WHY DO TEENS ACT THE WAY THEY DO? (4)

“Our youth now love luxury.
They have bad manners and contempt for authority.
They show disrespect for their elders.

They love chatter in place of exercise.
They no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents,
chatter before company; gobble up their food;
and tyrannize their teachers.”

Socrates, Fifth Century, B.C.

Adolescence begins at puberty and ends........sometime.

Adolescence is not childhood, and it is not adulthood. It is the period in between these two stages of life. Adolescence is when the brain is undergoing its final stage of development. Currently it starts around 11 or 12 years of age and lasts about 15 years. Adolescent behavior is directly linked to big changes happening in the brain. Understanding the biological challenges of adolescence can help parents interact with their adolescent without taking things personally. Knowledge about the adolescent brain can help a parent remain calm in the midst of an adolescent melt down. Parents need to understand what is happening in the brain of their adolescent so they can provide the nurture and guidance necessary to help their teen thrive, and survive this stage of development.
The adolescent brain is still “under construction.”

These images of the brain show just how much the brain changes from age 12 to age 20. Parents and teachers are often confused by a lot of adolescent behavior. Understanding the specific parts of the brain that develop during human adolescence explains a lot of adolescent behavior. Each part of the brain has a different job. When a specific part of the brain is still under construction, it doesn’t work the same way as it does in a mature, adult brain.

The PRE-FRONTAL CORTEX is the “executive center” of the brain. Its job is to think ahead about consequences and to plan. In an adult brain, the pre-frontal cortex helps control impulses coming from other parts of the brain. But, the adolescent brain seeks thrills and adventure. This thrill-seeking behavior is explained by the hormones that surge through the adolescent brain. During adolescence the pre-frontal cortex goes through stages of pruning and then, the mature circuits are finally formed. New MRI studies clearly show that the physical development of the pre-frontal cortex is not complete until the mid-twenties.
Bottomline: Adolescents do not have the ability to control impulses and understand cause and effect in the same way that is possible in a mature adult brain.

Adolescent brains get the gas before the brakes. Puberty gives adolescents a body that looks like an adult and a brain that goes through wild emotional swings and powerful surges. Even auto rental companies do not rent to drivers under 25 years of age.

Their brain’s gas pedal is ready for a NASCAR-paced adulthood.

But because their pre-frontal cortex is not yet fully developed, adolescent brains have the brakes of a Model T.

Parents must be the mature, “substitute,” pre-frontal cortex for their developing adolescent. Clearly stated rules and parental discipline will help keep an adolescent’s behavior from becoming destructive to the family, themselves, and others.

The basic message of recent groundbreaking neuroscience is that cognitive maturity develops last (after physical and mental maturity) for all adolescents. This research shows that cognitive maturity happens in the mid-twenties, and includes the following abilities:

- Mature judgment
- Seeing into the future
- Seeing how their behavior can effect their future
- Associating cause and effect
- Moral intelligence
- Abstract thinking
- Seeing what is not obvious
- Planning and decision-making
- Rational behavior and decision-making
- Understanding rules of social conduct
Adolescent brains interpret emotions differently than adult brains

Parents often find themselves in the middle of a misunderstanding with their teen and have no idea how they got there. It may be they are fighting with their adolescent’s developing brain. Brain scans show that adults and adolescents use different parts of the brain to interpret facial expressions. Adults use the pre-frontal cortex, but adolescents use the AMYGDALA. The amygdala is the seat of fear and anger, or the fight-flight response, in the brain. Adults use the rational part of the brain to read emotions, but adolescents basically do it with a gut reaction. For example, brain research shows that adolescents see anger when shown a picture of a face showing an expression of fear or surprise or sadness or worry.

Misreading emotional cues can lead to real communication problems.

\[ \text{misinterpretation + gut response + lousy brakes = communication problem} \]

When a seemingly normal conversation with an adolescent suddenly spins out of control, it’s not the result of having a “bad attitude” or trying to be difficult.

The adolescent may really be interpreting the outside world, especially emotional messages, differently.

Here’s how it happens:
Adolescents overreact because their brain mis-interprets a comment as a threat or an insult.

The adolescent’s emotional response pushes the adult’s button (parent, teacher, etc.) who also becomes upset.
The adult’s emotional response, in turn, causes the teen brain to **misinterpret** the situation even more.

Very quickly a comment or conversation can turn into a situation that spirals out of control and leads to hurtful words and hurt feelings.

Parents will often find themselves asking, “What just happened?”

When a child lies to a parent, the situation can also quickly spiral out of control if a parent reacts with anger.

It’s the job of the adult to keep their “cool,” because it’s a lot harder for an adolescent brain to “be reasonable.” Adults can use their fully functioning pre-frontal cortex to remain calm and rational during these communication situations which can erupt into big misunderstandings. It is very important that adults clearly spell out their feelings to help the adolescent understand the correct interpretation of what the adult is saying.

Example: “I’m **angry** because you were **late for curfew**. I am **disappointed** you didn’t call me and let me know what was going on. I was worried that something **bad** had happened to you.”

*Recent brain research suggests that the ability to accurately interpret tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, and social cues in others may be the final stage of the brain’s development.*
Changes in the adolescent brain explain “Tired Teens”

At puberty two big changes affect sleep patterns. First, the way the brain regulates sleep and the amount of sleep needed begin to change at puberty. Second, the timing of the sleep/wake cycle shifts.

How much sleep do teens need? Sleep research has discovered that the adolescent brain needs about nine and a half hours of sleep every night. Most adolescents are not getting anywhere near enough sleep.

The result is a nation of sleep-deprived teens. They don’t get enough sleep during the week. Many adolescents sleep more on the weekend because they are so tired, which throws their sleep-wake cycle even further out of whack.

Beginning at puberty the sleeping and waking cycles change. The chemical in the brain that helps a person fall asleep is released later and later in the adolescent brain. And the level of that same chemical drops off later and later. So adolescents have two sleep problems. Because their brains are in the midst of so much development, they continue to need a lot of sleep - about 9 ½ hours every night for their brain to operate at its peak efficiency during the waking hours. The other problem for teens is that because of the shift in their sleep/wake cycle they get tired later and go to bed later. But, to get to school on time, they have to get up early and be in school, before their brain is really awake or fully rested.

Teenagers are often accused of being lazy and irresponsible when they forget their assignments, books, or chores. The reality is that they are fighting a losing battle with their own bodies to stay awake. Sleep deprivation is a serious problem. It can cause a lot of difficulty with memory and lack of alertness. Lack of sleep interferes with a teenager’s ability to use their functioning memory to get through the day.
If teenage drivers got enough sleep, imagine how many driving accidents wouldn’t happen. *Paying attention requires a brain that is rested and able to stay alert.*

Mood disorders go along with chronic sleep deprivation. Emotions are more intense, and all ages of people are less able to control emotional outbursts, when they don’t get enough sleep.

Some sudden tears, slamming doors, withdrawal, or angry outbursts may be signs of sleep deprivation.

Parents need to help their adolescent understand the importance of getting enough sleep. These simple steps can help convince the adolescent brain it’s time to go to bed and fall asleep.

**After 9 PM:**
- no caffeinated or high sugar beverages
- limit time watching TV
- limit time playing video games
- limit physical activities
- limited or no phone calls
Teens live in a complex psychological and social world. At least four dramatic changes take place during adolescence.

1. **Rapid physical changes, such as growth spurts, voice changes, hair growth, skin problems, the development of sexual organs, and breast development in girls.**

Adolescents spend a lot of time every day thinking about their physical features. They are very self-conscious about how they look. They often become preoccupied or embarrassed about some of their new physical changes. While completely natural, adolescent preoccupation with physical appearance can make life very difficult for some young people (pimples, weight gain, entering puberty early or late, or anything else they think makes them appear unattractive or different from their peers).

At this stage of adolescent development, any negative attention that turns into some form of public humiliation, or bullying, because of an adolescent’s physical characteristics, can be extremely painful emotionally. When bullying occurs at school adolescents do not feel safe and will often refuse to attend classes. If this happens, parents, school personnel, and other adults need to intervene.

Cyberspace bullying is equally alarming. There have been too many recent examples of adolescent violence and suicide to ignore the impact bullying can have on an emotionally fragile teenager.
2. Changes in the intensity, stability and explosiveness of their emotions

Because of changes in the adolescent brain, teens experience new emotions. These emotions are felt very intensely.

sexual feelings

feelings of jealousy

feelings of territoriality

Familiar feelings like anger and sadness are now experienced more strongly than ever before. Adolescents can experience a huge range of feelings - very mixed and very different - all within a very short period of time. These “emotional roller coaster rides” can be very confusing.
An adolescent can be on top of the world at 9 AM, in the dumps by 9:30, flying high again at 10 AM, and feel like they’re drowning by 10:30.

Who did or did not say “Hi” to them in between classes, in the school hallways, may be the cause of a sudden mood change.

It is very important for adults to remember that these sudden changes in emotions and “emotional fireworks” are largely explained by the changes happening within the adolescent brain.

To make matters worse, adolescents can’t decide if they want all the privileges of an adult

OR

fun with no big responsibilities

OR
Back and forth they go between feeling and acting maturely and immaturely. Parents, teachers, and other adults aren’t quite sure “who” or what “mood” they’ll be dealing with either. If adults remain calm and respectful when dealing with an adolescent, it goes a long way in reducing the emotional explosions.

Knowing the limitations of the adolescent brain does not excuse bad behavior. It does, however, reinforce the need for parents to provide constant support and guidance. More than ever, adolescents need their parents to remain involved in their lives. It’s not butting in, but pouring in love and guidance to protect an adolescent’s future hopes, health, and happiness.

It is not always easy for parents to figure out when and how to stay connected, when the influence of peers increases in the lives of teens. Sometimes parents assume incorrectly that peers will have a greater influence on their young person than is actually the case. A national study found that teens reported their parents were the most important influence on the decisions they made regarding sexual behavior.

3. The shift of influence from parents to peers

Teenagers often don’t want to go places or do many things with their parents. They feel like a “kid” around their parents. When they think their parent does or says something “stupid,” they are totally embarrassed to be seen with that parent.

When children are little, parents decide just about everything for their child. So, it’s not surprising that as teens leave childhood, they need to put some distance between themselves and their parents. Part of growing up is starting to make some of one’s own decisions. Pulling away from parents - even refusing to do what they want - is the way teens can begin to exercise their own judgment.

At the same time adolescents voice their desire for more independence from parents, they often feel tremendous pressure to fit in. Peers have rules for how to dress, how to talk, what music to listen to, and how to act. Peer pressure can be a powerful force on a teen’s decision-making. Adolescents experience the pressure of their peers throughout their day. The strength of peer pressure must be balanced with strong and constant parental support and guidance.

Without judging their teen’s friends, parents need to talk with their adolescents about peer pressure and how to manage it. Parents need to encourage their adolescent to make independent decisions. When adolescents think independently, they may also start to challenge a parent’s values.

Challenging simply means adolescents are starting to think for themselves. It doesn’t mean they are going to reject everything their parents think is important.
4. The search for identity - they need to answer two questions:

“Who am I?”

“What do I want to do with my life?”

This article is based on the work of David Walsh, author of WHY DO THEY ACT THAT WAY? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen. Information used in this article includes edited excerpts and the words of the author. Dr. Walsh has over 30 years of experience with teens as a teacher, sports coach, school counselor, and private therapist. Other important topics covered in this book discuss the issues of “Love, Sex and the Adolescent Brain,” and “Adolescents and the Media.” Very parent-friendly information. WHY DO THEY ACT THAT WAY? is available at your local public library or can be ordered at www.Amazon.com. Visit Dr. Walsh’s website at www.mediafamily.org for more information parents need to know.