

21.01.09 Teen Spirit Hour.wav

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AS Audio Sample
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SM Today's American teens, Generation Z, are more ethnically and racially diverse than any who've come before them. They're also likely to be better educated. And across the Internet, Gen Z-ers are making their political opinions known.

AS If you're between the ages of 18 and 26, you'll need to listen up, because this affects you.

AS Just because we use our voices to initiate and make change does not mean that we are any softer than any generation before us.

AS If your first response to a young person talk about political issues is "you can't even vote", then you're the one whose opinion we shouldn't take seriously.

AS If you are a young person, I am here to tell you that your voice matters, and you are powerful. We're literally changing the world.

SM And the books that today's teens love have followed suit. They're open-minded, global and political.

AS So here we see a connection between activism that's portrayed in young adult literature and activism that is an important value of teens and young adults today.

SM From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today on the show, a look at the teens of 2021. My first guest is Lisa Koch. Koch is an English professor at George Mason University, where she teaches classes on young adult fiction and teen culture. She shared with me some of her favorite recent young adult books. Lisa, what about you - did you read young adult fiction when you were that age or not so much?

LK I was a voracious reader, but I didn't read a lot of young adult literature, and I think because the selection was really limited. But about 10 years ago, my son, who was 13 at the time, was reading "The Hunger Games", and I borrowed the novel from it and I absolutely fell in love with it. It is an amazing novel. I particularly liked the emphasis on social justice and on strong female characters. I have a mug on my desk right now that a student gave me that says, "every revolution begins with a spark". Definitely, it spoke to me.

SM "The Hunger Games", I feel like, shaped the world of view of an entire generation of young people.

LK Absolutely. So "The Hunger Games" trilogy was published between 2008 and 2010. And right around 2010 is when young literature experienced a surge. So in the past 10 years, young adult literature has been the fastest growing segment of publishing. It's just absolutely boomed. Young adult novels have expanded and the readership has expanded as well to include not only teens and young adults, but also adults of all ages. So everyone I know who is in their 40s and 50s has read "The Hunger Games". I don't know anyone who hasn't.

SM You know, I feel as though it's possible that young adult literature may for this generation be what rock music and folk music was for an earlier generation.

LK Yes, absolutely. And the fan base that young adult novelists have, just as music created rock stars and fandom in the 80s, a lot of young adult literature has created that same type of status and fascination, and we have teen fans. My students follow their favorite young adult authors on Twitter and on Instagram.

SM Are they able to communicate with them?

LK Yes, absolutely. So that is definitely one of the distinguishing features of current young adult literature, is that readers can communicate directly with Y.A. authors. So when I was teaching the young adult novel "Darius the Great is Not Okay", one of my students DMed the author, Adib Khorram on Twitter and Nicole wrote, "when we finished Darius, my prof asked how many of us liked it, and it was a unanimous, unprecedented yes". Well, within one hour, Khorram answered Nicole. He responded with, "Oh, I am so, so glad that makes my day". Needless to say, Nicole was so excited to report it to our class, who was so excited. And so it's really creating a bond with the writer.

SM Tell me about that book in particular. "Darius the Great is Not Okay". I read a terrific review of it.

LK Yeah. So it's the story of Darius, who refers to himself as a fractional Persian. His mom was born in Iran, his dad in the U.S. and he has difficulty fitting in. He's a Star Trek and Hobbit nerd. He doesn't fit in with his family because he doesn't speak Farsi and other family members do. He doesn't fit in at his high school in Portland. And then he takes his first trip to Iran, where he meets his grandparents, and he befriends a neighbor who's his age. And that is a life changing experience for Darius.

SM His father is this Germanic white American and his mother is from Iran. He writes that he doesn't really have anything in common or relate to his dad or feel related to by his dad, except the two of them love watching Star Trek together.

LK Yes, that is the way they bond. That's their father-son ritual that they watch Star Trek together every night. I think this is where the first-person perspective of a teen comes in, because even though he doesn't feel bonded with his father or feel like his father understands him, the reader gets clues that maybe his father understands him a little more than he thinks he does. Something important that the novel addresses is mental illness. So both Darius and his father are diagnosed with depression, they both receive treatment for their depression and one ritual that they do right before Star Trek is they both take their medication together every night. So one of the things the novel does really well is portrays mental illness as an aspect of everyday existence. It basically shows that having depression is okay. You know, as the novel says, Darius the Great is Not Okay, but one of the points of the novel is that certain things are okay.

SM So many of these well-done young adult books address the politics of today, the family complexity of today, the identity complexity on every level of today.

LK Yes.

SM Another one of those is the book called "The Hate You Give". Tell me about that one.

LK So "The Hate You Give" is one of several novels that have come out in the past few years that both was inspired and inspired the Black Lives Matter movement. And Angie Thomas, the writer, wrote "The Hate You Give" as a debut novel.

SM Tell me about the main character in the book. This is a young woman named Starr, a teenager.

LK Yes. And so, she is driving with her friend, they get pulled over and she witnesses a police officer shooting her friend. And the novel deals with the shock and pain that she undergoes and that her community undergoes because of racial profiling and police violence. Starr says, "I've seen it happen over and over again. A Black person gets killed just for being Black and all hell breaks loose. I've tweeted RIP hashtags, re-blogged pictures on Tumblr and signed every petition out there. I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice making sure the world knew what went down. Now I am that person and I'm too afraid to speak". So this passage is really identifiable for readers, teen readers who find themselves in a difficult situation where ahead of time they may have thought that they would act a certain way. And then when it comes down to it, they're afraid. And that's really what the novel is about - is about learning to find one's voice and to speak out, particularly in cases of racial injustice.

SM Are there other novels that have really caught fire, that are also along this theme?

LK Yes, absolutely. There are several novels related to the Black Lives Matter movement. There's one called "All-American Boys". There's another called "Dear Martin". And what's particularly interesting about the popularity of Black Lives Matter is their appeal to Gen Z. So Generation Z consists of 13 to 23 year-olds. The vast majority are teens, and recent polls have shown that 90 percent of Gen Z supports Black Lives Matter. And so that's really powerful. So here we see a connection between activism that's portrayed in young adult literature and activism that is an important value of teens and young adults today.

SM In the book, "Darius the Great is Not Okay", that we were talking about earlier - it has such a global reach with Darius between the Persian and American culture. Is there a trend in young adult books looking at the more globalized lives of young people?

LK Absolutely. So, in comparison to earlier young adult novels, most of them were set and occurred in the United States and now there is definitely more global outreach. We have characters who are traveling to other countries and learning about their heritage. We have characters who are exploring their multiple identities. So, for example, there's a graphic memoir that was published last year by Malika Ghareeb called "I Was Their American Dream", and she has an Egyptian father, a Filipino mother, and was born and raised in the US. And she spends her summers in Egypt and the school year in Chico, California, and she's navigating her identity. She talks about struggling as a teen to answer the question, "what are you?" and that identity is portrayed as a complex issue.

SM We just have time to talk about one more book and kind of a genre of books. Tell me about "Carry On" and why it's such a popular illustration of this fan fiction genre or Harry Potter fan fiction genre.

LK Yes, well one thing that has distinguished current young adult literature is the popularity of fan fiction. Readers can become writers and they create their own stories based on characters, plot, setting of different novels and seven million stories have been uploaded to fanfiction.net. Interestingly, the median age is 15 and a half. So "Carry On" is written by a very popular young adult writer named Rainbow Rowell, and it's been referred to as a deconstructed Harry Potter because it takes some elements of Harry Potter and is based on another character that Rowell has created who is a fan fiction writer. So, it's a story of Simon Snow, and he's been referred to as the worst chosen one who's ever been chosen, and his relationship with his nemesis and roommate named Baz. And the novel takes place during their final year of Watford School of Magics. And I love the way that the Kirkus Review describes the novel: "There's a great battle between good and evil, but there are also mobile phones, contemporary slang, pop culture references and gay romance". So when I've taught "Carry On", there's one scene that really strikes my students and they love. And that's a scene that is a satire of a melodramatic scene from one of the Twilight movies. Well my students loved it so much that they asked if they could act it out, read it out loud in front of the class and act out the scene. It's a really fun and smart read. It's also really well-written.

SM Lisa Koch is a professor of English at George Mason University.

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SM Old school guidance counselors sit behind their desk giving one on one sessions that can feel like pulling teeth for moody kids. Natoya Haskins says her days as a guidance counselor were nothing like that. She spent hers on her feet, in the hallways, in group sessions and getting kids excited to see their counselor. Now, Haskins is a professor at the William and Mary School of Education, where she studies how this hands-on approach to school counseling can be an act of social justice. Natoya, before you started teaching and training future school counselors, you were a middle school counselor yourself. Tell me about that experience and what drew you to it.

NH Yes, well, I was a school counselor for about four years in a middle school in Richmond, Virginia. I initially got interested in it, really because of my own experiences as a student with my school counselor in high school. She was an African-American woman and she really pushed me and challenged me. I was a first-generation college student, so I really didn't have a lot of information about what I needed to do to be successful after high school or what my options were. And she sat me down one day and she said, "You have what it takes. I know you probably don't see this in yourself, but I see it in you". And those little bits of information that she gave me really kind of changed my life trajectory. You know, I went on to college and when I was trying to decide what I wanted to do, her voice just kept kind of echoing. And I thought, gosh, if I could do the same.

SM And had you had other counselors who were less impactful?

NH Well, she was probably out of all of my counselors, the one that had the most impact. She also was the one that looked like me. And like I said, she was African-American and I didn't have that many people in my academic career that looked like me.

SM That had to be so important for you to hear her say, I see this in you. You're a slam dunk for college.

NH Absolutely. You know, she was one of those people that you look back on in your life and you think, gosh, if I could just ever say thank you, I had an opportunity probably about 15 years later and I bumped into her. At this point, I was a school counselor and I said, "oh my gosh, Miss Wallace, is that you? You don't realize the impact that you had on my life. I am a school counselor because of you".

SM Do you also remember one or two things she steered you in the direction of that might not have happened without her?

NH Well, one thing I can say unequivocally was honors and AP courses. My freshman year, she sat me down, she actually called my mom into her office one day because I didn't know what to take. I had signed up - they used to send out these forms for you to kind of check the classes that you wanted to take. And I just kind of signed up with what I thought was what everybody else was taking. And she called me into her office and said, "I'm actually going to put you in honors and AP for next year". And I was like, "Really? Do I have to?" and she was like, "I think you can do it". And the next thing I knew - like that, next day she called my mom and to sit down and talk with both of us. Without that, without that change in trajectory, I don't know - I mean, I probably would've went to college maybe, but it's hard to know. I was able to see something in myself through those courses that I hadn't seen before. You know, that I could be successful, that I could stand aside - alongside, you know, people that maybe did not look like me, but be just as successful.

SM How diverse were those AP and honors courses you're taking?

NH Typically, I was one of maybe two other Black students. It was typically, you know, white students. There may have been one Asian student, but really there were few of us. I think in this particular class, the one where she recommended I go into the honors AP, I was the only - I was the only African-American student in that class.

SM Tell me about your experience when you were working at a middle school that was really struggling. What was that like and what was the experience of that school?

NH Right. So the middle school that I spent the most time working at when I was a school counselor was in the city of Richmond in Virginia. It was 99 percent African-American, probably about the same percentage of free and reduced lunch. A lot of what I did when I was there, was trying to give students access. I would probably say 90 percent of the students had never been on a college campus and neither had their parents. And so we would take all of the eighth grade students on a campus tour and we typically would visit anywhere from three to four colleges. So we did one year we did Norfolk State, we did Hampton University, we did Christopher Newport University. And the students had an opportunity to see students that looked like them. And for a lot of them, it had an impact. We had by the end of the time I was there, we had about 20 percent of our students go on to specialty high schools. Prior to that, we had no more than five or six students every year. By the time I left, we had about 20 percent of our students of a class of about 150. So it was pretty significant.

SM Was your day typically in your office seeing students who were sent there, or out of the office?

NH So typically I walked the halls. As soon as the bell rang, that was my - you know, I was in the hall. I was in the hall just chatting with students. Typically, it was nothing major. It was just how are things going? You know? And I would, you know, look at body language just to kind of see, you know, those students that seemed maybe like they may be having a hard time. Or they just kind of seemed maybe out of sorts, you know, maybe they - or nothing. You know, for me, it was just an opportunity to engage with them in a way that felt, you weren't coming to my office because there was a problem.

SM Isn't that kind of connecting with the students, especially the tough, hard to reach ones, what all good guidance counselors do?

NH Oh, I absolutely think it should be. I think more of us need to be doing that. Unfortunately, many, many times students aren't getting that. Students, Black and Brown, students, students of color and students from underrepresented backgrounds continue to say that. That they wish they had more of a connection.

SM Where is most of the time spent for those counselors that aren't getting out, would you say?

NH I think it depends on the - the school, you know. So for some counselors, if you are at a school where you have a high population of students that are going on to college, you might be spending your time writing recommendation letters or just meeting, you know, meeting with students that were going on to college and, you know, wanting to kind of talk through with their essays needed to entail and that type of thing. And - and if you're not careful, you know, there are certain groups of students that fall through the cracks. There's only a certain amount of time in the day, you know, so you have to be really intentional. You know, when I was at the high school that I mentioned, I had a list of - of students on my desk that I met with weekly that were my, you know, what I call my bubble students. I'm still thinking, oh, if you want to go to college, we can find a way for you to get to college. You know, it's just, you know, we got to look at all the options that are out there because they're many.

SM You are looking at how counselors can address social justice issues in their work. What does that look like for counselors that you've studied?

NH Right. When I worked in the middle school, one of the ways that we addressed access was we started a mentoring program with one of the local churches. We identified, I believe it was approximately 20 or 30 of the students that need the most support. Some of them were even, you know, suspended for short periods of time. And we paired with a mentor to create some type of connection, positive connection with the school where they felt like they wanted to - to attend and wanted to connect.

SM What are some of the social justice issues that you see can be tackled and should be tackled through middle and high school counseling?

NH So, I mean, I feel that one of the things based - based on my own experience is looking for disparities. You know, who's passing, you know, which test and who's being selected to participate in certain programming or gifted programming or course selection. How can we diversify those opportunities? Because school counselors tend to be the ones that are signing off on gifted placements and AP placements and honors courses. We tend to be the last ones to either say, okay, we're fine - you know, we're going to continue to maintain the status quo or we're going to challenge the status quo and we're going to

identify students that we - we know have potential. And that impacts so many students. It has the potential to impact so many students that you make it a part of your mission to identify Black and Brown students that also can benefit. Even meeting with parents, because Black and Brown communities, sometimes we - we don't know what we don't know. I mean, like my parents did not know about what the options were, and they didn't know to ask. Nobody was reaching out to them, you know. And so, when my school counselor reached out to my mom and said, you know, I want to meet with you and your daughter, you know, my mom was like, sure, but she wouldn't have probably asked on her own, because she didn't know.

SM So what sort of leadership is needed? Where are we finding counselors that have this caring and social justice sort of approach to their work? How important is it for the principal, for instance, to be fostering this?

NH You know, ideally, you know, you want to be on the same page. But oftentimes, you know, it's been my experience - when I was working in the the middle school that my principal was on board. Because for her, she wanted to see more of our students succeed, you know, so she was looking, you know, like, what can we do? You know, Natoya, what do you - what do you have in your pocket that we can, you know, pull out to try to support the social and emotional needs, you know, of these students. But also, being mindful that if you can show impact, then more than likely they are going to support the work that you're doing.

SM How responsive are the college students that you're teaching this to now?

NH I would say overwhelmingly most are. So let me let me be honest, a lot of them are overwhelmed by the by the notion that, oh, once they find out that school counseling is more than, you know, being in your office and working with one student, you know, at a time or doing a small group on friendship, which is - all of these things are wonderful, but that you really are doing more systemic work and you're - you're working with those students that often kind of get left behind and you're addressing things like social justice issues and advocating. Sometimes it can be overwhelming. And I say that that's in many ways, that's where the profession is moving. To more of an advocacy-minded profession. You know, even our professional organization now is - has said that the focus is on all students in that you as a school counselor should be looking at, you know, the disparities, you know, get out of our comfort zones to help them be their best self.

SM Natoya Haskins, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

NH I appreciate this opportunity.

SM Natoya Haskins is a professor at the William and Mary School of Education. This is With Good Reason, we'll be right back.

[00:28:05]

SM Welcome back. From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. Eve Ettinger says by the time they were 13, their childhood was essentially over. As the oldest of nine kids in an extremist evangelical household Ettinger's home schooling was sidelined so they could become essentially another parent, caring for siblings, cooking and cleaning. Now an English professor at Dabney Lancaster Community College, Edinger has left the religion they were raised in and is devoted to helping other young people find their own

path. Tell me a little bit about your family growing up, a very religious family and many children.

EE So I'm the oldest of nine kids and I was raised in what outsiders from the movement call the Quiverfull movement. So this is a offshoot of the Jesus movement in the 70s and 80s that was kind of along the lines of that that back to the land kind of stuff that in a religious sense, where everybody was extremely pro-life and having as many kids as God allowed. And many in the community were actively homeschooling with the intention of raising their children up in a Christian culture to be Christian culture warriors, to kind of continue on building God's kingdom in the United States.

SM Your parents actually came from fairly liberal families initially, right?

EE Initially. So my - my parents were the, on my mom said she was the first in her family to go to college, blue collar family from originally Massachusetts, but then she was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area in Oakland. And my father's family was from Texas and South Carolina. And his parents both had postgraduate degrees and raised him in Berkeley. And they were very liberal. Neither families were particularly religious, but when they were in college, they both had Christian roommates who converted them. And so they were participating in this charismatic evangelical church community in the San Francisco Bay Area. And they were part of a large group of young couples that got married all in the same time frame, that all had the same kind of goal of raising Christian children in a Christian community because they - there was something that they all felt was lacking in their own upbringings.

SM Huh. What was it like for you growing up in that family?

EE I didn't know what I was missing. So for a long time, I thought that my family was both really unusual because they were, we were - we were very different. There were things that we weren't allowed to do that was very clear and obvious from the start. You know, all my - my neighborhood friends would go to school and I was homeschooled, and they were all getting TVs in their homes and we didn't have one, or they were all watching new Disney movie and I wasn't allowed to. You know, Little Mermaid was disrespectful to our dad, we weren't allowed to watch that. But on another level, I - I felt very bonded with my parents and very loved. And I - within the system that they set up, it got more increasingly authoritarian and increasingly controlling and abusive as I grew older, but my early childhood years in California were pretty warm. And so I didn't really think that anything was wrong and I didn't really have any reason to brush up against it. But as they kept having more and more kids, my childhood was slipping away. I was being put into these adult roles at ages that were far too young. I was being asked to babysit five kids at the age of 12, and I was a proxy for a lot of my parents' parenting needs. They couldn't do it all on their own and so they to really heavily on me.

SM How did you escape from that? As a teenager oppressed by sort of the family circumstances, what was your escape?

EE Reading. So the year my mom had my twin brothers, I turned 13 a couple of days after they were born. And I kind of neglected my - my math and science stuff because I needed help with it. And Mom didn't have time, and I was helping with night shift with the babies and watching the other kids, and they had a lot of ear infections and doctors appointments, so I was just constantly babysitting. But that year I read about 300 books and most of them were classics. So I was like out on the swings, pushing the baby while I'm reading Dante's

Inferno and like hanging out with my brother in his tree house, reading Beowulf out loud to him.

SM Were your friends also a source of escape for you?

EE Yeah, but there's a lot of limitations when there's that many kids and a tight budget. And my peers were having, you know, fairly conservative but normal teenage experiences. They were going to youth group and I was not allowed to go to youth group. They were like hanging out and going to movies and staying up late. And I had a curfew at 10 p.m. I - you know, there's - there's just not a lot that you can do when you're tied to that. So when I went to college, was really when I had a little bit of a high school-ish renaissance.

SM And you met a great guy.

EE Well, I thought he was a great guy. Yeah, I - I met my ex-husband there, and that was... That was really fun. We were both from a very similar background, we had a lot in common, we were both processing a lot of the same things. And so we'd stay up at all hours just like trying to talk about, like the stuff that our churches did. And we were trying to figure out, like, what does this mean? Is this - is this essential to Christianity? Is the stuff that this church teaches essential to faith? If we leave behind these elements, do we still want to be Christians? And so we kind of left the cult together. And I call it a cult in the academic definition of a cult. You could also call it a high control group, because that's what it was. And we just kind of tried everything to see what we liked and what we wanted to keep. And we ended up becoming Episcopalian and felt very comfortable with that. And so by the time we were married, we - we had an Episcopalian wedding.

SM You've set that writing around this period in your life really saved you. How?

EE So, the term gaslighting comes from, you know, from the Ingrid Bergman movie where she's an heiress and he's - the guy who's married her is a con artist who's trying to get her fortune. And - and he's trying to do so by getting her to believe that she's crazy and sign over her - her powers to him as her husband. It's this experience of like having your experiences of reality challenged, like you believe that you experienced this thing. And they're like, wait, what? That didn't happen. And one of the things that was pretty common across the board was the patriarchal powers that were within the church, within my family, within my marriage, all - all really used gaslighting as a tool to reinforce their own narratives. I got told that I had a bad memory for years by people, and I was like, I don't have a bad memory. Like, I'm not imagining these things, like this actually happened. This is what you did and said. And so having the - the ability to write down what I observed and what I experienced and have put it on a blog in a public space where other people would read it and recognize their own experiences and be like "me too!", was a really, really potent way of - of you know, it was an antidote to the poison of being told, like, "you're - you're imagining things, it's not that bad". I mean, I still have to do this. Like there are sometimes when I'm like, you know, maybe X thing in my marriage wasn't that bad. And I'll have a friend who will be like, "yeah, but do you remember this happening?" and I was like, oh yeah, that's right. That did happen. It was as bad as I thought it was. So having that, that really allowed me to keep myself protected.

SM Now, you write a lot about growing up and you have a podcast, Kitchen Table Cult.

EE Kitchen Table Cult, yeah.

SM Who are you trying to reach? What are you saying to them?

EE So Kitchen Table Cult is my podcast and I co-host it with Kieryn Darkwater, who - we both grew up in Quiverfull families around the same time. And we knew each other since they were 14 and I was 16. And so we're trying to do like explainers of, okay, so, you know, the Trump administration moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, what is the significance of that to the fundamentalist evangelical community? So we're trying to explain these - these contemporary events that we're seeing with the larger context of having grown up in a subculture that created what's happening now.

SM And are you picturing an audience, you're trying to reach somebody and make a difference?

EE We're picturing two different audiences. One is the people like us who are getting out and are like, "Did that just happen? Am I crazy?" in order to confirm for them that, no, you're not and actually, it was as bad as you thought it was and - and here's how we got out. Let's give you a little trail of breadcrumbs. The other is for people like my extended family who loved us and watched with bafflement as my parents went further and further and didn't know how to reach us or how to help us. And so this is a okay, so you love someone who's in this in high control group, or you love someone who believes these things, here's - here's how to understand what - what might be going on in their - in their heads, in their community, and here's how to approach it in a compassionate and perhaps effective way.

SM Do you have siblings who are still stuck in the loop?

EE No. My parents my parents got divorced two years ago and had been separated for a couple of years before that. My mom has come full circle and has - is a fairly moderate Christian.

SM Right.

EE My - my youngest sister is 13 and - and she, she has very normal 13-year-old problems. And that is the most gratifying thing to see.

SM What do you say to young people who are still trying to split with their parents on their beliefs like this?

EE There's - there is a - a point at which you have to respect that they are doing that the best they can with the tools that they have, but you are responsible for yourself and they are not able to decide for you what you need or who you are. Or how to thrive in this world, and sometimes that requires giving yourself some radio silence so that you can hear yourself think. And sometimes that means giving yourself some geographical distance so you can hear yourself think. And there's nothing wrong with that. But it's not - it's not the end of the story. And - and keep living your life in a way that's true to you and does no harm and - and know that there are people in that community who are watching and will find hope in your decision to do that.

SM That's really wonderful, Eve Ettinger, thank you for sharing with me on With Good Reason.

EE Thank you.

SM Eve Ettinger is a writer and an English professor at Dabney Lancaster Community College. They co-host of a podcast called Kitchen Table Cult.

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SM Why do teens make the choices they make and why do they take the risks that they take? Pearl Chiu and Brooks King-Casas are psychology professors at Virginia Tech, and they have new research that seeks to unlock some of the mysteries of the teenage brain. Brooks, why study the teenage brain? What is truly different or special about it? I know we always say the mind doesn't fully formed until age 25, but what's going on with a teenage brain?

BK The teenagers are really kind of a critical period for social development. And part of what we are interested in studying is how they become so sensitive to social information and how that kind of guides their decisions, how it can change them. So this was a study that we wanted to do to try and get out that - that process a little bit. How do - how do others influence teenagers and how does that change over time?

SM So prior studies showed teenagers are influenced by their peers who use drugs and alcohol. But the two of you looked at whether the reverse is also true. Are teenagers less likely to engage in risky behavior and use drugs and alcohol if their peers don't use?

BK Much of the previous work has really been focused on sort of these potentially negative influences of social peers. Here we wanted to look at those two things separately, so we wanted to see if we could parse out positive influences from potentially negative influences in the context of generally risky decisions.

SM Pearl, tell me about the study that the two of you conducted.

PC Sure, so we recruited adolescents aged 15 to 17 and had them come into the laboratory and do a simple gambling task where you're trying to make decisions about a couple of risky options, kind of like - kind of like a pair of lottery tickets. And adolescents made the decisions on their own, but then also made the decisions in a group context. So sometimes seeing social peers who chose the safer lottery and some who chose the riskier lottery. And what we saw was that safer peers do make the adolescents make safer choices, but also that risky peers make adolescents make riskier decisions, too. But what was particularly interesting is, we recruited adolescents who had tried using drugs and so some adolescents who hadn't - had not tried these substances. And what we found is that both adolescents who had and had not tried were equally influenced by their riskier peers. But what was different between the adolescents who - who had used and not used substances was how responsive they were to peers who made safer choices. And we found that peers who had not used any substances were more likely to follow their safer social peers.

SM What does that tell us or suggest?

PC Traditionally, we've had a lot of focus on negative peer pressure and the - the consequences of following kids who make poor decisions. But - but what this suggests is that our safe social peers might actually be protective against potentially poor decisions.

SM Did anything surprise you?

PC That that in itself was quite surprising. We went in thinking that we would help uncover some of the brain mechanisms behind negative peer pressure. So why is it that social others can influence us to make decisions that we would rather not make? But what we found is that what's perhaps more important are the safe social peers who can influence us to make decisions that may be more beneficial in the long term.

SM What do you think the research means outside of the lab in the real world? What impact on how we talk to teenagers?

PC There's a couple different potential areas of impact. Maybe we need to focus less on the negatives, but focus on the positives, but also recognize the importance of social peers in how the information is portrayed. But also in general public health information campaigns, so it might be important to not only focus on the information, so the positive - potential positive outcomes of certain decisions, but also who's providing that information. Is it safer social peers? Are they riskier social peers?

SM What was your first thought when you launched this experiment, judging teen risk influences?

PC I think part of what got us curious is that we don't know why we're influenced by social others. I mean, we know that we are, but we don't know why. And the brain scans and the behavioral tasks let us move towards understanding the why of social influence. And I think it's an important public health question to, to understand in adolescents, since using drugs in adolescents partially determines whether you'll have a substance use problem in the future, and that we have the the brain tools and the behavioral - the behavioral kind of mathematical models that can help us tease apart the mechanisms of why of social influence.

SM And yet the question you were asking yourself and what you expected to happen was actually almost in the conclusion opposite, right?

PC That's right. I mean, I guess not so much opposite as extra. Because we did find risky influence. We know that when social peers make risky decisions, were more likely to make risky decisions. Just like in our four - four-and-a-half and two-and-a-half-year-old. When they were around each other they'll - they're more likely to make risky decisions than - than they are alone. But what we didn't expect to find is that how strong the safe - the safe social peers are.

BK The way I think about - about it is a little bit, there's this term called risk assortment, and it's basically the idea that people like being around people who are similar to themselves, right. Maybe people start out being slightly more biased or, you know, have a little bit more affinity for safe social peers. The literature has been kind of, okay well, everyone's going along, doing just fine. And then there's these - these negative kinds of influences that - that pull people off of the safe or regular path. And this work makes me kind of wonder whether it's really kind of the opposite. It's - it's not the opposite, but it's really folks being a little bit, paying a little bit more attention to - to safe peers and following safe peers and end up being reinforced or being around more safe peers. That keeps them less exposed to their risky influence as opposed to the risky folks pulling them away from - from the safer norms in their peer groups.

SM I understand you're starting a five-year study to follow teens over a longer period. What do you want to see in that?

BK We're going to be launching this longitudinal study in the spring and we really want to be able to study all of these other contextual factors, including things like family environment. How chaotic is our family situation? What's the socioeconomic factors, you know, that are part of their - their family and whether their parents have used substances or have problematic behaviors themselves? And those are all critical determinants of later substance use and kind of seeing how those interact with the social processes, the extent to which, you know, they're influenced by their parents or their peers is really interesting to us. And then also, you know, once they leave the house, you know, once they get a bit older, then they have all these freedoms to make the choices that they want to. So, you know, we don't think about or even as parents, we have two children ourselves and thinking about our own kids making risky decisions is kind of - it made us realize, you know, we actually - risk isn't a bad thing. We want them to be, you know, making their own mistakes. Because, you know, at the end of the day, once they leave the house, they - they are going to be the stewards of their own decisions. They need to have enough experience with the world to have, you know, a way of making - of navigating all the freedoms that they're going to have. So we want them to try these risky things, then be able to sort of use that experience to - to make good decisions of their own.

PC That's absolutely right. One of the challenges of - one of the many challenges of parenting has been kind of suppressing the impulse to stop the risky decisions, to let it let it happen, let them learn from the outcomes of a potential risky choice. And that's been particularly hard, but we know that's important. It's important to take the risks, to observe the outcomes and to develop your own sense about what is - what is too risky for you as a person. And I think you just also there's a certain irony of studying social influence in the context of a pandemic that requires social isolation. And so I think it will be interesting to observe how this generation of middle schoolers may turn out differently from previous generations or future generations and that they will have been at home more and so maybe more influenced by your - the family context than their social peers. But that's that remains to be seen. But we're very curious about that too.

SM Pearl and Brooks, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

BK Well, thank you for taking the time.

Pearl Chiu and Brooks King-Casas are both professors of psychology at Virginia Tech and professors at the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at Virginia Tech Carilion. Support for With Good Reason comes from the University of Virginia Health System, a National Cancer Institute designated cancer center researching and developing the treatments of tomorrow, uvahealth.com. With Good Reason is produced by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation, the original people of the land and waters of her home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Lauren Francis, Jamal Millner and Aiden Carroll. Maya Nir is our intern. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell, thanks for listening.