Can Adolescents Predict Significant Life Events?
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Managing risks is a crucial element in making effective life decisions. Hence, adolescents need the ability to judge the probability that specific decisions (e.g., about education and sexual activity) will lead to experience different life events (e.g., getting a high school diploma and getting pregnant). Risk perceptions play a central role in theories of adolescent development, economic decisions, and health behavior. However, questions have been raised about adolescents’ ability to use probabilities. In my talk, I will present data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1997 -- one of the largest, most representative samples of US adolescents. I will also present two studies that suggest that eliciting adolescent expectations of sexual health outcomes may help health care providers to serve their adolescent patients better. Hence, research on adolescent expectations for significant life events has theoretical and practical implications.

Adolescent Decision Making in Developmental Context
Lisa Crockett
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Adolescents' decisions are influenced by their developmental status, prior experiences, and current social context. Furthermore, adolescents' decisions have the capacity to influence their future well-being by placing youth on distinct behavioral trajectories that set the course for adult functioning. Decisions to participate in risky behavior, for example, may create some future opportunities while foreclosing others. The decisions adolescents make, either deliberately or inadvertently, are influenced by their decision making competence, including their ability to regulate their emotions and behavior. The linkages between risk behavior and both self-regulation and decision making competence are illustrated using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Analyses focus on the role of self-regulation and decision making competence in adolescent risk behavior as well as the role of decision making competence in moderating the relations between contextual factors, such as peer influences and parenting, and adolescents' involvement in risky behavior. Results indicate that poor self-regulation or low decision making competence predict subsequent substance use, delinquency, and risky sexual behavior. Furthermore, decision making competence modifies the relations between peer and parenting factors and risky behavior. Implications for viewing adolescent decision making in a life course framework are discussed.
Adolescents’ Life Expectations and Risk Perceptions: The Roles of Base Rate Knowledge and Executive Function
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Adolescents’ typically overestimate the likelihood that engaging in risky behaviors will result in deleterious outcomes. Simultaneously, like adults, adolescents typically believe that they are more likely to experience positive, and avoid negative, outcomes than their peers. The present research explored the possibilities that (a) the tendency to overestimate risk arises from lack of knowledge of the base rates at which risky behaviors lead to negative outcomes and (b) individual differences in optimism and risk perception are mediated by executive function (e.g., impulse control, planning) abilities. In addition to measures of executive function, 15-18 year-old adolescents were presented brief scenarios to elicit perceptions of the probabilities of positive and negative outcomes in several domains (e.g., educational and occupational success, risky driving, threat reaction); for half of the participants, hypothetical base rate information was presented immediately prior to each scenario. Preliminary analyses indicate that base rate information decreased both optimism and risk perception, but only in certain domains (e.g., health); executive function abilities were related to risk perception, but only when participants estimated the probability that their peers would experience negative outcomes. These results suggest a domain-specific approach to adolescent risk perception, raise questions about the wisdom of educational programs intended to increase adolescent realism, and support a dual-process approach to understanding adolescents’ future perceptions and the relationship of these perceptions to higher-order cognitive skills.

TBA
Ross Matsueda
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Adolescent (Over)confidence and Risk
Andrew Parker
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Understanding the extent (and limits) of one’s knowledge is crucial to making decisions in an informed, reasoned way. This is particularly true when making decisions in the presence of high uncertainty, which inherently limits what can be known or predicted. This talk draws on several research projects to ask whether the magnitude and appropriateness of adolescents’ confidence in their risk-related and general knowledge is associated with two aspects of adolescents’ risk. First, are higher-risk environments associated with less appropriate confidence (especially overconfidence), as might be expected if high-risk environments proved less stability, for developing decision-making strategies, and offered fewer opportunities for modeling good decision making. Second, could such inappropriate confidence lead to maladaptive risk-taking behavior, by encouraging actions based on faulty knowledge?
Risk and Rationality in Adolescent Decision Making: A Fuzzy-Trace Theory Approach

Valerie Reyna
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Crime, smoking, drug use, alcoholism, reckless driving, and many other unhealthy patterns of behavior that play out over a lifetime often debut during adolescence. Changing unhealthy behaviors in adolescence would have a broad impact on society, reducing the burdens of disease, injury, human suffering, and associated economic costs. Any program designed to prevent or change such risky behaviors should be founded on an empirically supported theory of the causes of such behaviors. Recent research in judgment and decision-making on dual processes, and on fuzzy-trace theory in particular, has produced surprising findings about why people take risks and how the process of risky decision making changes with age. In this talk, I review some key findings, including paradoxical reversals in the relation between risk perception and risk taking which are predicted by fuzzy-trace theory's dual-process assumptions.