Behavioural Development

Risk taking is an integral part of behavioural development. In adolescence it is an important and normal exploratory behaviour which helps them:

- shape their identities.
- try out their new decision-making skills.
- develop practical assessments of themselves and other people.

Teens need space to experiment and to experience the outcome of their own decisions in different types of situations. Some typical risk taking behaviour in adolescence:

- Smoking cigarette
- Truancy
- Sexual experimentation
- Alcohol consumption
- Illegal substance use
- Dangerous driving

However, risk taking does not have to be overly dramatic. Simply stepping outside one’s normal comfort zone can already constitute taking a risk and can satisfy many adolescents’ needs (i.e. join a school play, take up an unfamiliar sport, go mountain climbing, etc.) for risk taking if they are encouraged to do so.

**Parent’s role:**

- Provide guidance in decision making and encourage the adolescent to channel the positive developmental aspects of this energy into less dangerous and more constructive “risky” pursuits.
- Don’t be too overprotective, give them the freedom and opportunity they need to explore and discover new things.
- Parents should be able to discuss certain sensitive issues with their teens in matters such as sex, drugs and alcohol, and other safety concerns.

Note that all elements of child development share a concurrent relationship and influences one another. Therefore, a lapse or an imbalance in nurturing any of the elements (or focusing on just one) could result in decreased mental “resiliency”, thus, rendering teens more prone to be negatively influenced by mental stressors. 

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**Bringing Up Mentally Challenged Children**

*Be happy and be proud, your child is like any other; special and worth all the love and affection in the world*

Children who are mentally challenged are often referred to as being intellectually disabled. It is characterized by below-average intelligence or mental ability (i.e. learning, reasoning, problem solving, etc.) and a lack of adaptive behaviour required for day-to-day living (i.e. interpersonal skills, self-esteem, ability to follow rules/obey laws).

Numerous factors can facilitate its onset, but more noticeably; genetic predisposition (i.e. Down Syndrome), complications during pregnancy or childbirth (substance abuse), injury (i.e. near drowning), trauma (i.e. severe parental neglect) or an infection (i.e. meningitis).

**Notice The Signs**

Knowing when your child should achieve certain developmental milestones (refer “Fostering Mental Health in Children” article) can give you an indication of whether they are growing at a normal pace or whether development is being delayed or obstructed.

Early recognition will ensure better interventions for the child. So, immediately seek professional (i.e. paediatrician, doctor) help if you detect any signs of developmental delay.
Signs may appear during infancy, or they may not be noticeable until a child reaches school age. Other typical symptoms may include:

- Lack of or slow development of motor skills, language skills, and self-help skills, especially when compared to peers.
- Failure to grow intellectually or continued infant-like behaviour.
- Lack of curiosity.
- Failure to adapt (adjust to new situations).
- Difficulty understanding and following social rules.

**Diagnosing The Problem**

The evaluation and classification of intellectual disability is a complex issue and should be done by a professional. In essence, it involves:

- significant limitations in intellectual functioning
- significant limitations in adaptive behaviour
- onset before the age of 18

The IQ test is a tool used by professionals in measuring intellectual functioning. Other tests are used to determine limitation in adaptive behaviour (i.e. conceptual, social, and practical skills).

**Never Lose Hope**

Understandably, parents in care of a mentally disabled child may undergo certain challenges not typically experienced by most parents. This may include (among other things) societal acceptance of their child as a result of stigma, self-blame which can lead to depression, and an overwhelming sense of worry for the future wellbeing of their child if and when they’re gone.

Nevertheless, this cannot be used as an excuse to incur neglect – the child’s future, wellbeing and happiness is top priority. Consider these helpful tips:

- **Learn to accept your child’s condition** and appreciate them regardless. A positive outlook and attitude to suit is crucial – your child needs help; wasting time grieving over your fate is counter-productive.
- **Find out as much as you can about your child’s condition.** The more you know the better advocate you can be for your child.
- **Play an active and supportive role** while providing an enabling environment for the child to develop different abilities, skills and interests.
- **Teach your child all of the survival skills required** to function on a day-to-day basis to at least be able to take care of the basics (i.e. hygiene, money, nutrition, etc.).

- **Sign your child up for early intervention programmes** as soon as possible. These programmes are individually modified to cater for your child’s specific condition, age and learning curve.
- **Follow your child’s progress closely** at school with a teacher and reinforce what your child has learned there at home.
- **Plan for their future** – full independence is preferable but often not possible. Consider medical treatment, financial, and social planning for your child and make sure other willing family members (or even close friends) are involved.
- **Be open to professional counselling** to help you cope with the challenges or stresses that you might face along the way.
- You’re not alone in this. **Connect with other parents of intellectually disabled children.** They can be of great help and support at times when you need it most.
- **Search for social support** offered by the government, private sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to address some of the challenges.

Most importantly, shower your child with the love and affection that he deserves and empower him with a sense of self-worth. Remember, your child – however beautifully-flawed he/she may be – is an extension of yourself, a gift loaned to you so that you may be eternally grateful. PP