

Risky Business: Helping Jewish Teens Make Good Choices

*"When people see someone reckless and dangerous, they imagine the person to be a hero.
When people see someone who avoids all risk and lavishness, they imagine the person to be holy.
But these are both extremes, and every person should strive to walk on the path of balance."*

– [Maimonides, *Eight Chapters*](#), (c.1157-1165 CE, Egypt)

On December 15, 2021, Moving Traditions hosted [Risky Business: Helping Teens Make Good Choices](#). The webinar for parents and educators featured Dr. Jess Shatkin, of NYU's Child Study Center, and our own Rabbi Tamara Cohen and Rabbi Daniel Brenner.

We discussed how to foster safe habits and healthy risk-taking, so that the preteens and teens in your life emerge from this period healthy, thriving, and resilient.

Moving Traditions, like you, wants to help teens “walk on the path of balance” and find the health, happiness, and wholeness we know they need to live good and fulfilling lives. A crucial step for adults to take before attempting the difficult work of helping the teens in our lives is to pause to reflect on our own thoughts and feelings around risk-taking.

We invite you to use this exercise below prior to having a discussion on this topic with the preteens and teens in your life.

What risks concern us? What risks do we hope that our teens will take?

We designed the assessment below knowing that what feels okay for you or for your teen may or may not feel okay for other parents or for other teens. We each come to this conversation with our own personal histories and experiences that color the way we think about when it is okay, or is not okay, for a teen to try something that we consider risky. We each come to this conversation with legitimate concerns about the “digital native” generation and with a gap in understanding about how our teens communicate and operate in a world that looks very different in some ways from the one in which we came of age.

Before talking to your teen about the items on the chart to follow, think through where you (and the person you are co-parenting with) would draw the line. Read through each statement and decide at what age—if ever—you would be okay with your teen engaging in the behavior and check off the corresponding box. Note that there are no right or wrong answers here – only your own thoughts about the subject. You may also want to use this as a basis for discussion within your circle of friends or the circle of your child's friends' parents.

When would it be okay if my teen...?

	Middle school	9 th /10 th grades	11 th /12 th grades	During college	After college	Never
Kissed someone they liked						
Texted a photo of a naked body part						
Had sex with someone in the context of a steady relationship						
Had sex with someone they were not in a relationship with						
Attended a party with no parents home						
Had a drink						
Got drunk once a week						
Tried cigarettes or e-cigarettes						
Tried pot in some form (vaping, joint, edibles)						
Got high on pot once a week						
Went drag racing/drove over 85 MPH						
Had a few beers in the park with a group of friends						
(Fill in your own)						

Once you have completed the chart, look it over and, considering your child’s age, pick 1-2 items to speak to them directly about. As Dr. Jess Shatkin emphasizes, direct communication around these issues is a key component of helping our teens think through risks.

Note: If you are co-parenting with someone, it is a good idea for you to each fill out this chart and then compare notes. It is important to be on the same page before talking to your teen.

Jewish Wisdom

We read in the Talmud (Kiddushin 29a) about the obligations a parent has to their children. This includes, “...*to teach them Torah, to marry them off, and to teach them a craft. Some say a parent is also obligated to teach them to swim.*”

This clearly reflects the time in which it was written. Today, many of us have our own ideas about our obligations to our children, and about whether marriage or a committed relationship is a goal. The most curious thing on this ancient list is perhaps the inclusion of swimming as a major parental task.

Perhaps, this text has something important to tell us about our role in helping our children take healthy risk. Learning to swim inherently involves taking a risk. You have to push off the side and doggy-paddle to see what that feels like. You have to learn how long you can hold your breath under water before coming up for air. You have to see how tired your body feels after swimming for 5 minutes, 10 minutes or more and learn when to stop.

Our role as parents and caregivers is not just to teach Torah and a craft—i.e., tutor them for their SATs and help them get into a good college and interview for a good job—but to help them learn to swim, on their own, which they can only do by taking a risk and trying. Learning to swim involves flailing around, kicking your legs, and probably swallowing a whole bunch of water. But that is the part of the risk – the healthy one – that we need our children to take on the road to becoming competent swimmers.

As our teens develop, they need us to help them take the risks that will teach them to become whole, competent, and resilient adults.