grows.

(C)

Setting Healthy Digital Boundaries

- Establish clear, age-appropriate rules.
- Discuss acceptable online behaviour.
- Use monitoring tools as protection, not punishment.
- Hold regular conversations about digital content.

The Role of Parents

(D)

Assess their Emotional Vulnerability

Teen stress and emotional difficulties may present as risky or challenging behaviour. Academic pressure, social stress, and digital exposure can increase vulnerability. Emotional support and early recognition of distress are critical protective factors.

Children are more likely to engage in risky dares if they are:

- Experiencing stress, bullying, or loneliness.
- Struggling with self-esteem.
- Seeking validation or attention.
- Coping with family or academic pressure.

(E)

Recognising Warning Signs

Warning signs may appear gradually or suddenly. While a single sign may not indicate serious risk, patterns or multiple changes require attention.

Behavioural Warning Signs:

- Increased aggression or defiance.
- Repeated rule-breaking.
- Increased secrecy or lying.
- Excessive focus on trends or challenges.
- Risk-taking behaviours that are out of character.
- Heightened need for peer approval or fear of being excluded.
- Hiding devices or online activity.

Emotional and Psychological Warning Signs:

- Loss of interest in activities.
- Persistent sadness or irritability.
- Anxiety or emotional withdrawal.

The Role of Parents

(E) Recognising Warning Signs

Social Warning Signs:
- Withdrawal from family or friends.
- Sudden change in peer group.
- Avoidance of social activities.

Academic Warning Signs:
- Decline in academic performance.
- Frequent absenteeism.
- Loss of motivation toward school.

Physical and Digital Warning Signs:
- Unexplained injuries, bruises, burns, cuts, or marks.
- Changes in sleep or appetite.

(F) Asking direct but safe questions	**Parents should ask clearly, calmly, and without judgment.** **Examples:** • "Have you seen any online challenges recently?" • "Has anyone asked you to do something that felt unsafe?" • "What would you do if a friend dared you to try something risky?"
(G) What parents should do when warning signs appear	• Stay calm and observant. • Start a supportive conversation. • Focus on safety and wellbeing. • Seek professional help early if needed.

What to Avoid?

Overreaction, shaming, public conflict, fear-based punishment, or ignoring early signs can escalate risk and reduce adolescent disclosure.

Protective Factors that reduce risky behaviour

Emotional regulation skills.

Clear family values.

Strong parent-child relationship.

Positive peer networks.

Trusted adult support.

Know when to Seek Professional Help

Professional support should be sought:

- When behaviours persist, escalate, or
- When they are linked to mental health
- When its affecting his daily functioning

When Should Immediate Help Be Sought?

Immediate medical or psychological help is required if there is:

1.

An injury.

2.

Self-harm.

3.

Talk about self-harm.

4.

Direct risk to safety.

Parents are also encouraged to contact school counsellors, healthcare providers, or mental health professionals.

Key Messages for Parents

- Risky behaviours are signs of stress or unmet needs—not bad character.
- Early communication protects adolescents.
- Safety is more important than punishment.
- The family is the first line of protection.

What Parents Can Do Today?

- Watch for changes in behaviour or mood.
- Have regular, calm conversations with your teenager.
- Know your teenager's friends and daily routine.
- Agree on clear rules for online and offline behaviour.
- Promote digital literacy and critical thinking.
- Explain the risks of online challenges.
- Model safe, responsible behaviours.
- Maintain open channels for disclosure.
- Seek advice early if you are concerned

Parenting teenagers can be challenging, and you are not expected to handle concerns alone. Early, calm support and consistent boundaries can prevent escalation and protect your teenager's safety and wellbeing. If you feel unsure, reach out to your school counsellor or a qualified healthcare professional for guidance.