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Psychologist Explains Teens' Risky Decision-making Behavior

Science Daily — Meg Gerrard will be the first to admit that unraveling the adolescent mind is not an easy thing. Like most parents, she's even asked her teen daughters, "What were you thinking?" after one of them was caught in a risky behavior

But now it's Gerrard -- an Iowa State University psychology professor -- who has tried to answer that question scientifically through analysis of research from the last 12 years on adolescent risk-taking. She was invited by the Association of Psychological Science to deliver a presentation titled "A Dual Process Approach to Adolescent Decision-Making: Applications to Cancer Risk and Prevention" at its annual convention last week in Washington, D.C.

Her analysis included research she conducted with ISU colleagues on more than 10,000 youths from across the country regarding such things as smoking, use of alcohol and/or drugs, or practicing unsafe sex. She's found that one of the biggest reasons teens are so hard to figure out is because there is an impulsive element to their behavior.

"There's actually been a series of studies we've done over the last 10 or 12 years designed specifically to ask questions about what's going through their heads, or what's not going through their heads as they're making these decisions," she said. "And what's not going through their heads is a big part of the story.

"What's novel about this research is that we've demonstrated that quite a bit of adolescent decision-making is not reasoned on -- on any level," she said. "It's not because it's motivated behavior, or they've thought about how much they want to do it. It's because they just do it."

Her presentation detailed two ways humans process information to make decisions -- a more reasoned path that leads to intention to engage in a behavior; or a more intuitive path that leads to an openness or willingness to engage in a behavior. These two modes are always active in everybody, but a situation may lead an adolescent in one direction or another. Some people are more prone to operate in a more reasoned fashion, while others are more impulsive.

According to Gerrard, prior research on adolescent risk-taking behavior has treated teens like adults and assumed that they make reasoned decisions that lead to intentions to engage in specific behaviors. But she's found that their decisions are often not planned or even premeditated. Instead, they're reactive to "risk-conducive" circumstances that usually involve friends and peers.

"Parents ask kids, 'What were you thinking?' and they say, 'I don't know.' And they really don't know what they were thinking," she said.

Gerrard said that the initial risk-taking experience will influence an adolescent's intention to repeat the behavior in the future. They do consult their conscience over risk-taking, but not always in a classic "good vs. evil" way.

"From a kid's perspective, if you're operating in this more reasoned, thoughtful [experienced] mode -- then you have the proverbial devil and the angel over your shoulder," she said. "If you're operating in the more experiential [impulsive] mode, you don't even know the angel is there. Those things are not in your mind at all, and the devil's only saying, 'This could be interesting.'"

But the research indicates it's not just the devil that made them do it. When it comes to the impulsive mode, image is everything -- specifically distinct social images of the kind of person who engages in specific risk behaviors.

The good news, according to Gerrard, is that those images can be easily shaped so parents can steer their kids from future risky decisions.

"Kids have these images or prototypes in their heads of what kind of kid does this," she said. "There's a lot of agreement about these prototypes. They're formed very early -- we have evidence that they're formed when kids are 7 to 8 years old -- and it's not that difficult to change them. Oftentimes kids who are not willing to engage in a risk behavior are not willing because they don't have a favorable prototype [of someone engaging in that risk behavior]."

But Gerrard's study suggests that parents should really use two approaches when trying to keep kids from adopting risk behaviors.

"What I think most parents and most prevention programs try and do is get kids to think about the potential negative consequences before they engage in a behavior. That's good, but it's not enough," she said. "It needs reinforcement and you need to change how they think about people who exhibit those risky behaviors."

Gerrard hopes to change the way people think about teen risk-taking behavior through her research.

Note: This story has been adapted from a news release issued by Iowa State University.