

## The Risky Business of Growing a Child

By Ruth O'Neill

Not so long ago I watched my newly licensed teenager bump into the curb as he backed out of our driveway. He laughed at himself, adjusted his wheels and then drove away. I reluctantly waved goodbye both to him and to my last illusion that I could protect him from serious harm. Keeping him safe was no longer as simple as properly installing a newborn car seat or insisting he wear a bike helmet. All the sunscreen in the world will not protect him from the consequences of his own decisions.

Every day teens rely on their not-yet fully mature brains to make choices. New MRI brain imaging technology gives experts picture proof of what generations of parents before us already knew — high school students are not adults. Their brains are not fully developed. Their decision-making skills can be erratic and uneven. At times they lack the ability to assess risks, to evaluate consequences or to control impulsive behavior. Teens crave independence, but at the same time they are highly susceptible to the influence of peers, who likely have equally immature brains. Our teens have made, and will continue to make, mistakes. Some will drive over fire hydrants or speed out of the garage with the door still closed. Some will experiment with alcohol or other drugs, have unprotected sex or develop unhealthy eating habits. Good judgment is just not something one can order online. We know it will take some students longer to mature than others. So what can parents do in the meantime?

“Parents can encourage positive risk taking,” advises Upper School counselor Erin Adams. “A teenager’s main developmental task is to wrestle with his or her identity. High school not only presents opportunities to enhance existing skills and knowledge in particular areas, but it should also remain a time for delving into new interests. Let them explore who they are by trying new things like a drawing class, a different sport, AB Calculus, debate or drama. Encourage them to continue to pick appropriate new challenges. This allows them to develop their own feelings of competence. The process of learning and mastering skills helps them develop a larger sense of self and an identity that is separate from their parents.” By joining teams and getting involved with clubs and service learning, Adams says, teens can also find adult mentors who support them in making sound decisions.

So acquiring an adult brain requires more than just waiting in line behind the scarecrow for the Wizard of Oz to give you one. Our teens need to take chances. They need to move outside their comfort zones. They need to feel the thrill of mastering something that perhaps they never thought they could do. “Adults are always harping on the downside of teenage risk taking, and it’s true that teenagers are more apt than adults to get themselves in trouble,” says neuroscientist Bill Wilson in an article by Nancy Shute, which was published last September in U.S. News and World Report (<http://health.usnews.com/blogs/on-parenting/2008/09/02/7-ways-to-learn-more-without-more-study.html>). “But the fact that the parts of the brain that drive people to try new, risky and exciting things appear to be more developed in teenagers can be a huge plus.” Wilson believes that teens can actually become smarter by “harnessing” the power of risk taking. “Pick appropriate challenges — difficult sports, a tough job, mastering a performance art, or traveling overseas, and the teenage brain is uniquely primed to tackle them.” Wilson also offers two more reasons why parents should encourage appropriate risk taking. First, his findings



**The O'Neill family: Phelan '10, Ruth, Brian and Ariel '12**

suggest that the brain will actually “give” better attention and focus skills to a teen who finds something he or she is passionate about. Second, he believes most lifelong skills are obtained during the teen years.

Okay, so positive risk taking sounds great when it ends with the thrill of victory, but what about the agony of defeat? What about the other “F” word? What about failure? What about the all-important high school transcript? Are we really supposed to be supportive if a junior girl wants to drop varsity debate to play junior varsity tennis? Should we really let a star hockey player quit skating to try acting in the school play? If we allow our teens to make choices that might ultimately lower a GPA, how can that be a positive thing?

During my most challenging parenting moments, I try to remind myself that I am growing an entire person, not just a brain. If I do not let my sophomore take chances, she may not blossom. If I obsess about her grades, she may come to believe that bombing a quiz is the end of the world. If I protect her from disappointment, she may never learn to cope with failure. If I do not let her make her own decisions, she may struggle with separating from me and becoming a healthy adult.

This year all of us will watch our children make decisions, like how hard to study for a test, whether to attend a party or maybe whether to study overseas. Many times they will make good choices, but sometimes they will not. It will be an ongoing struggle for each and every one of us to know when to intervene and when to be brave enough and patient enough to let our teenager find his or her own way. The Blake School is a wonderful, rigorous college preparatory school that offers students many incredible opportunities in this very competitive world. Of course the high school transcript matters, but after 10-plus college visits with my senior this summer, I now finally believe that what matters even more than grades is that my son knows that I trust him enough to let him take the wheel.