

Understanding Adolescent Risk-taking: A Quick Snapshot

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Beginning at puberty, adolescence is the transition from childhood to adulthood. It's a time of many changes, physically, socially, emotionally, as well as changes in the brain. Research can help us better understand why more risk-taking can occur during this stage of development.

What is risk-taking?

Risks have two key features:

- Uncertainty (i.e. unknown outcome)
- The possibility of an adverse outcome.

Risks-taking can vary along several dimensions. It can be:

- Adaptive (e.g. learning to drive) or maladaptive (e.g. trying alcohol or other drugs)
- Reasoned (intentional, planned), or reactive (impulsive, unplanned).

Taiohi brain development

Important changes to the brain occur during adolescence. Two key structural changes that increase the efficiency of the brain are:

- Synaptic pruning of connections that haven't been used

- Myelination of axons.

Other brain changes include:

- Increased functional connectivity
- The way in which neurotransmitters (e.g. serotonin and dopamine) affect the brain
- Increased sensitivity to rewards.

Individual differences

Despite some similarities as taiohi develop, there are also large individual differences.

These differences include:

- Brain development
- Experiences during development up to this point
- Behaviour
- Reward sensitivity
- Gender
- Differing opportunities.



For those individual tamaiti who already find impulse control difficult, this might increase in adolescence.

Environmental factors influencing risk-taking

A number of factors in the environment influence risk-taking by taiohi. These include:

- More independence
- Being with their friends
- Drinking alcohol
- Lack of sleep
- Stress.

Points to note

- Physiological changes, including those of the brain, do not occur in isolation and the context and purpose of these changes is important to understand.
- Brain changes in adolescence do not directly translate to certain behaviours; taiohi behaviour is influenced by both factors in their environment, as well as the biological changes they experience.
- Trying new things is important for taiohi learning and development.

To sum up

Risk-taking in adolescence is influenced by many things, including:

- Social and biological changes of adolescence.
- Large individual differences in both adolescent brain development and in risk-taking behaviour.
- Situation specific factors (e.g. being with friends, using alcohol, lack of sleep, heightened emotions).

How an adolescent develops through this time depends on many factors, including their relationships, experiences, and the adult support available to them during adolescence, as well as their genetics and brain development up until now.

Taiohi are undergoing incredible changes and are predisposed to explore and learn about their world. For some, this leads to concerning behaviour, but it can also lead to positive contributions and activities.



Glossary of te reo Māori words:

taiohi – adolescents

tamaiti – child

Want to know more?

See this article for more detail, and references:

Understanding adolescent risk-taking

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/understanding-adolescent-risk-taking>

Taiohi Need Adults: A Quick Snapshot

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Adolescence is a time of changes. Many things influence taiohi while they make the transition from tamaiti to adult. Relationships with parents, and other adults, are foundational to their health and wellbeing.



Relationships change during adolescence

- Relationships between taiohi and their parents differ greatly. Some experience more conflict and less closeness during adolescence, but many do not.
- How conflict is handled makes a difference. Being able to express a range of emotions is helpful as taiohi and parents work through changes in their relationship.
- A history of positive relationships as tamariki can make this transition smoother for taiohi.



Authoritative parenting

This parenting style:

- balances being warm and loving with clear, firm boundaries. Both aspects are important, and the word 'balance' is key,
- is associated with many positive outcomes for taiohi,
- applies also to other adults in the lives of taiohi e.g. teachers, coaches,
- is sometimes called back-bone, or tree parenting.

Impact of supportive adults

Healthy connections with parents and other adults support the positive development of taiohi. The impacts can be seen in many areas, including:

- better mental and physical health,
- less self-harm, less suicidal thinking, and fewer suicide attempts,
- improved school and academic performance,
- fewer conduct problems and less involvement in violence,

- higher self-esteem, better emotion regulation and more prosocial behaviour,
- lower rates of substance use and dependence,
- supporting healthy brain development, particularly the areas that process social and emotional information.



Taiohi facing adversity

- The more taiohi have been exposed to adversity as pēpi and tamariki, the greater their need for adult support to foster their resilience and wellbeing.
- Warm and supportive parenting can buffer the effects of stressful experiences on adolescent's neurobiology and behaviour.
- At times when parents are not able to support taiohi it is particularly important that there are other adults in their lives who can.

Rainbow youth

- Taiohi with diverse sexual and gender identities face increased challenges during adolescence, including to their mental health.



- Parental acceptance of the sexual and gender identity of taiohi profoundly affects their health and well-being.
- Acceptance is linked to improved outcomes in a number of areas, including general health, substance use and mental health.

Points to note

Strong relationships with adults do not guarantee a smooth ride for taiohi, but they do make it more likely. Importantly, when taiohi do face challenges, having committed adults supporting them increases their chance of coming through that challenge well.

To sum up

- Strong, positive relationships with parents and other adults are important for taiohi, influencing their development and protecting them from a range of poor outcomes.
- For taiohi facing additional challenges, supportive adult relationships are especially important.
- Taiohi need adults who balance warmth and support with clear boundaries and expectations of them.

Glossary of te reo Māori words:

pēpi – babies

taiohi – adolescents

tamaiti – child

tamariki – children

Want to know more?

See this article for more detail, and references:

[Adolescents Need Adults](https://brainwave.org.nz/article/adolescents-need-adults)

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/adolescents-need-adults>

He Pitopito Kōrero

Whakamana i te tamaiti

Every childhood matters. Our vision is that all children in Aotearoa / New Zealand are valued and nurtured to reach their full potential. We share knowledge with everyone who influences the lives of pēpi, tamariki and taiohi about the critical importance of brain development during early childhood and adolescence, recognising the positive impact and influence this can have on wellbeing. Brainwave has no political or religious affiliations and is known for relying on strong evidence and for the scientific integrity of all its material.

from our Kaihautu/CEO, Huia Hanlen, who outlined Brainwave's future direction and areas of focus. The conversations and connections made through the evening left the Brainwave team and those we spoke with, refreshed and recharged in the knowledge that so many people are working in their own ways to support the kaupapa of Brainwave Trust—Whakamana i te tamaiti. Together we strive to make positive change.



Brainwave 25 Years

Tēnā koutou katoa,

On October 11 2023, we celebrated Brainwave's 25th birthday at Homeland in Auckland! We were fortunate enough to have our former Executive Director, Sue Wright, and other founding members of Brainwave staff present, alongside mana whenua, our champion donors, trustees, supporters, esteemed guests and partner organisations. It was a real melting pot of people joining together for the shared purpose of positively impacting child wellbeing in Aotearoa. Our guests shared that they were extremely moved by the speeches from our trustees, Dr Julia Ioane and Anthea Springford (pictured above), from chef extraordinaire, Peter Gordon (whose tautoko to Brainwave was a welcome surprise) and

Of course the Homeland three-course dinner menu was amazing to say the least, our bellies and hearts were full after this epic event. Again, our utmost gratitude to those of you who have offered your generous support over the course of 25 years and who continue to support Brainwave. To those who attended, we appreciate each of you, thank you for opening your hearts to our organisation, fostering open dialogue and for your rich conversations focused towards a better future for pēpi, tamariki and taiohi in Aotearoa. We look forward to working in partnership with you in the future and seeing the impacts of your work in the community.



Reach into the Community

After three years of COVID impacts, Brainwave is on track to meet or exceed our highest number of workshops on record, by the end of this financial year! To date Brainwave kaiako have facilitated 315 workshops and wānanga in the community, 39 workshops in corrections facilities and 91 multi-day programmes in schools, as well as multiple sessions with kaimahi and professionals. Five new kaiako have completed their training and will begin facilitation in the coming months. Nau mai, haere mai Kiri Piahana, Amelia Antonio, Oriana Suaesi, Laura Setiu and Te Moehau McKean! It's really important to us that Brainwave can support rural and remote communities and we are increasing our reach throughout Aotearoa, with a particular focus on those hard to reach places. This month Brainwave Learning Designer, André Ngāpo, will be visiting the Chatham Islands, running five workshops over three days, in partnership with Heartlands Council.

If you follow us on social media you might have noticed that we are making some exciting developments in our mahi with whānau Māori. Over the past four years we have developed strengths based workshops that champion mātauranga Māori, te reo me ōna tikanga, alongside current understandings of child development. Working alongside iwi and hapū based organisations, our kaiako Māori facilitate *He Hīkoi Mahara* wānanga, *Tiakina te Tamaiti* and *He Rangatahi Hei Raukura* workshops where the participants are predominantly Māori. A goal for each wānanga is for those present to leave with an understanding that their traditional, pre-colonial parenting practices are still very valid today, and western science complements what their tūpuna



knew all along. Instrumental in the development of *He Hīkoi Mahara* was Dr Tahlia Kingi, who explains: “Our mātauranga Māori, knowledge that is grounded in our Māori worldview, is powerful and valid. We only need to look at our pūrākau (stories), our kōrero tuku iho (stories handed down) — within these is the blueprint for raising tamariki and supporting them to thrive. These two powerful bodies of knowledge can empower whānau.”

These workshops and wānanga originate from a strategy that prioritises outcomes for Tangata Whenua and Tagata o le Moana. This focus runs alongside the other work we do in the community and will be explored in more depth in *Brainwave Review Raumati 2024*, when we introduce some of the pūrākau from *He Hīkoi Mahara*. If your organisation would like to host a wānanga or workshop contact: bookings@brainwave.org.nz.

We are so grateful to all our donors, grant and philanthropic funders who support our mahi, improving outcomes for tamariki.

If you would like to make a contribution to Brainwave Trust and the work we do:

Alternatively you can make a single or recurring payment to:

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Find out more about our charity's strategy, statistics, funding and achievements in the Brainwave Trust 2023 Annual Report:

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