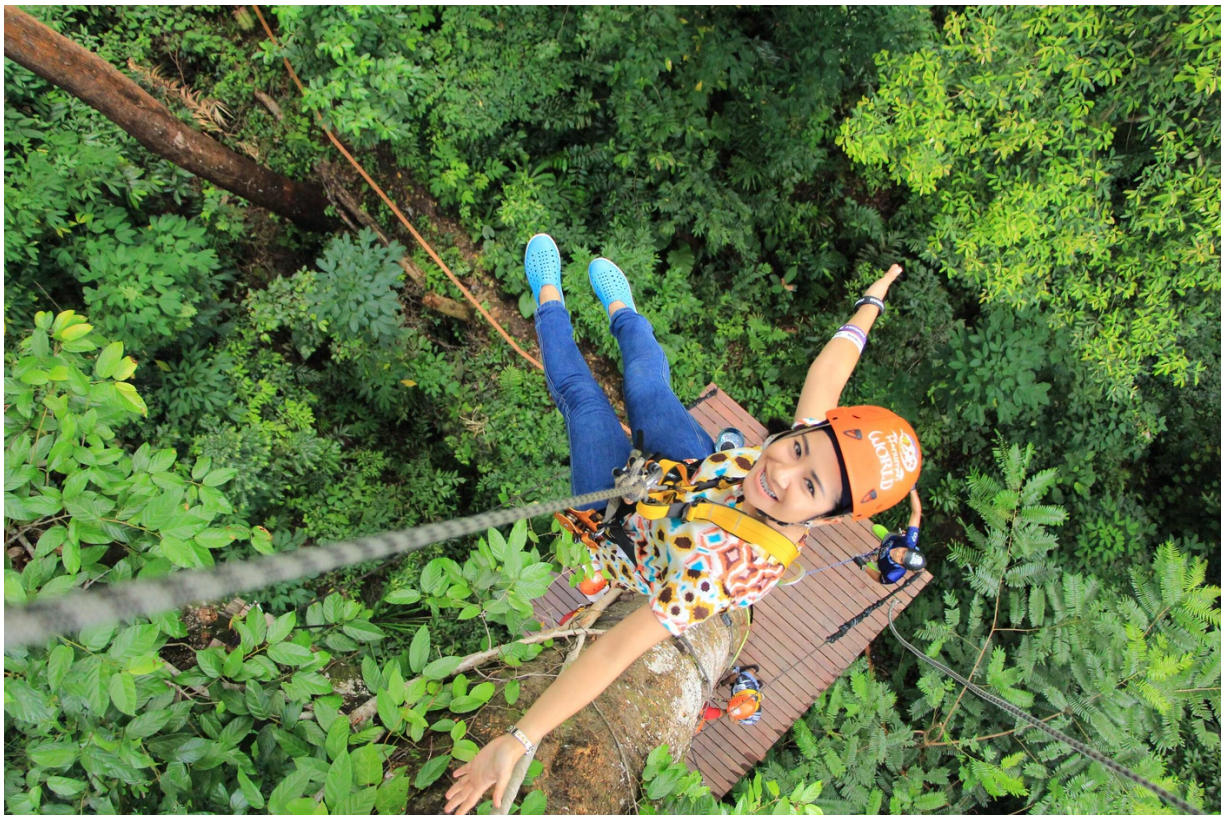


6 Ways to Let Teens Take Risks While Traveling—Even (Or Especially) in a Pandemic



By Sarah Lindenfeld Hall

This summer, after an early dinner during a family trip to North Carolina, my 15-year-old made a request: “Can I take a walk?”

A few years ago, the question would have given me pause. We were in a new place, and we were on vacation—we were supposed to be together. “Absolutely,” I said. “Just be back before dark.”

Teenage brains crave risk. During these formative years, a kid’s frontal lobe—the part of the brain that inhibits our action—takes a bit of a break.

“We think about it as our brain’s manager or boss, and that kind of goes a little bit offline,” said [Stephanie Zerwas](#), an associate professor at the University of North Carolina at-Chapel Hill’s department of psychiatry.

It happens for biological, developmental and evolutionary reasons. If teens don’t take risks, they might never take the biggest risk of all—leaving home to strike out on their own. And while some teens might turn to drug use or other dangerous behavior, many more can satisfy their craving for risk with healthy activities such as playing a sport, starring in the school musical...or exploring a new place on a family trip.

“Travel scratches that itch,” said [John Duffy](#), a clinical psychologist and author of *Parenting the New Teen in the Age of Anxiety*. It gives kids the opportunity to be daring with activities that would seem completely tame at home. Teens can build confidence, resilience and their own identity along the way. Duffy said.

Of course, during the COVID-19 pandemic, even the simplest trip can feel very risky. But many teens have been stuck in lockdown without the usual opportunities to take chances—making it even more important for parents to loosen up a little. If you’re planning to travel this fall, here are six ways to give your teens the risk they crave.

Let Them Lead

Instead of presenting a parental plan for exploring a new place, let your kids

map out a day of activities and then guide everyone through their itinerary. It's entirely possible that you'll be late for your dinner reservations or that an

activity will fall flat, but that's the point. They also might realize they're decent planners and navigators too. "Some kids are surprised that they have any affinity for that at all," Duffy said.

Mix It Up

Visiting the same place every year can be comforting and build memories, whether you do a week at Disney World or rent the same house at the beach each summer.

But that routine can also be confining. Throw some surprises into your ritual-filled trips, Duffy said. Include some activities that are new, exciting and even a little scary—whether that's riding a new roller coaster at your favorite theme park or parasailing at the beach.

"If you're anxious about your kid walking the streets alone then, at the very least, find some challenging components," Duffy said. "Some kind of little adventure that is something outside of their comfort zone."

“

The benefits for teens start from the moment you say, "Yes."

Give Them Independence

Just like my 15-year-old went on her solo walk, it's important to let teens take some time for themselves. It's fine to set some parameters, especially around safety. Duffy said the benefits for teens start from the moment you say, "Yes."

"There is a feeling of independence around that, and a big part of it has to

do with just the ritual of you saying it's OK for you to do this," Duffy said. "Like I trust that you can go and take a walk through these unfamiliar streets without me and you'll be fine, and if you're not, you'll reach out, you'll find me or you'll find an adult who can help you through this."

Avoid Being the Hero

Those uncomfortable experiences can pop up in all kinds of ways during travel — from not being able to find a bathroom in an unfamiliar country to having your phone's battery drained to 1% and not knowing how to get back to the hotel. If your teen does get lost or the museum they led you to is closed, don't jump in to help them.

"The more you give them opportunities in smart and strategic ways to get lost and figure out how to get back to the rental house or navigate a situation that is awkward, the more you're building up their competence and confidence," said Zerwas the UNC psychologist.

Take Advantage of Anonymity

For some teens, even simple things like buying their own ice cream or placing an order at their hometown pizza place can feel risky. What if they mess up around someone they know? Let them practice those skills when you're on the road, when everyone is a stranger. Hand them the phone to order the pizza and give them \$5 to get the ice cream on their own.

"Travel offers up this unique opportunity where they don't have to worry about having an audience," Zerwas said. "They don't have to worry about running into somebody from school. It offers this really bounded and compartmentalized space to try out all this stuff."

Manage Your Own Emotions

It's natural to have mixed feelings about all of this. Some parents of teens may be leery of giving their kids too much freedom in a strange place. They

may be fearful of giving their kids too much freedom in a strange place. They may also be counting down to—and mourning—the end of their teen's

childhood. During a family trip to the Caribbean, Duffy remembers his wife falling apart when their then 13-year-old son jet skied out of sight.

"We just talked about it for a minute," Duffy said. "He's not gone forever, but this is an important thing for him. He's going to feel different when he gets back here than he did when he left."

Sarah Lindenfeld Hall is a North Carolina-based journalist and parenting writer who fell in love with traveling while living in Cassis, France at age 7.

Do you try to let your teens take risks while traveling? Share your advice below!

Brooklyn, NY · Posted 12m ago



The Expedition

Host

 Be the first to cheer this
