Go Ahead, I Dare You
A new study asks why teenagers do stupid and dangerous things. The answers might surprise you.

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In the popular 1955 movie “Rebel Without a Cause,” moody teenager Jim Stark makes a bad choice. He decides to drive his ’49 Mercury at high speed toward a seaside cliff in a game of “chicken” with his nemesis, the bully Buzz Gunderson. It’s actually a worse life decision for Buzz, who loses the game and perishes in the Pacific Ocean.

American culture has shifted dramatically in the half century since heartthrob James Dean starred in this cult classic. But some things have not changed, including the fact that teenagers make risky, and often life-threatening, choices. The deadly “chickie run” may be a cultural artifact, but it has been replaced by other risks, including widespread drug use and HIV infection, and adolescents continue to put themselves in harm’s way.

Why? As a parent of three boys, I want to interview the Jim Starks of the world. First I want to shake them by the lapels, but then I want to ask them these questions: What were you thinking? What precisely was going on in your reasoning process when you said to yourself, “Sure, racing my car toward a cliff is an OK thing to do”?

Surprisingly, behavioral scientists have actually done these interviews with hundreds of American adolescents. In order to explore really stupid behavior, they have asked what seem to be really stupid questions: Is it a good thing to set your hair on fire? Drink Drano? Go swimming where sharks swim?

The results are fascinating, and unsettling. While teenagers are just as likely as adults to get the answer right (the correct answer is “No”), teens actually have to mull the question over momentarily before they answer. As summarized by psychologists Valerie Reyna of Cornell and Frank Farley of Temple in the current issue of the journal Psychological Science in the Public Interest, teenagers take a split second longer than adults to reject such patently inane behaviors. And more of the teenage brain lights up, suggesting that they are actually going through some kind of deliberative calculation before concluding what the rest of us assume is obvious.

This is not a good thing. While we tend in our culture to celebrate reason and careful, deliberative decision making, some psychologists are now arguing that the opposite value sometimes holds. The emerging view is
that the brain is a dual-processor, with certain neurons dedicated to systematic crunching of information, and others (probably older and more primitive from an evolutionary point of view) making fast intuitive leaps. These leaps, the new research suggests, may lead to healthier decisions. In other words, impulsivity sometimes trumps logic and caution.

But here’s the counterintuitive rub. It has long been assumed (and taught) that teenagers do stupid things because they can’t think very far into the future and therefore can’t fathom harm or death. But according to Reyna and Farley’s review of the scientific literature, there is no evidence for the “myth of immortality.” Indeed, they demonstrate that if anything teenagers overestimate the risks of such things as drunk driving and unprotected sex. They just do them anyway. Why? Because they have weighed the risks and weighed the benefits and made a cold calculation that the benefits outweigh the risks. That benefit may be immediate pleasure, as with drugs and sugary foods, or the emotional connectedness that comes with fitting in.

So much for teenage capriciousness. In fact, Reyna and Farley argue, as teenagers develop into adults they become more, not less, intuitive and automatic and “irrational.” In the jargon of psychology, they become “fuzzier” in their thinking, and more apt to be guided by the “gist of the matter” rather than get bogged down in a mess of details. Here is another example from Reyna and Farley: Adults don’t spend a millisecond when asked if they want to play Russian roulette: The essential gist is “possibility of catastrophe” and however remote that possibility it’s enough to make a quick and final decision. Less mature minds might calculate the number of bullets, number of chambers, probabilities, etc. Guess who makes the wiser life choice.

So what does this mean for keeping our kids alive through this perilous transition? There are some concrete public health lessons here, Reyna and Farley conclude: Supplying teenagers with yet more information or more precise information about risk is unlikely to lead to any significant change in behavior. Indeed, such interventions could backfire, since most adolescents already overestimate perils of risky behavior. So, for example, trying to teach teenagers to “drink responsibly” is probably an unwise strategy, since it plays right into their immature habit of overthinking everything. It would make more sense, in light of the new research, to enforce drinking ages and restrict teenage driving and otherwise eliminate opportunities for risk.

Ultimately, psychologists would like to teach adolescents to think categorically—to make sweeping, automatic gist-based decisions about life: “unprotected sex bad,” “illegal drugs bad.” This is obviously a lot harder than it sounds. Plus teenagers are always a couple of steps ahead of adults in inventing new categories of deadly behavior. If it’s not playing chicken in a ’49 Merc, then it’s raving with ecstasy, and if not ecstasy it’s . . . well, who knows?

Wray Herbert writes the “We’re Only Human . . .” blog, which appears at www.psychologicalscience.org/onlyhuman.

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