

a Therapist City or Zip



Davi
ABC

[Find a Therapist](#)

[Topics](#)

[Get Help](#)

[Magazine](#)

[Tests](#)

[Ex](#)

Unraveling the Teenage Mind

A interview with "Born to Be Wild" author Jess Shatkin.

Like 5

Posted Oct 13, 2017

[SHARE](#)

[TWEET](#)

[EMAIL](#)

[MORE](#)

Why adolescents do the things they do has perplexed ex-adolescents for many generations. Over the years a number of theories have emerged to explain everything from the incredibly foolish yet funny things we can view in movies and YouTube videos to the horrible tragedies we hear about all too often.

For those looking for some answers, a great new source is *Born to Be Wild: Why Teens Take Risk and How We Can Help Keep Them Safe* by child psychiatrist Jess Shatkin, a professor at the New York University Child Study Center and host of the SiriusXM radio show "About Our Kids."

The first part of the book outlines some of the core drivers of an adolescent [brain](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/neuroscience) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/neuroscience>). In these chapters, Shatkin offers lucid arguments that dispel many of the popular myths about [adolescence](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/adolescence) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/adolescence>) (a period that, when it comes to the brain, extends well into ones 20s for most people). No, actually, teens don't think that they are invincible and often, in fact, have a heightened sense of danger. And some of those risky choices that adolescents often go for while adults pass, they can stem from a teen actually spending more mental energy "weighing the odds" than the typical grown-up.

Shatkin conceptualizes many of the prevailing forces that exert influence in adolescence, such the intense need to be with groups, not to a "brain in progress" model of development but rather as an evolutionarily selected strategy that, at least in the past, made a lot of sense. Lest readers think, however, that such a premise is a going to be a rationalization to just let "teens be teens," rest assured that Shatkin, through his extensive clinical experience, understands full well the negative and sometimes deadly consequences that can result from risky actions and poor [decision making](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/decision-making) ([https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/decision-](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/decision-making)

author, while offering practical strategies that [parents](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting) (https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting), schools, and mental [health](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/health) (https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/health) clinicians can take to improve their relationships with teens and help them navigate this wonderful but challenging part of their life safely.

The writing style of this book is friendly, conversational, and non-judgmental. Shatkin very deftly blends his experience as an academic, a practicing physician, and a father into the text. He can discuss the negative impact of too much screen time on a developing brain while also being sympathetic to so many of us who struggle mightily with this issue. At the end of the book, I marveled over how the vast amount of scientific knowledge that was conveyed went down so easily.

Reading *Born to Be Wild* also sparked some questions which I put to the author. His replies are as follows:

Q. In the book you are open about the fact that, as an adolescent, you were not someone who managed to avoid making decisions that you now think may not have been the greatest. How did that personal experience color your approach with the book and your approach to adolescent patients?

A: We learn in all sorts of ways, and one of the most important ways we learn as adolescents is by experiencing the world. Sometimes, this means taking risks, and as I say in the book, not all risk-taking is bad. Some risks are great to take, like trying out for the football [team](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/teamwork) (https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/teamwork) like I did my first year of high school. I was eventually able to channel my risk-taking behavior away from fast cars and [drugs](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/psychopharmacology) (https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/psychopharmacology) and [alcohol](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/alcohol) (https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/alcohol) and into intellectual rigor and physical fitness. And I found, in fact, that studying hard and then asserting my ideas in front of others, or training to run a fast mile, was plenty risky. That took a lot of perseverance and courage. So, with my patients, and with my two teens at home, I try to help them see that risk-taking isn't just about climbing an electrical tower; it's also about working hard and asserting yourself, and that's extremely satisfying and much healthier in the long run.

Q. There is often this notion that adolescents almost need to experience a phase of taking more risks as a prerequisite to later adult functioning. Do you think that is true?

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

A: I think that some risk-taking is to be expected. As I said, it's part of how we learn about the world. But remember that not all risk-taking is thrill-seeking (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sensation-seeking>), and I don't see thrill-seeking risk as a prerequisite for everyone's normal development. Some people don't take many risks and do just fine. For example, we know that if you don't try marijuana (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/cannabismarijuana>) by the time you're around 26, there's almost no chance you'll ever try marijuana. Marijuana use is a risk factor for all sorts of negative outcomes like other substance use and mood and anxiety (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anxiety>) disorders, so in this case, avoiding the risk of drug use seems to be just fine. But for those of us who do seek thrills, one approach is for parents and teachers to channel that tendency by providing "safe" risks; things like skateboarding, skydiving, mountain climbing, mountain biking, roller coasters, and go-carting might work for the thrill-seekers among us now and again. But also, camping in the woods; that can be a pretty thrilling risk. I've been camping with my wife and kids and had bears come within feet of our tent—that was a really risky moment and very exciting. Or playing in the school band or acting in a play—those too are risky choices that teach us a lot about how to be more successful adults and have real elements of associated thrill. I'd like to see us provide more support to our schools to present kids with exciting and thrill-seeking opportunities for development that are still safe. That's a lot of what extracurricular activities like sports (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sport-and-competition>) and theater arts are all about.

Q. There are some indications that teens today are making less risky decisions than in the past? Binge drinking (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/alcohol-use-disorder>), teen pregnancy (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/pregnancy>), smoking (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/smoking>) rates are all down. Some people see this as real progress and others as a warning sign that kids are spending too much time on smartphones and not enough time engaged in the real world. How do you see this?

A: I honestly think it's too early to say anything meaningful about these trends, which are just a few years old and don't hold in every area. For example, while it's true that cigarette smoking has come down a few

... be seeing a substitution in risk behavior. In the case of teen pregnancy and binge drinking, reductions to date are blips on the radar. Ten percent of high school girls are still forced to have sexual intercourse and 51 percent of Latina teens get pregnant. Binge drinking rates also remain unacceptably high; over 20 percent of high school students have binge drunk in the past two weeks. So, while I applaud any movement of the needle in the direction of safety, at this point, it's impossible to say if it has anything to do with parents, society, or just the ebb and flow of small changes that occur now and again. If any of these reductions hold in place in the coming years, I would be surprised if they would be due to kids staying inside and playing computer games. If anything, the data we have on video gaming suggests that they may encourage even more risky behavior by contributing to less prefrontal control over emotional brain systems. In other words, I believe that we still have a long way to go and that any of the potentially small changes witnessed to date are either happenstance or suggest that we're headed down an equally risky path.

For those of you looking a non-preachy, highly readable but reliable source of information about how the adolescent brain works and how we best interact with those brains, *Born to Be Wild* is not to be missed.

@copyright by David Rettew, MD

[SHARE](#)

[TWEET](#)

[EMAIL](#)

[MORE](#)

COMMENT 

[About the Author](#) [text=Unraveling%20the%20teenage%20mind%20and%20the%20adolescent%20brain%2035?](#)

[4&display=page&href=http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/abcs-child-psychiatry/201710/unraveling-the-teenage-mind&related=PsychToday](#) [20Teenage%20Mind%20and%20the%20Adolescent%20Brain%2035?destination=node/110763](#)

[David Rettew, M.D.](#) is a child psychiatrist at the University of Vermont and author of [Child Temperament: New Thinking about the Boundary between Traits and Illness.](#) ([/experts/david-rettew-md](#))



[/unraveling-the-teenage-mind&related=PsychToday](#) [log/abcs-child-psychiatry/201710/unraveling-the-teenage-mind&related=PsychToday](#) [ay\)](#)

//faps:
ce //t
bo witt
ok.er.
co co
m/ m/
pe pe
dip dip
sycsyc
h) h)



In Print: *Child Temperament: New Thinking About the Boundary Between Traits and Illness* (Norton Professional Book) (<https://www.amazon.com/Child-Temperament-Thinking-Boundary-Professional/dp/039370730X?SubscriptionId=AKIAIRKJRCRZW3TANMSA&tag=psychologytod-20&linkCode=xm2&camp=2025&creative=165953&creativeASIN=039370730X>)

Online: *Child Temperament Book* (<http://www.childtemperament.net>)

YOU ARE READING

ABCs of Child Psychiatry



[Unraveling the Teenage Mind \(/blog/abcs-child-psychiatry/201710/unraveling-the-teenage-mind\)](/blog/abcs-child-psychiatry/201710/unraveling-the-teenage-mind)

A interview with "Born to Be Wild" author Jess Shatkin

[\(/blog/](/blog/)

[abcs-](#)



[Nature Versus Nurture: Where We Are in 2017 \(/blog/abcs-child-psychiatry/201710/nature-versus-nurture-where-we-are-in-2017\)](/blog/abcs-child-psychiatry/201710/nature-versus-nurture-where-we-are-in-2017)

A short review of one of the most popular debates in behavioral science.

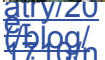
[try/20](#)

[\(/blog/](/blog/)

[17107u](#)

[abcs-](#)

[traveli](#)



[Teen Therapy Without Parental Consent \(/blog/abcs-child-psychiatry/201708/teen-therapy-without-parental-consent\)](/blog/abcs-child-psychiatry/201708/teen-therapy-without-parental-consent)

Vermont takes on the question of youth consent for treatment.

[try/20](#)

[\(/blog/](/blog/)

[17107u](#)

[abcs-](#)

[traveli](#)

[versus](#)

[See More Posts \(/blog/abcs-child-psychiatry\)](/blog/abcs-child-psychiatry)

~~we~~

17

~~de~~

therap

pre-in-

without

=

parent

al-

consen

t)