



The Teenage Brain

By Anna Kirzner, MSW, LCSW

Your son has always had good grades and has been active in school clubs. The high school years hit; before you know it his hair is dyed and shaved in a Mohawk fashion. You are losing count of his piercings and can no longer tell what his physique looks like, because he is drowning in his daily attire.

Or, perhaps your teenage child is still getting good grades, is active in school and demonstrates responsibility; however your teen continues to talk on the phone while driving, despite a history of car accidents. Not to mention, he or she would much rather spend a few hours

on a thrilling, heart pounding roller coaster then go to the movie theater. Is this part of the perils of adolescence?

According to Richard Knox's *The Teen Brain: It's Just Not Grown Up Yet* (2010), the answer is yes, and there is plenty of research to support this. As a society, we have a certain level of expectations of teenagers as they are maturing and transitioning out of childhood; albeit science has proven that the brain is a work in progress and is not fully matured until the mid twenties. Acknowledging this and making accommodations can lead to healthy nurturance of your child and their maturing brain.

Adolescence is a time of physical and chemical maturation. It turns out that the brain is under construction during this time as well.

Recent research has shown that the brain's primary executors are late to develop. For instance, in the teen brain the frontal lobes are not fully connected, delaying the teen brain's access to them. However, it is the frontal lobes that are actively drawn upon in order to contemplate consequences.

Wikipedia describes the executive functions of the frontal lobes as involving "the ability to recognize future consequences resulting from current actions, to choose between good and bad actions (or better and best), override and suppress unacceptable social responses,



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and determine similarities and differences between things or events. Therefore, it is involved in higher mental functions.” In addition, Dr. Jay Giedd of the National Institute of Mental health has reported that an additional wave of gray matter production takes place from the teens into the 20’s.

After this process, connections either strengthen or fade, depending on whether or not youth “hard-wire” their brain through experience and activities. This can be done engaging in risky behaviors or through learning academics and playing sports.

So what does all of this mean for parents?

For starters, teens can benefit from concrete, personalized examples. Writing off marijuana because mom or dad “said so,” does not resonate with the average adolescent; as opposed to explaining that their SAT score or the test that they have to take in two days will suffer tremendously due to the neurological effects that marijuana has on the brain.

Youth can relate to this and it is a fact. Parents that possess knowledge of brain development, have a stronger understanding of their adolescents’ abilities and actions.

Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D., the author of “The 10 Basic Principles of Good Parenting,” explains that “It’s important for parents to realize that teenagers may not be as good as adults in thinking ahead, envisioning the future consequences of their actions, resisting pressure from others and forgoing immediate rewards to get a bigger payoff.”

He recommends consistent communication and explains that “there is a great deal of evidence that teenagers thrive when parents and teachers are what psychologists call ‘authoritative;’” He defines this as “warm, firm and fair,” a trifecta. Parents have the power to encourage healthy brain development. While dissuading adolescents from substances and other poor choices is crucial, it is equally imperative to influence and support healthy decision making.

Sources:

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PARENTING DURING TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES

If you're a parent with money worries, life can be pretty tough. You might need time to earn extra money, work on your finances or just unwind from a draining, demanding day.

But your kids still need your attention, and they may have worries of their own. How can you parent well when times are tough? Consider some steps that can support your family and preserve your own health and well-being.

- **Limit kids' exposure to worries.** Try not to talk too much about your own fears when the kids are listening, and consider turning off the TV news. You may think your 5-year-old tunes out adult topics, but he may hear just enough to spark his active imagination.
 - **Share honestly but appropriately.** Secrets can be scary. You certainly don't want to overwhelm your child with information, but it's probably best to share some of your family's financial situation. Take a reassuring approach by pointing out any areas you know are stable, such as staying in the same school despite any other changes.
 - **Economize in a way that's clear and fair.** If you need to scale back on your children's after-
- school activities, letting them pick from a few options may decrease their disappointment. You might also consider less-expensive options at local community centers and libraries too. And don't forget to show kids that you're cutting back on some of your own "extras" as well.
 - **Keep predictability high.** Kids like routine. Make sure your child's routine includes exercise to burn off energy, soothing nighttime activities and, above all, some special time with you. Children crave attention, and if they're not getting it in positive ways they may get it by acting out.
 - **Let kids contribute.** Even little kids can help around the house to ease your load. They also can donate old clothes or toys to a local shelter. Helping out builds self-esteem and a child's sense of effectiveness in the world.
 - **Take a breather.** Let's face it: Raising kids can be a ton of work. If you feel that your stress is affecting your ability to be kind and gentle, go off somewhere to regain your composure. Don't let your kids feel it's their fault that you're having a bad moment.
 - **Set aside "me" time.** You're probably working hard at work and then

working hard at home. If you don't refuel somehow, you're going to run out of steam. Get enough rest, squeeze in a little fun, and maybe take just 10 minutes to connect with friends.

- **Get professional help if you need it.** If you're having trouble parenting—or dealing with any of your other day-to-day responsibilities—a mental health professional can help you learn new coping skills. Some sources for finding therapists include your primary care doctor, clergy member or Mental Health America affiliate. If your child is showing signs of stress like trouble sleeping, headaches, or acting sullen or angry, you also can talk with a school psychologist or guidance counselor.



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Menthol Cigarettes Scrutinized by FDA

A discussion on the future of menthol cigarettes will begin at the first meeting of the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) new Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee.

Congress gave new tobacco regulation powers to the FDA last year, but punted the issue of what to do with menthol-flavored cigarettes, setting a two-year deadline for FDA to develop new regulations.

Determining if there is added harm to menthol cigarettes -- sales of which make up nearly a third of the \$70-billion cigarette market -- is a racially and politically charged topic.

African Americans prefer menthol brands, and critics say that menthols produce a smoother cigarette targeted to attract first-time smokers.

Given the size of the industry and its potential impact on the economy, an outright ban on menthols seems unlikely, said David J. Adelman, an industry analyst for Morgan Stanley. Added warnings, and perhaps an additional tax, are the more likely outcomes, he said.

The above report was provided by Join Together a program of the Boston University School of Public Health and is the nation's leading provider of information, strategic planning assistance, and leadership development for community-based efforts to advance effective alcohol and drug policy, prevention, and treatment. To learn more about this organization and to subscribe to their newsletters, please go to www.jointogether.org.

The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD) of Middlesex County, Inc. is a private, non-profit, community-based health organization providing prevention, education, information and referral services to county residents, businesses, schools, faith-based organizations, municipal alliances, and social service agencies since 1980.

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