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## Helping teens think

# Take a chill pill

Jun 19th 2015, 7:39 BY S.K. | LONDON



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WHY do teens from poor backgrounds drop out of school or get arrested? New evidence finds that the answer lies in *how*, not *what*, they think. Keeping teens in school and out of jail may be as simple as getting them to think more slowly.

In a new paper, a group of researchers analyse results from a trial in some of Chicago's toughest schools. Their theory is that everyone tends to go on auto-pilot, but that this has much worse consequences for teens from rougher areas.

For example: children from privileged backgrounds are constantly advised to do what they are told. If confronted by a mugger, parents say, hand over your phone: it's safer. Make eye contact with people to whom you speak. "Autopilot" behaviour from children from richer backgrounds is to do what they are told, and that translates into better behaviour at school.

But it does not work the same way for children from poor backgrounds. If confronted by a mugger, it may be better to resist, to avoid being seen as an easy target. Making eye contact may be seen as threatening. The problem is that auto-pilot behaviour on the street can have a big, bad effect on school performance. Uncommunicative, obstreperous students tend to land themselves in trouble.

If that theory is really true, then teenagers' lives could be improved simply by helping them to slow down their decision-making and stop the auto-pilot from kicking in. The programme the paper analyses are designed to do just that. Students were "randomly assigned" to take what is known as a 'Becoming a Man' (BAM) course (ie, some students take it, other don't). That means the researchers can be sure that the BAM was the only real difference between the treated and untreated groups.

BAM included exercises known as 'cognitive behavioural therapy'. In one

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of the first exercises, the teens were split into pairs. One was given a ball and the other was told to get it from them. After a lot of grabbing, the programme leader stopped the exercise and asked the teen given the ball what they would have done if they had just been asked nicely. The usual response was that they would have handed it over – “it’s just a stupid ball”.

Information on the students’ participation in BAM was then linked to their school and criminal records, to see if BAM had made any difference. The authors found that BAM led to large and statistically-significant falls in arrest rates in the year of the study.

In one of the studies school engagement (a measure including absenteeism, grade-point average and enrolment status at the end of the year), also increased significantly, by as much as would usually be associated with an increase in graduation rates of between 7%-22%.

The authors then wanted to make absolutely sure that BAM was working to slow down thinking. In a follow-up experiment, the teens involved in the programme took part in a quick-thinking exercise that involved deciding how to divvy up cash between themselves and a partner. The teens who had taken part in the study took longer to make their decisions, but were no more generous. Although it did not make the teens nicer people, BAM really did slow down their thinking.

So should the government scale up the programme? The authors argue that it is at least as cost-effective as other interventions, with a 44% reduction in the crime rate within the year of the study for a price tag of \$1,200–2,000 per student.

But the programme did not work for everyone. The fall in arrests came among those students who had not already had a brush with the law, suggesting that for teens in school the programme is more preventative than remedial.

Regardless of whether it should be scaled up, the study is important. It does not offer cash incentives for kids to stay in school. It does not tell them what to think. Instead, it encourages them to think more carefully for themselves. Maybe teens can be trusted after all.

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