

## DEBATE

Some kids, including motocross racer Eric Burdell, 12, of Quartz Hill, California, have been doing extreme sports for years.



# Should Kids Be Allowed to Do Extreme Sports?

FOR 15-YEAR-OLD snowboarder Chloe Kim, nothing beats the thrill of zooming down a ramp at top speed and pulling off new tricks. This month, the teen from California will go for her second gold medal at the Winter X Games, a competition that showcases extreme sports. Last year, Chloe won first place in the women's snowboard SuperPipe, becoming the competition's youngest gold medalist ever.



Chloe Kim, age 15

Chloe is hardly alone in her love of extreme sports. In recent years, big-thrill activities like snowboarding, rock climbing, and skateboarding have skyrocketed in popularity—and more athletes, including kids, are taking part. According to a report from PHIT America, a company that promotes physical fitness, activities like BMX racing and windsurfing are among the fastest-growing sports in the U.S.

Some people say that participating in extreme sports keeps teens active and helps them learn to take age-appropriate risks, overcome their fears, and push their limits.

But critics say extreme sports are too dangerous for teens. They point out that young thrill seekers often attempt stunts that are too advanced for them, which can lead to serious injuries—or even death.

Should kids take part in extreme sports? Two experts weigh in.

**YES** It's well-known that physical activity has many health benefits. Unfortunately, many kids today have lost interest in traditional sports. But activities such as snowboarding, mountain biking, and motocross are steadily becoming more popular. And that's a good thing.

Although some extreme sports are associated with a higher potential for injury, it may be this very risk that helps get—and keep—teens involved. If kids believe that they aren't challenged by an activity, they might lose interest.

It's important that young people learn to take chances and push their boundaries. Doing so is crucial to figuring out when to take risks—and when not to. Risk-free activities deprive kids of the opportunity to test themselves and overcome their fears.

Risk is a fact of life. Consider something as simple as driving to school or work. Daily commuting is associated with a large number of car accidents. But we wouldn't suggest that kids never get in a car. Instead, we tell people that they can protect themselves by wearing a seat belt.

To avoid serious injuries when taking part in extreme sports, kids should be honest with themselves about their skill level. Athletes who compete in the X Games or the Olympics spend years working their way up to the gravity-defying stunts they perform on TV. Kids who are new to action sports should avoid the most dangerous tricks until they're ready. And they should always wear a helmet.

Teens may lack the ability to judge risks and the consequences of failure. That's why it's important for them to have guidance from a coach or parent. Nevertheless, extreme sports can still be part of a healthy, balanced life.

—JAMIE BURR

**Professor of Exercise Physiology  
University of Guelph, Canada**

**NO** Sports that include flying through the air on a motorcycle or doing flips before landing on an icy mountainside are extremely dangerous. They involve a level of risk that's far greater than soccer, basketball, or baseball.

With extreme sports, we're not just talking about the possibility of a broken leg. I have treated several motocross riders who suffered broken bones that left them disabled. One of my patients lost his leg in an ATV accident. Massive head trauma that can cause permanent brain damage and even death is a very real possibility.

Last year, I was part of a team that studied injuries related to extreme sports. We found that more than 4 million injuries resulting from these activities occurred between 2000 and 2011. About 40,000 of those involved the head or neck. Such injuries can be very serious and can lead to lifelong disabilities.

Even the most advanced protective equipment can't prevent all injuries. Helmets aren't made to withstand the high-level impact of these sports. And because children grow so fast, it's hard to fit protective gear correctly. Not to mention that research shows kids' brains are more vulnerable to the effects of injuries and take longer to recover.

Kids don't have the tools they need to make good choices about whether participating in extreme sports is worth the risk. It's not just a matter of emotional maturity. It's a matter of brain development. Scientists have found that the part of the brain that guides impulse control and weighs risks isn't fully mature in teens.

That's why adults need to step in and tell kids that they have to wait to participate in these very dangerous sports—at least until they're old enough to be responsible for their own decisions.

—DR. VANI SABESAN

**Associate Professor  
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take risks.**

**Taking part in  
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