



"The Teen Brain: A Work in Progress"

Implications for Adults Who Work with Teens

It's the mystery of mysteries—the unpredictable moods and behaviors of American teenagers. While 95 percent of the human brain has developed by the age of six, neuroscientists now tell us that the greatest spurts of growth after infancy occur just around adolescence. It is during the teen years that the brain is establishing new links between more complex ways of thinking and new emotional experiences. New brain growth depends on experiences and use in order to become permanent.

These discoveries should change the way we understand and work with teenagers. Our teens should be encouraged, because they have an enormous potential for learning new skills and honing their abilities.

Provide Teens Opportunities to Build Skills

The frontal cortex, which is the part of the brain in charge of planning, strategizing and judgement, is among the last parts to mature.

Disorganization prevails for many teens and they may need your encouragement and guidance to help them take small steps toward their goals.

Schools, organizations and workplaces can provide opportunities for teens to develop organizational skills, like managing time, action planning and following through on commitments.

Involve Teens in Decision-Making

A teen's frontal cortex needs to be developed through experiences in problem solving and decision making.

Adults who tell teenagers what to do and how they should be acting usually have good intentions. But teens need to gain experience in thinking and choosing for themselves.

Involving teens in making decisions about rules, procedures and guidelines that affect them, is one way to give teenagers an opportunity to assume more responsibility.

Give teens more freedom to make choices and monitor their choices and progress without trying to control them.

Support Healthy Experimentation

The teen brain is dominated by the emotional centers and seeks novelty and stimulation. Adolescents are known for their attraction to anything new. This attraction allows them to navigate challenges that daunt many adults, but it also may be behind their experimenting with "weird" fashions, hairstyles, fads and jargon.

Instead of criticizing teens for their taste, back off and allow them to experiment and try new things to test out their new abilities. Some ideas are setting up a website, being in charge of an event and writing a letter to the editor.

Be Tolerant of Moodiness in Teens

In comparison to adults, teens tend to rely more on the amygdala, an area of the brain responsible for quick, emotional responses. This can explain why teens act before thinking, have fluctuating moods and can become overwhelmed by negative thoughts.

It isn't uncommon for teens to proclaim that "everything is stupid" or point out all the flaws in the adults around them. Their attempts to capture your interest and express their feelings can be "read" as rude or inappropriate by adults when this is not the intention of the teenager.

Teens need to communicate in order to understand their feelings. They will benefit from opportunities to share their views and opinions with adults who do not judge them or deny their feelings.

Give Teens Recognition and Guidance

Neuroscientists are now finding that the cerebellum is not finished growing until well into the adolescent's early 20's. This helps to explain why teens can be both physically AND mentally clumsy.

Adolescents may alternate between high expectations and performances and poor self-confidence and struggling efforts. Teens can be very mature in sticky situations. However, sometimes even in a matter of minutes, their behavior can become childish, much to our surprise! This "stumbling" is most likely to occur when they are put under stress.

Help teenagers learn to believe in themselves by recognizing their efforts and progress. Don't leave teenagers completely on their own, because they may need your guidance.

Schedule Activities with the Sleep Needs of Teens in Mind

Research shows that a teen's sleep clock generates a natural bedtime that is closer to midnight, and a waking time that is closer to 8 a.m.

Inadequate sleep on a regular basis can have adverse effects on teens. Signs of sleep deprivation are inability to concentrate, falling asleep spontaneously and irritability later in the day. Several of these symptoms, like difficulties in focusing attention and difficulties with self-

control, can look like ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

Adults who work with teens should avoid scheduling early-morning times for meetings, school and extra curricular practices. Do what you can to help teenagers get adequate sleep, which is approximately nine hours of sleep each night.

Take Time for Teens

During the teen years the brain undergoes major reorganization. Unfortunately, some adults tend to brush off what adolescents are going through with comments like "you're just going through a stage," or "you don't know how easy you've got it - just wait until you're an adult."

Instead of trivializing teenagers' experiences and feelings, adults should make an effort to be more understanding and accepting. You can have a powerful, positive influence on teens by cultivating supportive and respectful relationships.

The developing brain has a great effect on a teen's behavior, from the disorganization of the frontal cortex to the emotional reactions from the amygdala to the cerebellum's lack of coordination. Remember, a teenager is "an adult-in-training" and his or her brain is a work in progress.



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References: "The Teen Brain: A Work in Progress", Dianne Weber, Family Living Educator, UW-Extension, Eau Claire County and Karen Hintz, Family Living Agent, UW-Extension, Door County, (2004) and "What Teenagers Need from Parents, Teachers and Other Adults", Stephen Small, Human Development and Family Relations Specialist, UW-Extension and Patricia Day, Youth Development Specialist, UW-Extension, Publication B3508, (1990).