Tip sheet 5:
Talking about risk-taking



5.1 Why this matters

- Risk-taking is a normal part of growing up.
- Young people feel safer when adults help them understand risks instead of just saying 'no.' This keeps the path open for harder conversations later.
- Without guidance, young people often rely on what their friends think is normal.
- Learning the difference between safe, safe risk, risking on purpose and unsafe helps build judgement.
- Curiosity and calm responses help young people think things through.
- Online spaces can increase peer pressure to take risks, making adult support even more important.

5.2 What you might notice

Young people exploring risk may:

- test boundaries or rules
- talk about pressure from friends
- minimise danger ('It's fine' or 'Everyone does it')
- move quickly between feeling confident and feeling doubt
- withdraw or go quiet after taking an unsafe risk
- avoid all 'safe risks'.

These behaviours often show a young person is learning and testing limits.

5.3 What helps

Using the Safety continuum	Help them place a situation into a category: • safe • safe risk (fun to feel scared) • risking on purpose • unsafe. This keeps the focus on judgement, not good or bad. It helps them think, not feel judged.
Focusing on their thinking, not just the outcome	Ask what they noticed, what felt safe or unsafe, and what they might do next time.
Checking the Building blocks of safety	Ask: • *'Are you choosing freely?'* • *'Do you have control?'* • *'Is there a time limit?'*
Planning ahead together	Ask: • *'Have you thought about what you'd do if it stopped feeling safe?'* • *'If you needed to leave, what could help you do that?'* • *'If you felt uncomfortable, who could you reach out to?'*
Normalising mixed feelings	Remind them it is common to feel nervous and excited at the same time.
Keeping connection central	Curiosity and calm responses keep communication open.
Celebrating safe risks	Acknowledge their effort and courage when they try something new.

Respecting pace and context	Risk feels different for everyone. Culture, disability or past trauma can change how safety feels. Follow the young person's lead. A safe risk for one person might feel unsafe for another. Don't compare them to others. Focus on what feels manageable for them right now.

The **Safety continuum** and the **Building blocks of safety** come from protective behaviours education. Young people explore these in the **Young Person's Guide to Personal Safety**.

5.4 What to avoid

The 'I told you so'	Shame can stop a young person from learning. Connection supports growth.
Taking the wheel	Unless there is immediate danger, don't just ban the activity. Help them build safety skills instead.
Strict rules	Using words like never or always can stop a young person from telling you when a risk goes wrong. Focus on mostly and usually to allow for honest mistakes.
Assuming risk means 'acting out'	Risk-taking is a natural part of human development.

5.5 Quick responses

These are suggestions. Use your own words and adapt them to suit you and the young person.

If the young person…	You can say or do…
Wants to try something new	*'That could be a safe risk. What's your plan to stay in control?'*
Feels pressured by friends	*'It sounds like others are making the choice for you. How can we help you get your 'voice' back?'*
Talks about an unsafe risk	Stay calm. *'Even if you took an unsafe risk, you don't have to keep it a secret. I'm glad you told me so we can sort it out.'*
Is unsure how to say no	Practise exits. *'I'm not up for that.'* or *'I've got to head off.'*
Is nervous but curious	*'It's OK to feel both. What would help this feel safe to you?'*
Is worried you'll be angry about a mistake	*'I might not like the choice, but I'm always glad you told me. Your safety matters more than the rules.'*

If the young person shares something that feels unsafe, stay calm and follow the steps in **How to respond: The 6-step-framework**. If you're unsure what to do, check in with another trusted adult or a professional. You don't have to make decisions alone.

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