SUNDAY GAZETTE

Date: Sunday, November 05, 2017
Location: SCHENECTADY, NY
Circulation (DMA): 57,427 (56)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (S)
Page: 2
Section: Life & Arts
Keyword: Born to Be Wild

FAMILY

Book explains why teens may be wired to take risks

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Special to The Washington Post

Books on parenting are a lot like mix-tapes. They are as much about where we were and what we were going through at the time as they are about their contents. And when you look back at your collection of either, you're reminded of a certain embarrassing innocence.

It was with this recognition that I picked up Jess Shatkin's new book on the adolescent brain, "Born to Be Wild: Why Teens Take Risks, and How We Can Help Keep Them Safe." I remembered my quiet evenings more than a decade before when I could read "What to Expect When You're Expecting" at my leisure, and those moments during nap time when I eagerly read "The Happiest Toddler on the Block." Even "1-2-3 Magic," a book a pediatrician recommended during a phase of foot-stomping, seemed part of the halcyon days when our world was still filled with bunnies and juice boxes and boo-boos at the sandbox.

But adolescence invades like a midnight army, with the pituitary gland orchestrating a covert operation before your watchful eyes. "Born to be Wild" is best read when you've had a sense of this new reality. It's also best read with a cup of strong coffee, a highlighter and the mind-set of a student in a rigorous class. The author is a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry and pediatrics at NYU School of Medicine, and he has a master's degree in public health. His dual perspective is helpful because our ability to raise adolescents capable of managing risk depends on the bigger policies affecting their health and education. You don't have to look much further than the issues of sleep, homework load and early school start times to see the connections. Shatkin highlights those links on many topics, from driving, to drug use, to mental illness.

Shatkin presents new research, as well as insights as a clinician and a father, and offers a few tales about the stupid things he did as a teenager. These stories impress upon us the idea that if this successful and analytical guy once climbed a 30-foot, rusty ladder near live electrical wires just because some kid in Germany "dared him to," then our own brilliant offspring are no less immune to risk-taking.

Shatkin gives us ample evidence to come to terms with a radical statement: The adolescent's brain is designed to make him a successful adolescent. Nature intended these young people to take risks.

"Our hormonally driven, fiery limbic system and immature prefrontal cortex make adolescents highly responsive to strong emotions and once upon a time drove them to explore new territories and fight wild beasts. Terrific. But by and large, we no longer need to fight animals. So, why have these traits persisted? It's not just that evolution takes its time. It's that the same risky behaviors that threaten our adolescents also impart to them advantages for survival." And nature, he reminds us, will sacrifice thousands to save millions.

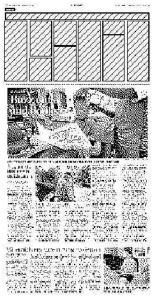
Contrary to what we often assume, however, adolescents do not believe they are invincible.

"Adolescents believe they're highly vulnerable. In most cases in fact, they think they're more vulnerable, sometimes far more vulnerable, than they actually are to every possible bad outcome imaginable, from low-probability events like earthquakes and hurricanes to higher-probability occurrences such as accidents and pregnancy."

The big takeaway here is that policies that focus on scaring teens, or driving home hard facts about risk, (D.A.R.E., Scared Straight, "Zero-Tolerance") don't work. Strategies that do work understand adolescent behavior, brain development, hormone activity and thought patterns. Teens are wired to accept more ambiguity in risk than adults because they see both fear and the possible reward.

Shatkin believes we can help our growing adolescents develop self-efficacy and manage their behavior and emotions and, importantly, stay safe. To do this, he's a fan of behavioral parent training, sometimes called parent management training. It focuses on positive reinforcement, effective commands ("be home by 10" instead of "how about getting home around 10?"), selective ignoring and scheduling. Children raised in this environment will suffer less anxiety and depression and have better self-control as they age, it is believed, because an environment of positive parenting slows the growth of the brain's flight-or-fight response.

Adolescents' desire for immediate reward is strong, so parents should learn how to work with that. Shatkin writes about an oncologist who was having trouble getting her 15-year-old patient to take his medicine. Saying, "If you don't take this medication every day, you may die," was not working. Threatening adolescents with death, Shatkin maintains, even in a situation like this, is not effective. It's better to focus on immediate rewards such as the opportunity to drive a car, spend time with friends, go to amusement parks or date, he says.



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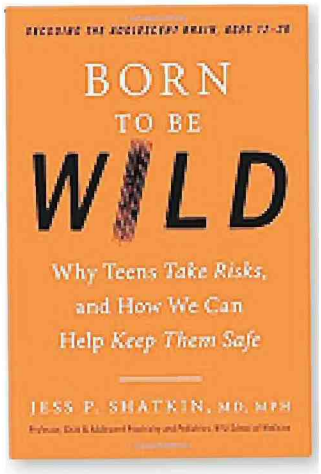

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