
Youth Truth



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Risky Behavior

Sandra Buckley

Family members of the space shuttle Columbia's seven crew members were all over the news after the shuttle exploded on February 1, 2003. Most spoke of the astronauts' joy at fulfilling their lifelong goals, and insisted that their loved ones' memory would be honored only if the space program continued.

The brother of Laurel Clark described her feelings about her first space flight: "How blessed she felt ... how thrilling it was." The last message of crew member Ilan Ramon was revealed by his brother: "It was the top of his life he said that he was so happy that he doesn't want to come back to Earth."¹ The wife of mission specialist Mike Anderson offered: "This is something he wanted to do so I was willing to support him of course, you never think *that's* going to happen."² The family members' comments were echoed in public memorials to the shuttle astronauts. To risk, to sacrifice—even one's own life—for what one loves and believes in is a display of the most admirable courage. The astronauts' countrymen should be proud of these men and women who pursued their dreams and demonstrated the concept of bravery at its finest.

On April 11, 1996, the mother of another courageous flyer who died in a crash, made a similar comment: "She went with her joy and her passion, and her life was in her hands."³

But public sentiment toward *this* victim and her family members was anything but supportive. The attempted mission was pronounced foolhardy, the family members, criminals. Instead of praising and honoring the downed flier's effort, public officials introduced legislation to stop others from following her example.

That's because the daring flier was 7-year-old Jessica Dubroff, who would have become the youngest person to complete a coast-to-coast flight across America.

Jessica wasn't the first 7-year-old to learn to pilot a plane. As required by FAA rules for fliers younger than 16, a licensed flight instructor was at her side in the single-engine Cessna,

with a dual control panel enabling the instructor to take over at any time. But Jessica wasn't ill-equipped to operate the plane herself. She'd logged about 40 hours of cockpit time and had made over 50 takeoffs and landings—enough experience, if she had been 16 years old, to have qualified Jessica to apply for a private pilot's license.⁴

That's not to say that no one was to blame for the tragedy. Just as NASA is investigating the cause of its recent disaster, plane crashes are also investigated to determine the causes. And so many dangers were present in Jessica's cross-country attempt that it *could* reasonably have been called a foolhardy venture. The Cessna was loaded over its weight limit with passengers and luggage. Weather conditions were treacherous. The flight instructor may have been pressured to overlook these hazards, to arrive on the east coast in time to be featured on a national morning news show which had been covering the story. The plane went down in a rain storm in Colorado after encountering the condition known as wind shear.⁵

But instead of focusing on the information uncovered by the investigation and using it to prevent similar tragedies in the future, the media focused on the one aspect of the story that almost surely had nothing to do with the crash: Jessica's age. With no evidence to support the theory, commentators were quick to conclude that this plane had gone down *because* a seven-year-old was at the controls. Many other small planes with *adult* pilots had experienced similar accidents; it's unlikely anyone thought to blame the age of the pilot in those crashes. Nevertheless, in *this* case, no matter what the investigation revealed, the *age* was assumed to be the problem. End of story.

Most of the dangers in children's lives are out of their control. They may be born to abusive parents, or parents who live in unsafe housing or crime-ridden neighborhoods. If they are told to ride in a car with a reckless or impaired driver, they must do

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Redirect

Author and youth advocate Mike Males has written a new article at <http://home.earthlink.net/~mmales/lat-nev.htm>, this time about how proponents of marijuana law reform are all for legalization of marijuana for adults, but don't seem to care about the draconian pot penalties imposed on youth.

Florida teenager Miranda Rosenberg is trying to lower her state's voting age to 16. The Florida Department of Elections accepted her petition initiative; the proposal will appear on a statewide ballot if enough registered Florida voters sign the petition! The story is told at <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/local/palmbeach/search/sfl-pvvote21feb21.story> and the petition can be accessed at www.voteat16.com.

Another petition at <http://www.petitiononline.com/backtatu/petition.html> protests the censorship of the recordings, videos and performances of the Russian teen pop duo TATU because of a kiss between the two female teens Lena and Yulia. Supporters also plan a "public lesbian kiss day" scheduled for May 3, as reported in the "news" section of www.tatu.us.

Youth Free Expression Network (YFEN) is a national coalition of teens and adults defending free expression rights of youth. YFEN spreads the word that censorial measures to "protect" youth not only prevent minors from learning, thinking, and exploring, but also deprive them of critical information they need. The web site is at <http://www.fepproject.org/yfen/>.

Retraction

We are unable to confirm that our last issue's News Link item entitled "Right to Vote At Retirement?" came from a genuine news report; it was probably a joke or a hoax. Our apologies.

News Links

Court Upholds COPA Decision

On March 6 a three-judge panel of the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld an injunction against enforcement of the Child Online Protection Act (COPA). A report found at <http://www.wired.com/news/privacy/0,1848,57956,00.html> says the judges found the law "constitutionally infirm."

"Under God" Rejected Again By Court

On February 27, the Ninth Circuit Court refused to reconsider an earlier ruling finding the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance to be a religious avowal, and the recitation of the Pledge (with those two words included) in public schools to be unconstitutional, amounting to government endorsement of religion. The ruling affects public schools in nine western U.S. states. The story can be viewed at <http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=17610>.

Senator Wants Daily Pledge

Just three days earlier, California Republican Senator William Knight had introduced legislation to mandate daily recitations of the Pledge in his state's public schools, as reported at <http://www.cnsnews.com/ViewNation.asp?Page=Nation/archive/200302/NAT20030224c.html>. California is one of the states affected by the Ninth Circuit Court's ruling on the Pledge.

State Court Rules Against Curfews

On January 23 the State Supreme Court of Washington struck down a juvenile curfew ordinance enacted in 1999 in the town of Sumner, finding that such laws give police arbitrary power to arrest youth for activities "normally considered innocent" such as "walking, driving, going to the store." An ACLU press release on the decision appears at <http://www.aclu.org/CriminalJustice/CriminalJustice.cfm?ID=11695&c=46&Type=s>; the majority opinion is online at <http://www.courts.wa.gov/opinions/opindisp.cfm?docid=714517MAJ>.

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News Links

School Plays Cause Controversy

Bang, Bang, You're Dead, a renowned play about a school shooter, is being performed by St. Petersburg, Florida high schoolers in a drama competition, but according to <http://www.sptimes.com/2003/01/17/TampaBay/Is_student_play_unsui.shtml>, due to "sensitive" subject matter, school administrators won't allow the play to be presented on its stage. And just three swear words in the script of the planned high school play *Les Miserables* brought complaints from Williamsport, Maryland parents, says the article at <http://abclocal.go.com/wpvi/news/13103_bbparents.html>.

Students Tired of School Dance Hassles

Milford High School in Massachusetts cancelled a scheduled freshman class dance last night, since nobody was going to be there. Dance attendance has been dropping since rules and enforcement became more strict, explains an article at <http://www.metrowestdailynews.com/local_regional/milf_dance_03092003.htm>. Dress codes have been tightened, more songs and ways of dancing have been prohibited, and attendees must be prepared to submit to random Breathalyzer tests.

Letters

I never liked the idea of standing and saying the pledge, especially the "liberty and justice for all" part, because as a "child" I was neither free (or as free as the teacher) nor did I get justice (like adults). In the most basic sense, teenagers are not free. It's beyond hypocritical to make them stand for the pledge and say that they are free, and then arrest them at 11:01 because they are too young to be outside alone. Pedro P





For all of you who find yourselves just not feeling right while saying the pledge, I present my personal version (Yes, I say it every Monday when they require the recitation):

I pledge allegiance to the beings
of the United State of Humanity,
and to the ideals towards which we strive,
one people,
[conspicuous pause where the "under God" would be]
indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Let's ya get all the faith in humanity's highest ideals without the pesky nationalism. And of course, change it however you want to...it's not proprietary or anything. :) Eli

Prom Night

Toon

	<p>Strapless?!? Backless?!? Bare midriiffs?!? This is a high school prom! Our students mustn't be allowed to dress up like grown women. Even on prom night, they're still just children!</p>	<p>You say you've already bought your tarty—er, fancy—gown? Okay, we'll compromise ... you can still wear it, as long as you wear a wrap or jacket on top. One that covers all the naughty parts.</p>	
<p>High heels and stockings? That's WAYY too suggestive. Hows about we change the dress code to saddle shoes with bobby socks? That's much more appropriate for young people your age.</p>		<p>Oh, heck, let's go the extra mile to be absolutely sure none of our students get any funny ideas. After all, abstinence at all costs, that's our policy!</p>	

Opinions expressed may not reflect the views of ASFAR.

My Youth Rights Journey

When I joined ASFAR three years ago, I certainly never expected that I would one day become its president! It seems fitting at this moment to talk about how I got to this point: what led me to sign up for a radical youth rights organization in the first place, how I joined its board of directors and later became its president, and finally, what my vision is for ASFAR's future.

But first, congratulations to the 2003 board on their election! Oliver Traldi, Susan Wishnetsky, Justin Mallone, Tevi Abrams, Jacob Kafka, and Winston Featherly-Bean, that means you! Oh, and me.

OK, so where was I? Ah, right.

What exactly made me consider the topic of ageism? It's hard to say; I can't remember a time when I *didn't* think about these things. Maybe it had to do with the fact that I had two parents who disagreed a lot—particularly in the areas of parenting—so it forced me to come to the conclusion that *one* of them must be wrong, and therefore I must reach my own conclusions. As it turned out, they *both* were wrong, as all people are, quite often.

I couldn't understand why I had to go to church, when no adults had to go to church if they chose not to (freedom of religion, right?). I couldn't understand why I was considered too stupid to be exposed to the ideas in R-rated movies. I couldn't understand why I had to waste my time doing the mindless busywork that my school assigned me, when I'd always believed that the activities I chose for myself were *far* more educational. I couldn't understand why I didn't get to punish my parents for being bad, but they got to punish me. I couldn't understand why I wasn't allowed to open a bank account in my own name, or apply for a loan. I couldn't understand why companies would refuse to hire me.

News Links

Teen Defeats Chess Master

On February 23, 15-year-old Teimour Radjabov of Azerbaijan defeated Garry Kasparov, the world's top-ranked chess player, at the annual chess tournament in Linares, Spain, reports http://abcnews.go.com/wire/World/ap20030307_2146.html. A rematch the following day ended in a draw.

What was worse, *no one* seemed to agree with me, not even the other kids. Sure, they hated school just as much as I did, but it was for their own good, right? And then there were the adults, who would say stuff like, "You can't drive a car because you're too short." My barber can tell them about phone books. Or: "You just wait till you're older. You'll see." Well, I'm older.

It's not that I thought they didn't mean well. I *knew* they meant well. It's just that they were so *wrong*. It would always annoy me to no end when they'd assure me that they were only doing this or that because they loved me. I wonder how they'd like it if their boss docked their paycheck for a week because they refused to eat their peas. It's only because he loves you, remember.

Of all these issues, my education was the most important to me, because if I'm not in control of what I can *think* about, then just what *am* I in control of? I'd always been in a bit of a power tug with my teachers and parents in this area, and it culminated on my fifteenth birthday, when I decided that as a present to myself, I would drop out of high school, leading me to experience the wonders of our compulsory education laws. In no time at all I was ordered back to school.

And yeah, I went back to school, since I was threatened with worse if I didn't, but I didn't really do the work. Sure, I'd do enough to slide by, but most of the time I was in my own world. My teachers would think I was at home doing my homework, and my dad would think I was at school doing my homework. Instead, I'd be at the public library, reading books. That's when I read *Summerhill*, a book about a school by the same name in England where there is no required curriculum. I'll flip through *Summerhill* today, and find a lot to disagree with. But four and a half years ago, it was my only window into another world: a world where young people are treated with the dignity that adults are accorded, and where they live their lives as they see fit. There was no turning back.

That book gave me the courage to decide that what I was doing was ridiculous. They can make me go to school, I thought, but they can't make me do the work. So I decided one day that I would forthrightly announce to my teachers that I had no

Random Drug Testing—On Us?

After a recent arrest of a teacher for marijuana possession in Aspen, Colorado, the area's district superintendent proposed that *all* teachers be subjected to mandatory random drug testing. The story at http://www.insidedenver.com/drmn/state/article/0,1299,DRMN_21_1777606,00.html describes the teachers' understandable outrage at the suggestion.

intention of doing their assignments. It was a tremendously liberating feeling. A great weight had come off my shoulders.

The next week, the school asked me to leave (it was a private school, so they could do that). Actually, they offered me another chance: promise to shape up, and you can stay, they said. As tempting as it was to not have to leave my friends, I knew that I'd be no less miserable than I was before. So it didn't take long for me to reach my decision. The question was: where would I go? I'd still have to attend some school, at least until I turned sixteen.

I described what I wanted in a school to my math teacher: I wanted it to be a facility, a resource, for me, not a prison. It would be there to answer my needs and desires, to help me learn about the stuff I wanted to learn about. There would be no required classes, tests, grades, anything. "Have you heard of Sudbury Valley?" she asked. I hadn't, but I immediately looked it up on the Internet. The next week, I was enrolled there.

"The Sudbury Valley School is a place where children are free," starts the description on its web site. All the students may spend their days doing whatever activities they like, whether that means reading books, taking classes, playing video games, climbing trees, having conversations, or just staring out the window. SVS is legally governed democratically by the school members, like a town; all the students and staff have one vote in the School Meeting, the body which makes all the rules, hires and fires all the staff members, and allocates the budget. The rules are enforced (on the staff members, too!) with due process in a court-like system, and the students are truly entitled to a trial by jury of their peers, because the judicial committee is composed of students and staff.

Discovering Sudbury Valley was a life-changing experience, and it opened the door for me to the youth rights community. I was posting on Internet discussion groups on the topic in early 2000, and Daniel McGuire (then an ASFAR board member) noticed my posts and suggested that I check out the ASFAR web site. I immediately liked what I saw, and joined. Later that year, Aaron Biterman (another board member at the time) coaxed me into running for a position on the board of

President's Pen

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directors. I was elected by the membership and I've been a board member ever since. Now that our previous president, Justin Mallone, has decided to devote his energy to other endeavors, I'm honored that the board has elected me to take his place. I thank Justin for his terrific leadership during his two-year term. I believe he was our best President ever.

That brings us to today. What does the future hold for ASFAR and the youth rights movement? I believe that the key is in the formation of local chapters. Our Internet community is great, but participating in ASFAR can often feel like you're one person at a computer, working with a group of kindred but distant folk. There's nothing like meeting like-minded people face-to-face, having great political debates with them, organizing demonstrations, and lobbying for change. So this year, I want to see lots of local chapters springing up around the nation. For our part, the board and I will be working to make chapter formation easier. But we really can't do it without you. The best thing you can do for ASFAR right now is to email our secretary, Susan Wishnetsky (secretary@asfar.org), and request that she send you information on forming a chapter. It's really very easy. You just need to get a group of people together and decide on your bylaws. What then? Well, what do you care about? Do you want to lower your city's voting age, like some are trying right now in Cambridge, Massachusetts and Anchorage, Alaska? Maybe you can help kids who are fighting to take control of their own education. You don't have to succeed! Even if your efforts fail, you're exposing the world to these ideas. The kind of change that ASFAR hopes for takes time. It's a gradual process, but change happens.

In the meantime, I look forward to a great year with you guys!

News Links

Abused Girl Finds Relief in Testimony

On January 30, an 11-year-old Texas girl took the witness stand to tell about her adopted mother's extreme abusive behavior, which caused the death of one of her brothers. The article at <<http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/metropolitan/1760108>> says she later called her day in court "the best day of her life." The mother was sentenced to 75 years in prison.

Researchers Praise Video Games

Researchers from Loyola University in Chicago studied the video game *Counter-Strike* and found benefits to players. An article at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/2744449.stm>> reports that the game allows players to safely try out social interaction skills and provides a harmless outlet for fantasies.

Sue's Review

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Rosenbaum, James E. *Beyond college for all : career paths for the forgotten half.* (American Sociological Association Rose series in sociology.) New York : Russell Sage Foundation, 2001.

The 1990s saw a continuous decline in the relative value of a high school diploma. Good economic times enabled ever-higher percentages of students to put off wage-earning in order to graduate. As a result, the high school diploma, once seen as the ticket to a good job, began to be considered the absolute minimum requirement for any job at all.

The low unemployment of the mid- to late-1990s might have provided a great opportunity for these brand new high school graduates to demand higher wages and better benefits in entry-level jobs. But government and school administrators decided to steer these students toward an even higher aspiration: a college degree. (What better way to make sure unemployment stayed low than to keep these young people off the job market awhile longer?)

As a result, in our current economic downturn, many of these young adults who set out for college with such high hopes are struggling for their very survival.

James Rosenbaum lays out the sad facts. In 1982, 71% of high school seniors planned to get a college degree; only 37.7% actually achieved this goal (p. 66). A 1992 survey found 95% of high-school seniors in that year planning to attend college (p. 57); only 62% actually enrolled in some post-secondary school (p. 55). And a 1996 study (p. 57) reveals that only about half of all college enrollees—even in community colleges—succeed in attaining a degree.

The author also cites a 1995 study revealing that, among students with poor grades, the wages of those who manage to achieve a bachelor's degree are scarcely higher than the wages of their non-degreed counterparts, and those with associate's degrees earn less money than those with no degree at all!

If everyone *did* complete college, then "degree inflation" would continue to escalate, to the point where, for example, a master's degree would be required to operate a cash register!

Instead of guiding students into valuable vocational training, providing help with job-seeking and interviewing skills, and assisting in "school-to-work transitions" with job matching and placement services, schools now send students on a wild-goose chase which, for many, will end in failure and disillusionment.

Rosenbaum compares the promise of "college-for-all" to a con game—a swindle—on the part of schools (p. 56):

... students are promised college for very little effort. Lured by the prospect of easy success, students choose easy curricula and make little effort. Just as some high schools implicitly offer students an undemanding curriculum in return for non-disruptive behavior ... high schools enlist students' cooperation by telling them that college is the only respectable goal and that it is easily attainable by all Because students usually do not realize that their expectations were mistaken until long after they have left high school, high schools are rarely blamed for their graduates' failures in community college.

The most interesting chapter was on the vastly changed role of high school guidance counselors. Criticized in the 1960s for heavy-handed control of students' decisions, often guided by personal biases based on the students' race, gender, or social status, counselors now seem to occupy a role of near-total impotence. While many would like to be honest with students about their future college and career prospects, school administrators, parents, and often students themselves demand that counselors parrot the "college for all" mantra, even for the most academically ill-equipped. Rosenbaum reports (p. 92-93):

Studies of occupations often find that role occupants exaggerate their own influence and importance However, counselors in the 1990s now emphatically belittle their own influence Counselors even downplay their ability to help students make wise choices, making arguments like, "I don't give advice; I give information." In many ways, they minimize their role in helping students make the transition from high school In regard to the task of dissuading students from making unrealistic college plans, counselors report that they do not *want* to do it, they cannot make students do it, parents will not let them do it, and they do not have the authority.

The information in *Beyond College for All* is important. A book as well-documented as this should be taken seriously, and its findings are serious enough to warrant a major re-examination of our public policy regarding education. However, the book's presentation is pretty dry, consisting, for the most part, of dispassionate recitations of studies and findings. I fear this book can't possibly capture the interest of our current government administration, headed by the "college for all" poster boy: a poor student who beat the odds, made it through college, and "made good", the supreme counterexample to Rosenbaum's research and the new champion of the "college for all" myth.

News Links

More Schools Realize They're In Trouble

Articles at <http://www.parisbeacon.com/newsbuilder2/news/2003/March/NewsStories/Nochildleftbehindlawisque.html> and <http://www.wisinfo.com/newsherald/mnhlocal/277197916777474.shtml> tell of Illinois and Wisconsin educators becoming increasingly worried about their ability to comply with the "No Child Left Behind" act. And <http://www.communitypapers.com/dailycourier/myarticles.asp?P=730760&S=400&PubID=10422&EC=0> reports on one Arizona school exploring the possibility of re-zoning school districts to avoid being labeled an "underperforming school".

Vocabulary Words Can Kill?

Two Canadian parents believe that knowing how to spell the word "gun" is dangerous for first-graders. An article at <http://www.jointogether.org/gv/news/summaries/reader/0,2061,556665,00.html>, their complaint prompted their child's school to remove the word from its vocabulary list.

Professional Driver Collides With Teen

On January 23, 92-year-old Johnny Mauro, a former Indy 500 racer and founder of the U.S. Truck Driving School, died in a head-on collision on I-70 in Golden, Colorado. According to <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/Central/01/26/racer.killed.ap/index.html>, Mauro's car veered across the center line into oncoming traffic. The crash killed 17-year-old driver Christopher Basinski and injured Basinski's 16-year-old passenger.

Why ASFA Needs Local Chapters

Maryland's State Senate just passed its version of the "law du jour"—the "no underage passengers for teenage drivers" law—on March 8, says an article at <http://www.sunspot.net/news/local/bal-md.driving08mar08,0,4357623.story?coll=bal-local-headlines>. And on March 6, Georgia state representatives responded to public complaints by reconsidering a law revoking the license of any driver under 21 for a single speeding violation. According to <http://www.savannahnow.com/stories/030603/LOCGATEenDrivers.shtml>, the House voted nearly unanimously to change the law; if passed by the Senate, the strict penalty will apply only to drivers *under 18!*

Washington Bill Makes Priests Reveal Abuse

On March 8, the Washington State House passed a bill which would require clergy to report suspected child abuse; the bill now moves to the Senate. According to http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/134648726_priest08m.html, the bill includes exempts information shared in confessions.

Florida Sex Offender Registry Questioned

An article at <http://www.pensacolanewsjournal.com/news/030903/Local/ST015.shtml> discusses how Florida's online sex offender registry wrongly labels and condemns people for life.

Group Prepares Youth for Potential Draft

An article at http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/134649426_draft09m.html describes a Port Townsend, Washington group formed to educate young people about the Selective Service, the history of the military draft, and how to declare oneself a conscientious objector.

Students Sue Over Police Round-Up

On February 22, 2002, police in Union City, California detained, searched, questioned, and photographed a large number of Logan High School students, mostly Hispanic and Asian, whom they suspected of gang membership. Now the ACLU has filed a lawsuit on their behalf; their press release at <http://www.aclu.org/StudentsRights/StudentsRights.cfm?ID=11733&c=31> alleges that the students' data and photos were automatically entered into the police department's "gang database," regardless of whether any evidence of gang activity had been found. Another article on the incident appears at <http://www.cnn.com/2003/LAW/01/31/student.lawsuit.ap/index.html>

Bill Lets Kids Keep Inhalers

New Hampshire's House of Representatives passed legislation allowing children with allergies or asthma to carry their own inhalers at schools or camps in the state; the Senate must now approve the measure. The item at <http://www.thewmurchannel.com/news/1947432/detail.html> says the bill was prompted by the death of a 14-year-old boy at a YMCA camp last summer.

State Health Officer Criticizes "Haphazard" Drugging

Ronald Preston, newly-appointed Secretary of Massachusetts' Department of Health and Human Services, wants to develop state guidelines to stop the overprescription of psychotropic medication to children, according to http://www.seacoastonline.com/news/03092003/south_of/16939.htm.

Florida "Hockey Dad" With A Gun

A Tampa, Florida father who thought he was defending his son against bullies fired a gun at a crowd of teens, killing 14-year-old Jabbard Anthony. According to http://www.austin360.com/aas/news/ap/ap_story.html/National/AP.V9156.AP-Teen-Shot.html, the victim was actually one of his son's friends.

Latest Abuse Stories

For the sad details of just a few recent cases, see http://abclocal.go.com/wls/news/012503_ns_basementkids.htm, http://abclocal.go.com/wls/news/012503_ns_childchained.html, <http://www.pilotonline.com/breaking/br0130fle.html>, and http://www.gopbi.com/partners/pbpost/epaper/editions/sunday/local-news-e3a69ce3c176_f055009b.html.

Risky Behavior

as they're told. Being born into an impoverished family can deprive a child of food; if the family has no health insurance a child may be deprived of medical care. Many children are forced to live in homes full of cigarette smoke.

We allow children to be subjected to all of these dangers, without their consent, often against their will. Why, then, are we so determined to keep children from so many experiences—often with far lower chances of harm to them—that they *do* choose?

The commonly-accepted view of young people as impulsive, thoughtless risk-takers is challenged by research, which finds that a sense of invulnerability is not “a reliable characteristic of adolescence” and that “adolescents are aware of the risks they take.”⁶

However, it would be well-nigh impossible for any study to attribute differences in youth vs. adult risk-taking behavior to the *age* of the individual. For such a comparison study to be valid, the groups being compared would have to be matched for variables *other* than the one being studied (i.e., age). But it is virtually impossible to separate the trait of being under-18 from a host of situational factors that our society imposes upon people with that trait. In order to find matched groups for comparison, one would have to find a group of adults who had always been, and still remained, in some kind of protective custody, with seriously restricted liberties.

Both adults and youth are liable to take risks while engaging in activities they enjoy or pursuing goals they believe in and care about. But there may be some reasons why, in our society, people under 18 might be *more* likely than adults to engage in risky behavior. The following four reasons for adolescent risk-taking may be considered hypotheses to be tested, if possible.

1. **They have little to lose.** Adults can own property, pursue long-term relationships, come and go as they please—all benefits which could be jeopardized by behavior such as drinking,

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or drug use, casual sex, gambling, or committing crimes. The main assets of minors that might be jeopardized by risky behavior are their relationships with their parents and their grades in school. And kids with the worst home lives and the poorest grades have the least to lose, and are therefore the most likely to engage in risky behavior.

2. **Opportunities for risk-taking are limited, so must always be seized.** If a forbidden liquor cabinet, always kept securely locked, is accidentally left open one day, what child would not be sorely tempted to take advantage of the rare occurrence? Adults who may legally buy alcohol, gamble, view pornography, or indulge in other “vices” at any time would be unlikely to possess this motivation (although adults who use illegal drugs or enjoy other illegal activities might act on this principle).

3. **Self-fulfilling prophecy is believed.** Kids repeatedly told that, if they are not watched every minute, they're bound to get into trouble may come to accept that description of themselves, and act accordingly.

4. **Risk-taking brings a new and gratifying feeling of maturity and respect.** A person who has always been thought of as incapable and inferior may find it immensely flattering to be approached to participate in “adult” activities and trusted by others to keep a secret. A female accustomed to being seen as an innocent child may feel honored by grown men who respect at least one aspect of her maturity, even if that aspect is merely physical. Individuals who are denied the more accepted ways of demonstrating maturity (autonomy, self-sufficiency, independence) are highly motivated to find other ways to gain respect and prove themselves worthy.

Just as we force young children to suffer the consequences of adults' bad decisions, we may also put some adolescents in a position in which risky activities are their best choices in life. If youth were accorded respect, rights, and alternatives, their motivation to engage in harmful activities might well decrease.

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