



## Risky behaviors in adolescents with normal intellectual development and mild intellectual disability

Zachowania ryzykowne u młodzieży w normie intelektualnej i z lekką niepełnosprawnością intelektualną

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### Summary

**Background.** Young people use drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes for pleasure and a fleeting sense of freedom. Taking risk behaviors is often associated with treating substances as a means of compensating for negative relationships in the family and inability to cope with difficult life situations.

**Objective.** The purpose of this study was to compare the tendency to take a risk by youths with mild intellectual disability and those with normal intellectual development with regard to psychological factors (relationships in the family).

**Material and Methods.** The study involved 400 subjects aged between 14 and 20. The authors employed an interview questionnaire of their own design, and a standardized instrument - the Multifactor Risky Behaviour Scale by R. Studenski.

**Results.** As many as 60% of the study group members whose parents were not interested in their affairs, claimed that they took a risk 'very seldom', while in the control group such an answer was only given by 8.3% of the surveyed. As far as testing their luck is concerned, the quality of relationships in the family had no influence on taking a risk by the study group members.

**Conclusions.** There are differences in the tendency to take a risk between teenagers with intellectual disability and those with normal intellectual development. There is a connection between relationships in the family and taking a risk by teenagers from the control group. There is an association between the parents-child relationship in the family and taking a risk to improve the sense of well-being.

**Key words:** risky behavior, youths, intellectual disability, normal intellectual development

### Streszczenie

**Wstęp.** Młodzi ludzie ryzykują sięgając po narkotyki, alkohol, papierosy, aby dostarczyć sobie przyjemności czy ulotnej wolności. Podejmowanie tego typu zachowań ryzykownych wiąże się z traktowaniem używek jako środków zastępczych w negatywnych relacjach z rodziną i nie radzeniem sobie w trudnych sytuacjach życiowych.

**Cel pracy.** Celem pracy było porównanie skłonności do ryzyka u młodzieży niepełnosprawnej intelektualnie w stopniu lekkim i młodzieży w normie intelektualnej z uwzględnieniem kontekstu psychologicznego (jakości relacji w rodzinie).

**Materiał i metody.** Badaniami objęto 400 osób w wieku 14 – 20. W badaniu wykorzystano narzędzie własne – Kwestionariusz Wywiadu i narzędzie standaryzowane – Test Zachowań Ryzykownych Studenskiego.

**Wyniki.** Młodzież z grupy badanej, gdzie rodzice nie są zainteresowani ich sprawami aż w 60% opowiadała się za „bardzo rzadkim” podejmowaniem ryzyka, gdzie w grupie kontrolnej tej samej odpowiedzi udzieliło zaledwie 8,3% ankietowanych. Analiza materiału zebranego dla grupy badanej wskazuje, że jakość relacji w rodzinie nie ma wpływu na podejmowanie przez nich ryzyka dla określenia swojego „farta”. Osoby deklarujące swoje relacje z rodzicami jako „dobre”, „brak” „złe” odpowiednio w 55,5%; 53,4%; 50% wybierały odpowiedź: „bardzo rzadko lub nigdy”, a odpowiedź „bardzo często” najrzadziej lub wcale.

**Wnioski.** Wykazano różnice w skłonnościach do ryzykowania w grupie osób niepełnosprawnych intelektualnie i w grupie osób w normie intelektualnej. Wykazano istnienie związku pomiędzy relacjami panującymi w rodzinie, a podejmowaniem ryzyka przez młodzież z grupy kontrolnej. Wykazano istnienie związku pomiędzy podejmowaniem ryzyka dla poprawy samopoczucia, a stosunkami panującymi w relacjach rodzic-dziecko w rodzinie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zachowania ryzykowne, młodzież, niepełnosprawność intelektualna, norma intelektualna

## BACKGROUND

Risk is a key concept of modern science. It is an element which has profound impact on human health and life, the way of coping with difficult situations, making decisions, and consequently, lifestyle [1].

The end of the twentieth century brought new threats associated with lifestyle and individual preferences, among them the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), a higher accessibility of psychoactive substances, an increasing interest in extreme sports and gambling, the growth of delinquency and, at the same time, a decreasing motivation for healthy behaviors. This situation leads to questions about the causes of risky behaviors, individual tendencies to take a risk, and risk factors.

According to Jessor's theory, risky behaviors are those which threaten youths' health and normal development. They include:

- the use of psychoactive substances,
- too early sexual activity,
- aggressive behaviors, violence, bullying peers,
- petty crimes, offences, acts of hooliganism or vandalism,
- neglecting school duties, truancy, non-completion of school,
- lies and flights from home,
- other behaviors suggesting the disturbed

development (ex. a failure to fulfill social roles properly, suicidal attempts and other behaviors resulting from depressive disorders) [2].

Risk factors, on the other hand, are 'characteristic variables or hazards, whose presence causes that the probability of disorders in certain people is higher than in a randomly chosen person from the general population' [3]. Lewicki believes that "human behavior runs according to certain laws, and depends on a set of conditions at the particular moment. The latter include 'situations' i.e.

changeable factors, and 'determinants' i.e. factors which are relatively stable and 'are a part of' one's personality" [4].

The aim of this study was to compare the tendency to risk seeking behavior among teenagers and young adults with mild intellectual disability and those with normal intellectual development, taking into consideration psychological factors (the quality of relationships in the family).

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study involved 400 students of secondary schools in Szczecin and Police, aged between 14 and 20 years. The respondents were divided into two groups: a study group A – youths with mild intellectual disability (200 subjects) and a control group B – youths with normal intellectual development (200 subjects). The study was conducted using an auditorium questionnaire completed by the respondents during classes in autumn 2011. The participants were guaranteed anonymity and absolute confidentiality of their data (including information concerning their classes and schools).

This survey-based study was carried out using the author's questionnaire. It included 35 multiple-choice and multiple-response questions, concerning the lifestyle that is most popular with respondents, and their general socio-environmental and economic situation. In the second part of the study, a standardized instrument, the Multifactor Risky Behaviour Scale by R. Studenski was used. It consisted of 25 general statements concerning motives for risky behaviors or risky activities. The respondents self-reported the frequency of their motivation to take a risk or the frequency of risky behaviors.

The results were processed with MS Excel 2007 and, then, subjected to statistical analysis. The distribution of categorical variables was

described by variable categories, the number of participants (n, and percentage values. The frequencies of specific variable categories were compared using a nonparametric test – the chi-square test of independence with the Yates correction. The level of significance was set at 0.05 (p=0.05). Statistical analysis was performed using Statistica PL version 9 [5].

## RESULTS

Analysis of the results suggests that there is a difference in a tendency to risk seeking behavior between the control and the study groups in the context of relationships in the family. As many as 60% of the youths from the study group whose parents were not interested in their affairs, claimed that they took a risk ‘very seldom’. In the control group such an answer was only given by 8.3% of the respondents.

At the same time, respondents from both groups who described their relationships with parents as ‘good’ and (extremely!) ‘bad’ chose

the answer ‘very seldom’ most often, and the answer ‘very often’ most rarely.

The above statistical analysis shows that youths with normal intellectual development, growing up in families uninterested in their affairs, took a risk to improve their well-being significantly more often than their peers having either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ relationships with their parents.

Quite a different situation was observed in the case of individuals with intellectual disability. In this group, respondents who maintained that their parents were not interested in their affairs, took a risk to improve their well-being considerably rarer than their peers having either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ relationships with their parents (tab.1).

Furthermore, it was found that the control group members, having good relationships with their parents, considerably rarer took a risk to show that they ‘were in luck’ than their peers describing such relationships as bad.

In the study group, the quality of

*Table 1.* Relationships in the family vs. taking a risk to improve the sense of well-being in groups A and B.

I take a risk to feel better	How would you describe your relationships with your parents?												Total	
	A						B							
	good		my parents are not interested in my affairs		bad		good		my parents are not interested in my affairs		bad			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
very seldom or never	80	46.2	9	60	5	41.7	94	68	37.8	1	8.3	3	37.5	72
seldom	31	17.9	2	13.3	2	16.7	35	34	18.9	2	16.7	2	25	38
sometimes	33	19.1	3	20	3	25	39	57	31.7	5	41.7	2	25	64
often	16	9.2	1	6.7	1	8.3	18	15	8.3	1	8.3	1	12.5	17
very often	13	7.5	-	-	1	8.3	14	6	3.3	3	25	-	-	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>

*Table 2.* Relationships in the family vs. taking a risk to show that ‘I am in luck’ in groups A and B.

I take a risk to show that ‘I am in luck’	How would you describe your relationships with your parents?													
	A							B						
	good		my parents are not interested in my affairs		bad		Total	good		my parents are not interested in my affairs		bad		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%		n	%	n	%	n	%	
very seldom or never	96	55.5	8	53.4	6	50	110	91	50.6	5	41.7	2	25	98
seldom	24	13.9	1	6.7	2	16.7	27	44	24.4	4	33.4	4	50	52
sometimes	30	17.3	3	20	3	25	36	28	15.5	-	-	1	12.5	29
often	12	6.9	3	20	-	-	15	12	6.7	2	16.7	-	-	14
very often	11	6.3	-	-	1	8.3	12	5	2.8	1	8.2	1	12.5	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>

relationships in the family had no influence on taking a risk by youths to show that ‘they were in luck’. The answer ‘very seldom or never’ was chosen by 55.5%, 53.4%, and 50%

of respondents describing their relationships with their parents as ‘good’, ‘none’, or ‘bad’, respectively. The answer ‘very often’ was the rarest or was not given at all (tab. 2).

*Table 3.* The parents-child relationship vs. taking a risk to improve the sense of well-being in groups A and B.

I take a risk to feel better	Can you rely on your parents in difficult situations?																	
	A									B								
	always		often		seldom		never		Total	always		often		seldom		never		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
very seldom or never	69	49.7	8	32	12	52.1	5	38.5	94	47	39.9	18	28.6	6	37.5	1	33.3	72
seldom	26	18.8	5	20	1	4.3	3	23.1	35	22	18.7	14	22.2	2	12.5	-	-	38
sometimes	23	16.5	6	24	6	26.1	4	30.8	39	37	31.3	22	34.9	3	18.8	2	66.7	64
often	12	8.7	4	16	2	8.7	-	-	18	8	6.8	7	11.1	2	12.5	-	-	17
very often	9	6.5	2	8	2	8.7	1	7.7	14	4	3.4	2	3.2	3	18.8	-	-	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>

*Table 4.* Feeling happy/unhappy in the family vs. taking a risk to improve the sense of well-being in groups A and B.

I take a risk to feel better	How do you feel in your family?									
	A					B				
	happy		unhappy		Total	happy		unhappy		Total
n	%	n	%	n		%	n	%		
very seldom or never	84	46.2	10	55.6	94	68	36.4	4	30.8	72
seldom	31	17	4	22.2	35	35	18.7	3	23.1	38
sometimes	36	19.8	3	16.7	39	59	31.6	5	38.5	64
often	18	9.9	-	-	18	16	8.6	1	7.7	17
very often	13	7.1	1	5.6	14	9	4.8	-	-	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>

Another aspect analyzed in this study was the connection between taking a risk to improve the sense of well-being and the parents-child relationship in the family. As table 3 shows, both youths with intellectual disability and those with normal intellectual development who could not rely on their parents in difficult situations, chose the answer: ‘sometimes’ twice as often as their peers, who could rely

on their parents in difficult life situations (in group B – 66.7% and 31.3%, and in group A 30.8% and 16.5%, respectively).

Thus, it was concluded that both youths from the control group and the study group who could count on their parents in difficult life situations, took a risk to improve their well-being rarer (tab. 3).

Next, we analyzed the relationship between

*Table 5.* Gender vs. taking a risk to improve the sense of well-being in groups A and B.

I take a risk to feel better	A						B					
	Men		Women		Total	P	Men		Women		Total	P
	n	%	n	%			n	%	n	%		
very seldom	48	41.7	46	54.1	94	0.11	27	29.7	45	41.3	72	0.12
seldom	22	19.1	13	15.3	35	0.6	21	23.1	17	15.6	38	0.25
sometimes	26	22.6	13	15.3	39	0.27	28	30.8	36	33	64	0.85
often	11	9.6	7	8.2	18	0.94	9	9.9	8	7.3	17	0.7
very often	8	7	6	7.1	14	0.8	6	6.6	3	2.8	9	0.34
<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>X</b>

being happy/unhappy in the family and taking a risk to improve the sense of well-being. As table 4 shows, there are differences between the two groups. Group B respondents who felt happy in their families chose the answer 'very seldom or never' more often than their peers who felt unhappy (36.4% - 30.8%).

The situation in group A was quite opposite. In this group, most respondents who felt unhappy in their families chose the answer: 'very seldom or never'. To sum up, intellectually disabled respondents, living in happy families, took a risk to improve their well-being rarer than their counterparts with normal intellectual development (tab. 4).

Taking into consideration essential differences between psychological profiles of women and men, we analyzed the influence of gender on taking a risk to improve the sense of well-being, and compared the results in both groups. The results shown in table 5 are as follows: in group B the answer: 'very seldom' was given by 41.3% of females and 29.7% of males, and in group A - 54.1% of females and 41.7% of males, respectively. Both females with normal intellectual development and those with intellectual disability took a risk to improve their well-being rarer than males (tab. 5).

## DISCUSSION

The literature describes many potential risk factors associated with family environment [6]. The study conducted by Mazur et al. [7] shows that bad relationships in the family contribute to risky behaviors among teenagers. In our study, we focused on the quality of relationships in the family as one of risk factors.

Similarly to Mazur et al., we found that there is a connection between taking a risk by young people and relationships in their families. Statistical analysis demonstrated that

youths who described their relationships in the family as bad, more often took a risk in order to improve their sense of well-being. The lack of parental interest in their children's affairs forces the latter to look for understanding and acceptance among other people, which, in turn, puts them at a risk of undesirable and dangerous behavior [8].

This situation, however, described both in the literature and in our study, refers exclusively to individuals with normal intellectual development. Those intellectually disabled, having bad relationships with their parents, are not more likely to engage in hazardous actions. In this group, the quality of relationships in the family does not contribute to taking risky behaviors. It results from the fact that people with mild intellectual disability are less critical, especially of themselves and their closest environment [9,10]. Therefore, even if their relationships in the family are not satisfactory, intellectually disabled children do not look for potentially risky solutions - they simply do not feel such a need, even though they are able to describe the reality they live in.

A particularly important contributor to individual differences in a tendency to risk seeking behavior is gender [11]. Many studies show that men are more inclined to take a risk than women and more frequently fall victim to accidents associated with taking a risk [12,13]. They more often practice extreme sports [14] and smoke cigarettes [15].

In her study, Stawiarska-Lietzau [16] analyzed 590 subjects aged between 19-25 years, including 300 women and 290 men. Using the Multifactor Risky Behaviour Scale as one of research instruments, she confirmed that men are more inclined to risk than women, and taking a risk is a part of the male genotype. The study of Studenski [17] demonstrated that taking a risk is a part of the male lifestyle, and the risk-takers are higher in

the hierarchy. His findings confirm that there is a connection between the man's readiness to take a risk and his attraction to women. Sex differences in risk seeking behavior are also determined by congenital factors. Men are evolutionarily equipped with psychological mechanisms predisposing them to risky behavior [17].

The results of our study coincide with those described in the literature. We found that males took a risk to improve their well-being significantly more often than females. What is important, there were no differences between the study and the control groups. Mental abilities of females and males had no influence on their inclination to take a risk. Hence, it may be said that risk seeking behavior is culturally assigned to the masculine role, and carefulness to the feminine role, regardless of the level of intellectual development of a person.

## CONCLUSIONS

There were differences in the tendency to risk seeking behavior between youths with mild intellectual disability and those with normal intellectual development. The disabled showed a lower tendency to take a risk.

There was a connection between taking a risk by the control group members and the relationships in their families. Such a relationship was not observed in the study group.

There was a relationship between taking a risk to improve the sense of well-being and the parents-child relationship in the family.

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