

Should Kids Do

EXTREME Sports?

The thrills are undeniable—
but so are the risks.

BY LAUREN TARSHIS, WITH JON LACKMAN



AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:

What are the risks and rewards of
extreme sports?

On a sunny afternoon in April 2012, in the dusty mountain town of Tehachapi, California, Jett Eaton was doing what he loved most: flying through the air on his skateboard.

The seventh-grader from Mesa,

Arizona, had been competing in skateboarding competitions for years, racking up trophies and fans. Now he was trying to master a challenging new trick on the MegaRamp, one of the longest and steepest ramps in competitive skateboarding.

Under the watchful eye of his dad and coach, Geoff Eaton, Jett had spent three hours working on a difficult move called the “nine.” Again and again, Jett whooshed

down the 500-foot ramp, **lofted** himself into the air, and attempted to spin two-and-a-half times while clutching his skateboard with both hands. He was so close to mastering the move, but each time, something went wrong. He would wobble, slip on the landing, or rotate too little or too much.

Finally, Geoff announced that Jett had practiced enough, that it was time to call it a day. But Jett wasn’t ready to stop. Exhausted and

Skateboarding phenom Jett Eaton



frustrated, he tipped his skateboard off the ramp one last time. He was determined to land the move.

Instead, he fell—and nearly died.

Pushing Limits

Skateboarding—at least the kind of skateboarding that Jett was doing—is an extreme sport: a high-intensity activity that involves great speed, enormous heights, and death-defying stunts. In addition to flipping and twisting on

skateboards, extreme athletes fly down mountains on BMX bikes and soar off jumps on snowboards, skis, and snowmobiles. They cling to icy cliffs, ride gigantic waves, and jump out of airplanes. Extreme sports are all about pushing the limits of what the human body can do.

Today, younger and younger kids are becoming extreme athletes. In 2014, 8-year-old Minna Stess became the youngest girl to skate from the steepest section of the MegaRamp. Ten-year-old snowboarder Benni Fridbjornsson of Iceland was doing flips at the age of 7; now he's doing double backflips.

There's no doubt that extreme sports are thrilling. But these thrills can come at a high price. According to a study of seven X Games sports, extreme athletes suffered about 4 million injuries between 2000 and 2011. Most were easily treated fractures and cuts, but serious—and even fatal—injuries do happen. In 2009, Olympic-bound snowboarder Kevin Pearce suffered a permanent brain injury after a fall during a practice run. Two years ago, snowmobiler Caleb Moore died after

a horrific crash.

As for Jett Eaton, he was alive when emergency workers arrived at the MegaRamp, but his injuries were **grave**. As a helicopter carried Jett to the hospital, his dad Geoff feared the worst.

Special Hazards

Extreme sports are risky at any age, but young athletes face special hazards. They are less likely than adults to really think about the risks. “Kids tend to think about what is happening this minute, not what could happen an hour from now,” says **psychologist** Jesse Matthews.

Inspired by video games or YouTube clips, some kids attempt stunts way beyond their skill level. And, unlike team sports players, many extreme athletes practice without the guidance of coaches.

There are ways to make extreme sports safer, however. Wearing protective gear is **critical**. So are training with experts and not attempting to become Shaun White on the first run. Then again, at the time of his accident, Jett was wearing a helmet, kneepads, a chest and spine protector, hip and elbow pads, and gloves. He was also working with a coach. Safety-wise, his only failing was ignoring Geoff's instruction to stop for the day.

At the hospital, doctors rushed to save Jett's life. He had a fractured skull, a **concussion**,



Adventure sports like extreme snowboarding and mountain biking have become more popular in recent years.

and a bruised brain. He also had a seizure caused by the **trauma** to his brain.

And yet, Jett pulled through. After three days, he was released from the hospital. But it was unclear if he would ever skate again.

Worth the Risk?

When so much could go wrong, why would anyone want to participate in extreme sports? There is, of course, the obvious thrill of flying down a mountainside at 60 miles an hour or soaring through the air on a trusted skateboard. Extreme sports also offer opportunities to kids who don't enjoy team sports like football or soccer. Kids can be more imaginative because they are free to experiment and invent their own stunts. Beyond that, extreme sports can build confidence and discipline, and like any sport, help kids stay fit and healthy.

Frank Farley, a psychologist who studies risk taking, says that if kids have the skill and the experience,



there is no reason to hold them back. "If a child has the skills to climb a serious mountain, should we hold them back from Mount Everest?" he asks.

Passion and Identity

It's been three years since Jett's devastating fall on the MegaRamp, and he is back to skating. At this point, he's had 10 concussions, five seizures, and six broken bones, and has punctured his spleen—twice.

Jett has not returned to the MegaRamp but hopes to one day. His father supports that dream. Geoff also continues to encourage Jett's younger brother, Jagger, to pursue skateboarding. (In the summer of 2012, Jagger, at age 11,

became the youngest person to ever compete in the X Games.)

Jagger, like Jett, has had his share of injuries, but Geoff points out that his sons are happy and healthy. He believes extreme sports have helped them find passion and identity. The grit they've acquired, he says, has helped them in school and enabled them to avoid risks like drugs or alcohol.

"You can't live behind a stop sign, and every time you want to do something that gets your heart beating decide that it's safer if you don't," Geoff says. "That's not how I live. I don't want my kids living like that." ●

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The Science of Thrill-Seeking

It's all about your brain. **By Jennifer Dignan**

Falling on your head hurts. So does breaking a bone. You'd think that to avoid such injuries (and, you know, *worse*) we'd stay away from danger except when absolutely necessary, right?

So why is it that sometimes we decide a little unnecessary danger is worth it? We speed down a steep hill on a bike, because when we weigh the risk (face plant!) and the reward (what a rush!), the risk seems worth taking.

Clearly, we're not all using the same scale to weigh risks and rewards, though. Some of us thrive on activities that would scare the bejeebers out of the rest of us. Why? Experts say it may have to do with how our brains work.

Take a Risk—or Die

The reason any of us take any risks at all might have to do with early humans. Risk-takers were better hunters, fighters, and explorers. Being better at those things meant a greater chance of survival. As the trait of risk-taking was passed from one generation to the next, humans ended up with a sense of adventure and a **tolerance** for risk.

So why aren't we all jumping out of airplanes then? Well, even 200,000 years ago, *too* much risk-taking could get you killed. A few daredevils survived, though, along with a few stay-in-the-cave types. As a result, humans developed a range of personality types that still exists

today. So maybe you love roller coasters, or maybe you hate them. Maybe you think rock-climbing sounds amazing, or maybe your stomach feels funny just thinking about it. It all depends on your personality.

Teenage Daredevils

No matter where you are on the thrill-seeking **spectrum**, scientists say that your willingness to take risks increases during your teenage years. It is during this time that you start to move away from your family and into the bigger world. To help you do that, your brain bumps up your hunger for new experiences. New experiences often mean taking some risks, so your brain bumps up your tolerance for risk as well. Even as a teen, though, what you see as a risk worth taking will depend on your personality. And so we return to the question of what drives some people to climb Mount Everest while others stick to the nature trail.

New brain research suggests that when thrill-seekers face an intense situation, a part of the brain related to pleasure becomes active, while for the rest of us, a part of the brain related to fear becomes active. It's also possible that highly adventurous people are more sensitive to dopamine. This chemical, produced by our brains, affects emotions and plays a role in **motivation**.

As experts continue to study the science of thrill-seeking, we'll continue to hit the slopes, the waves . . . or the shallow end of the pool. ●



WRITING CONTEST

Why are some kids more drawn to extreme sports than others? Should kids be allowed to do extreme sports at all? Use text evidence to support your ideas. Send your response to **EXTREME SPORTS CONTEST**. Five winners will get *First Descent* by Pam Withers.

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