The Fire Challenge: A Conversation with Parents & Caretakers

Lesson Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, parents and caregivers will be able to:

• explain how typical, biological adolescent characteristics impede responsible decision making.
• identify at least three actions that could satisfy their teens’ cravings for thrilling and novel experiences.
• apply at least 3 parenting strategies intended to reduce irresponsible risk-taking among teens.

Step 1: Introduction

• Explain who you are and how you are connected to the community.
• Explain that you are there to talk about a dangerous teen fad making the rounds on social media. Briefly discuss how teen challenge fads have been around for a long time. The current fad, the fire challenge, is definitely not the first one to show up on the internet and it likely will not be the last. Other dangerous fads include the choking game, chubby bunny, condom snorting, the cinnamon challenge, and many more.

HOOK Your Audience:

• Share a description (or a video clip from the internet) of the dangerous teen fad known as the fire challenge. This challenge requires a participant to pour an accelerant such as nail polish remover, rubbing alcohol, or hand sanitizer on a body part and light it on fire. Often a friend is filming the challenge and posts it on a social media outlet such as YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook.
• Ask audience members for their reactions to the fire challenge. Encourage participants to share both their feelings about the fire challenge and what they might say to a teen who participates in it. List the comments on chart paper or whiteboard.

Step 2: Body of the Presentation

The Teen Brain:

• Review the list of comments.
• Let participants know that before you discuss solutions to the fire challenge, you need to first look into the factors that make this activity tempting to teens.
• Ask audience members how they think a teen would respond if you asked, “Don’t you know it is dangerous to light yourself on fire?” Hopefully everyone would agree that teens are aware that touching fire leads to painful burn injuries.
Step 2: Body of the Presentation

The Teen Brain (Continued):

- This is important because this question is a normal reaction from an adult hearing about the fire challenge but it highlights the different thinking between adults and teens. Most adults and teens understand the risks of this activity. However, adult thinking tends to focus on the risks while adolescents tend to focus on the rewards connected to the activity.
- Provide some basic information that researchers have discovered about the teen brain:

  The brain is not fully developed until around age 25. As a result, thinking processes in adolescents tend to be different than those of an adult.

  Both teens and adults are capable of weighing the consequences of an action.

  Both groups will think about risks and rewards connected to an action.

  BUT – in the teen brain, the scales are already tipped:

  - Potential **rewards are weighted** much more heavily than risks of an action.
  - Teens’ decision-making is **driven by emotion** rather than rational thinking.
  - Teens’ rational thinking tends to decrease even more with **peer interaction**.
  - Social rewards such as **being popular**, seen as funny, or included in a group are particularly valuable.
  - **Social media** such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook provide instant and continued evidence of heightened social status through likes, views, and comments from “followers”.
  - The teen brain seeks novel and **thrilling experiences**.
Evaluating Adult Reactions:

- Ask participants to reexamine the reactions to the fire challenge you listed on the chart paper. Considering the information we have about the adolescent brain, predict why the adult reaction is not effective:

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<td>Adults view the behavior as “bad;” Teens view the behavior as cool, exciting, or funny. Also, teens are seeking peer approval during this time. Acceptance from peers can be more important than making parents happy.</td>
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Alternative Reactions: Opening the Lines of Communication

- After discussing some of the reasons why typical adult reactions have little impact, start to discuss responses that may be more effective. Ask the group to craft conversation starters that focus on the teen characteristics discussed earlier. For example:

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Taking Action:

- Unfortunately, there is no single solution to eliminate risky behaviors such as the fire challenge.
- Open, honest conversations about risky behavior is a start but it cannot be the end point.

Parents and caretakers need to employ a collection of prevention-oriented strategies:

- **Become informed** about the latest risky teen fads and about the dangers associated with them. All forms of risky behaviors peak during adolescence.

- Monitor teens’ use of social media. Set and enforce ground rules.

- Recognize that the teen brain (up to about age 25) is **under construction**. As a result, adolescents do not process rewards & risks the same way as adults do. The teen brain tends to weigh rewards much more heavily than risk.

- **Be involved** with teens. It is developmentally important for teens to seek independence but input from and interaction with adults is still important during this time.

- **Model healthy risk-taking** and thrill-seeking. It is valuable for teens to see their adult role models participating in exciting yet safe activities.

- Provide opportunities for teens to channel thrill-seeking behaviors in healthy ways. Consider both athletic and non-athletic experiences. (See Handout for suggestions)

- Enlist the help of **responsible peers**. For every teen who thinks the fire challenge is awesome, you can likely find one who thinks it is ridiculous. More and more teens are speaking out publicly against the fire challenge on social media outlets. Share these clips with your teen to help dissuade the feeling that “everyone is doing it”.

- Share examples of social media being used in a **positive manner** such as viral posts that are humorous without being dangerous. Show how social media has been a worthy vehicle for public awareness campaigns, charities, and to bring communities together.

- **Flag dangerous YouTube videos:** YouTube has a set of [Community Guidelines](http://www.youtube.com/about/policies) for posting videos. They do remove posts that cross the limits of “Dangerous Illegal Acts” and posts that are “Shocking and Disgusting.” However, YouTube relies on the viewers to flag items that cross the lines. Click on the flag icon under the number of views to send a warning to YouTube administrators.
Step 3: Conclusion

• Review the important points of the lesson:
  
  o The fire challenge is dangerous.
  o Teens don’t think about risky behaviors the same way adults do.
  o Adults can help reduce reckless behaviors by being involved with their teen’s activities, by monitoring social media use, by helping teens find safe outlets for thrill-seeking behaviors, and by keeping the lines of communication open with careful responses.
  o Risky teen fads come and go. There will likely be a new risk to address in the near future. The strategies covered in the lesson apply to a variety of risky behaviors.

• Additionally:
  
  o Validate the difficulty of parenting adolescents. Remind parents that even good teens with good parents mess up sometimes.
  o Reassure parents that many teens will not experience problems related to risk-taking.
  o Remind parents that some of them probably did some wild things back in the day, as well. The concept of teen thrill-seeking is not new. However, the added element of social media turns teen risk-taking into a global event. Before the internet, when teens did silly things, your neighbors heard about it and then the news fizzled away. For our current teens, their mistakes are heard around the world in an instant and have a permanent life on the web.

• Share handouts and additional resources.
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Parenting Strategies:
Addressing Teen Risk-Taking in the Age of Social Media

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Seeking the Thrill

Youth ages 10-25 are biologically wired to seek out exciting, novel experiences. Many teens will feed this need with safe behaviors but some will take unreasonable risks to get the adrenaline rush. Adults throughout the community can encourage teens to take responsible risks by providing opportunities for exciting yet safe activities and encouraging youth to try new adventures within sensible limits.

Need Some Ideas? Check out these suggestions:

**Outdoor adventures** will appeal to some teens. Obstacle courses, kayaking, mud runs, hiking, zip lining, and ropes courses will appeal to some teens.

For teens who want to **infuse creativity** into their escapades, suggest auditioning for a theatre company, performing in a talent show, entering a poetry slam, or take a tumbling or dance class.

Teens can grab some **thrills and spills at the beach**: Raft down a river, go tubing, ride the waves, learn to surf, enter a sandcastle building contest, catch sand crabs, have a scavenger hunt, or enter a cannonball challenge.

They can **go old school** and watch scary movie, go fishing, sing karaoke, visit an amusement park, or roll down a grassy hill.

Encourage youth to perform **random acts of kindness**: bring ice cream to a lonely neighbor, take someone’s barrels back to the house on trash day, run a toys-for-tots collection during the summer, let someone go ahead of you in line, or give a compliment to someone in need.

Tell them to **surprise friends with random ideas**: take a fencing class, try a new food, dance in the rain, join a campaign committee, or host a costume party.

Encourage kids to be **silly but safe**: have a fun game of “Heads Up!” in the middle of the mall, participate in a flash mob, or go caroling in July. Challenge friends to a Minute to Win-It competition, go sledding, or start up a neighborhood game of manhunt.

The possibilities are endless.

More information about teens and risk-taking:

- **Beautiful Brains** by David Dobbs, National Geographic Magazine, October 2011.
- **Dr. Drew** talks about the Fire Challenge, teen risk-taking, and the role of social media.
- **Insight into the Teenage Brain** by Dr. Adriana Galván at TEDxYouth@Caltech, 2013.
- Positive Parenting Tips, **Middle Childhood, Young Teens, & Teenagers**, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014.
- **Why do they act that way?** A survival guide to the adolescent brain for you and your teen by David Walsh, 2014.

Your Source for SAFETY Information

NFPA Public Education Division • 1 Batterymarch Park, Quincy, MA 02169

www.nfpa.org/education
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"You did WHAT??!!"

Adult's Reactions to Teen Risk-Taking Behaviors: Problems & Solutions

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