

Experts Say Youngsters Are Trying Riskier Stunts Teens 'Have to Keep Upping the Ante in Order to Get the Same Thrill'

Two young people have died in Idaho, each suspected of trying to catch a buzz by cutting off the blood supply to their brains. Also in recent weeks, a college student in Kentucky and another youth in Michigan have fallen to their deaths while "surfing" atop moving vehicles.

Risky Behavior: Jennifer Collette says daughter, Amanda, right, played a dangerous "choking game" with a 17-year-old neighbor boy. The "game" burst blood vessels in the girl's eyes and face.

Dangerous activities like these aren't new, but experts say today's teens are increasingly likely to try them – and to take more risks than previous generations.

"It's certainly part of the teenage psyche – but we're seeing an enormous amount of it of late," says Frank Farley, a psychologist at Temple University in Philadelphia who's been studying risk-takers since the 1960s.

The trend not only includes stunts that clearly cross the line of common sense – such as "the choking game" that may have caused the Idaho deaths – but also more calculated risk-taking, such as extreme sports with trick-heavy competitions involving skateboards, snowboards or BMX bikes.

"My generation is looking to be different; they're looking for ways to be individuals," says Christopher Sorichetti, a 20-year-old from San Diego who's been doing high-flying bicycle stunts since he was 12. "My sport is almost like a rebel sport. For the guys, it's kind of like a bad boy image. You're popular, pretty much, because you're known as a bad boy."

Sorichetti has ruptured a kidney, punctured a lung and broken many ribs doing bike stunts that have gone wrong. And this summer, he broke his right forearm in two places after falling.

Still, he plans to get back on his bike when he recovers. "I do it for the feeling of knowing it's dangerous and knowing you can get hurt doing it."

–Christopher Sorichetti, who does bicycle stunts

"I do it for the feeling of knowing it's dangerous and knowing you can get hurt doing it," Sorichetti says from his hospital bed. "I couldn't see my life without it."

It's an attitude that causes many adults to scratch their heads. But experts say that young people today are wearing their wounds as a badge of courage – and constantly looking for ways to outdo one another.

"As stuff becomes more common, then the degree that you have to go to be uncommon – to be unique – is a little more extreme," says Dr. Jeffrey Smith, the orthopedic trauma surgeon in San Diego who put Sorichetti's arm back together.

Others note that young risk-takers may react the way they do because they've grown up with constant stimulation from video games and TV.

"They have become adrenaline junkies," says Dr. Lynne Tan, a psychiatrist at The Children's Hospital at Montefiore Medical Center in New York. "They also have to keep upping the ante in order to get the same thrill because, after a while, the body gets used to the activity."

Technology also has given young people the ability to share their stunts with one another by way of the Internet – whether it be their latest skateboarding trick or an outrageous stunt, such as friends pepper-spraying a buddy for a laugh, or even jumping off buildings.

"In this wired world, you can link with other people doing these things instantly. And it develops a kind of camaraderie – almost a license to do it," says Farley, the psychologist at Temple. "In an earlier time, we didn't have such instant access to peer validation."

"Parents need to be aware of what teenagers are doing so they can talk to their kids."
–Jennifer Collette, concerned mother

Parents and others can, of course, talk to their kids about avoiding really dangerous stunts – sharing the many instances when car surfing, for example, has turned deadly or resulted in massive head injuries. The choking game, which flares up every so often in various regions across the country, also claims at least a couple of lives a year.

"Parents need to be aware of what teenagers are doing so they can talk to their kids," says Jennifer Collette, a mother in Valparaiso, Ind., whose daughter played the choking game with friends at a neighbor's house last December. Her daughter, now 13, didn't pass out, but the choking – done by a 17-year-old boy – caused blood vessels in her eyes and face to burst.

"She was pretty scared, and she said she'd never do it again," Collette says.

Extreme sports are a trickier call. As the popularity of pro competitions increases, so does the emphasis on safety.

Still, a spokesman for the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, Smith in San Diego says he regularly runs across young patients who injure themselves – and who plan to return to a dangerous sport.

So he does what he can: He stresses the importance of wearing safety equipment, such as helmets and wrist-guards and hopes for the best.

Other physicians agree that this kind of risk-taking can be dangerous – but they point out that, more often, young people die in car accidents or from violence.

"Our kids are getting shot," says Dr. Karen Sheehan, a physician at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago who is also the medical director of the Injury Free Coalition for Kids. "They get enough of a thrill trying to make it to school safely."