



Teenagers

Why are they so stupid?
Why are they so irresponsible?
Why do they take so much risk?

There are many models used to describe the changes and behaviour of teenagers. More recently research has had the advantage of functional MRIs (fMRI) that can show which part of the brain is active at what times. This provides a very effective means of understanding behaviour.

The brain develops over 20 + years of life. The very last part to develop, starting around 16 to 20, or even 23, is the part to do with what is called the executive function,. This is the part that deals with making decisions, setting priorities, organising thoughts, planning and weighing the consequences of ones action. The more teenagers are encourage in the making of decisions, setting priorities, organising thoughts, planning and weigh up the consequence the more these pathways will grow, strengthen and be an influencing factor in the person's life. If not used they will become virtually non functional.

The part that kicks in when the hormones start to affect the body (12 to 15?) is that part that deals with the tinderbox emotions. Where teenagers seek opportunities for their emotions to run wild, they experience intense and unpredictable behaviour and have an appetite for thrills and are often unreliable.

The main hormone that effects this change is stronger in males than females hence in males the changes are more pronounced, stronger, and noticeable. Girls tend to be more focussed to emotions and males to risk taking. In males it also depends on the strength of the hormones developed.

Different people react differently with different intensities, but the basis is there, its nature. The upbringing also effects, in that there is research showing how parents deal with the change and the cultural attitude to male behaviour greatly influences how the child's different brain pathways develop and function in the future.

So the answer to the three questions above is that teenagers haven't as yet acquired the mental skills needed and that particular part of the brain has still to be switched on.

At about 11 months and 14 years the brain development is similar. Young people's brains are experiencing a growth spurt. Unnecessary and unused nerve pathways are being pruned whilst weaker pathways are combining to be stronger and of greater influence.

Modern brain scan techniques (fMRI) enable us to see which part of the brain functions and when. An example is that when showing photos of friends and acquaintances, it stimulates that part of the brain involved in recognition and even with physical attractiveness and longing and desire, When they are shown a picture of a person they are passionately in love with it is a section on the opposite side of the brain that is stimulated .the caudate nucleus.

In teenagers there is high activity in the sections of the brain such as the 'amygdala' the areas responsible for fear, rage etc and likely to explain their unpredictable behaviour. There is minimal activity in their prefrontal cortex. This is responsible for the executive function, that part that deals with deciding, setting priorities, organising thoughts, planning, weighing the consequences of ones action.

The adult around 28 usually shows the high activity pre fontal and minimal activity in the amygdala (Unless someone takes their car space at the shops, and then it can be seen as to which parts have developed the most.)

An important part of the development of the prefrontal cortex is that the nerve fibres being used are being strengthened. It is important that those that lead to a balanced approach to life be encouraged. The more they are exposed to tasks that will enhance life skills, the more these pathways will develop and get stronger, the more impulsive ones will weaken

Can Scouting help?

Definitely, it holds a very strong solution to help youth grow into meaningful adults.

We should be giving them a variety of challenging activities that tends to channel their risk taking impulsive behaviour in a way that is satisfying and safe.

Focussing discussions around modern day issues is important. (eg News items on TV and adolescent issues that appear in the media)

We need to get them to start using the fibres that will strengthen as they grow. Such as planning; decision making; values and ethics; challenges that extend them, safely.

The Troop Council and Unit Council are also very essential, but we must remember that these youth are there to learn and acquire skills. That they are still to develop their 'executive function' skills, but this could be the ideal place for them to develop.

It is also an excellent place for girls to take part in the some more masculine risk taking behaviour (abseiling – White water rafting) and males in the feminine emotive such as discussions and socialising.

Coaching/guidance is necessary, but not advice giving, leaders need to offer alternatives for them to consider. It's all about learning.

You cannot teach a person anything, but you can help them discover it within themselves.

TEENAGE TRIVIA

- 1) Some American schools, involved in special trials, found that by starting school about 1 hour later, for teenagers, they REDUCED absenteeism, truancy; bullying and schoolyard fights. IMPROVED Academic marks, classroom participation, inter group participation and socialising amongst students. WHY? It allowed teenagers more time in bed of a morning. In young children the sleep chemicals in the brain (melatonin) kick in at around 8 pm. In teenagers it's around 10.30pm. Yet both need at least ten hours sleep hence teenagers have difficulty in waking after only 7 or 8 hours. Worse after a heavy weekend because the lack of quality sleep time is cumulative.
- 2) Boys with breasts enlarging at puberty? Yes its called gynaecomastia and it is usually mild and found in about 80% of boys (yes eighty%).
- 3) Before puberty boys and girls can hold themselves on a high bar for the same length of time. As puberty develops so does the males muscle mass, whilst in the girls a percentage of developing mass now goes into fat, as a result boys can hold themselves up on the bar longer. The fat in girls is very necessary, it protects muscle bones and organ and provides the reserves necessary when a girl becomes pregnant, without this reserve of fat her baby will likely be premature and have problems because the mother didn't have these energy/nutritional reserves to fall back on. Stress also greatly affects the developing foetus.
- 4) Recent research shows that today about 1 in 6 girls show signs of puberty by the time they are 8. In 1905 it was 1 in 100. Boys its now 1 in 14 by 8 years of age..

TEENAGERS NEED TO PRACTICE BEING ADULTS.

This means making choices and mistakes.

It means having someone to guide and offer a number of possible solutions for them to consider.

It means NOT telling them what to do but helping them decided from alternatives.

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Regional Support Team

Consult your Region Office for their contact details.