

Teen Brain: Under Construction

By Elaine Kennedy, Executive Director
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Dear Parents,

Why do teens mumble and walk away when you ask them a question? *Are they doing it deliberately?*

Why are teens attracted to risk-taking behavior? *Does that mean they need more, not less, guidance during adolescence?*

In this column I will share with you some of the newest findings about the teen brain. In the last 15 years, brain research has exploded as scientists have created new diagnostic tools which help scientists to see where and how information is stored in the brain. Probably most amazing is that neuro-scientists have discovered that during adolescence, the brain undergoes tremendous growth – more about that in a future article.

Right now, let me share some information about the developing teen brain that can help us to parent these new adolescents. There are three pieces of information which have great implications for how we can support our teens.

First, teen brains, more so than adult or child brains, are attracted to novelty. All brains are attracted to novelty, but teen brains are especially dominant in this area. This means that they crave experiences and want to explore anything that is novel or new. This works well if they're exploring new forms of literature or being challenging with new math topics; however, as teens are attracted to anything that is novel, they also seek to experience life choices we find undesirable – sex, drinking, and drugs.

Second, to further exacerbate the matter, teens are especially attracted to risk-taking behavior. In fact, the parts of the brain that are affected with risk-taking behavior are the same neurons impacted by cocaine. The resulting cascade of chemical reactions when teens are exposed to risk is a powerful “feel good” experience.

Third, as if the above information is not startling or concerning to parents, the frontal cortex of the brain is not fully developed in adolescence. The frontal lobe is responsible for making good judgments, anticipating consequences, and engaging in positive decision-making and planning. We sometimes expect teens to have developed these important life-choice attributes. However, this is one of the last areas of the brain to develop. In fact, the brain is not fully developed in females until the early 20s and in males until the late 20s.

As parents, we've got our work cut out for us! Think of this: At the same time that adolescents are attracted to novelty and risk-taking behavior, they have not yet developed the capacity to always make good choices.

What are the implications for parenting these special beings? Stop a moment, and see if you can answer this question for yourself . . . Here are my thoughts on the question. Teens need structure and guidance even though they may be asserting their independence and wanting to do a lot of activities without mom and dad. My strategy as a mom of two teenage girls was to ‘pick my battles.’ Give them some autonomy in areas where they can be successful or that the decision is not life-altering. But, hold firm to your expectations for appropriate behavior and experiences in which you will or will not allow your child to participate.

Don’t back off. You’re not wrong even if your teen thinks you can’t do anything right or that ‘all the other kids get to do it.’ Here are two interesting studies. In the first one, scientists found that teens, *more than younger children*, crave parent attention. They wish their parents weren’t so tired and stressed (Galinsky). They may not act like it, but know that deep inside they want your involvement.

In a second study, scientists found that teens actually want and need guidance from adults (Schneider & Yung, 1996). It’s interesting, because we see teens pull away at this time, isolating themselves in their rooms or wanting to be with friends. Don’t give up; keep connected to your children.

Language development of teens also sheds light on their behavior. As I’ve already mentioned, the frontal cortex is one of the last areas to develop in the brain. In addition to the skills already mentioned earlier that are processed in the frontal lobe, it is the location in the brain responsible for language and abstract thinking. Younger adolescents, compared to older ones, have more difficulty generating words and expressing themselves. So when adolescents use phrases like, “I don’t know,” or “Whatever,” they may really be having difficulty searching for the words they want. If these phrases are said in a disrespectful manner, you need to respond with limits; however, know that their language skills are still developing.

This next piece of information about language development shouldn’t surprise you, but it is interesting that it’s been documented in the lab. Teens hear information quite differently from adults (Spinks, 2002). They hear a disproportionate amount of criticism and rejection. In addition, they respond emotionally to language; adults respond with logic. These two can clash. Think back to a time you rationally and in a straightforward manner told your teen that she could watch TV after her homework and chores were done. Suddenly you have an explosion as your teen rants about how you’re always picking on her, none of her friends have so many rules, and you’ve ruined her life! Again, we can’t condone these behaviors, but knowing that teens experience a greater degree of criticism and react with emotion, helps us to understand what’s going on with them.

On a similar front, teen, compared to children, have a *more* difficult time identifying emotions by as much as twenty percent (McGivern et al., 2002). In fact, they haven’t yet mastered the art of reading body language. What are the implications of this for your parenting style? Put forth clear, consistent information while identifying any emotions

that you're feeling. Don't assume your adolescent is interpreting your body language correctly.

There is a lot more information about the teen brain. The field of brain research is exploding with new information.

If this column speaks to you and rings a familiar tone as you parent your burgeoning teen, let me know. I hope that you've gained a bit of background to the question, "*Why Do They Do What They Do?*"

Let me know what you think,

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