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Brain development

Brain development in teens

The parents of almost any teen or pre-teen can attest that good judgment and strong reasoning abilities are not highly developed in adolescents. New imaging techniques have shown that adolescents' brains actually function differently than adults when it comes to simultaneously processing emotional impulses and cognitive reasoning. The more emotionally charged a situation is, the less likely it is that an adolescent will be able to make a good, logical decision.

"What were you thinking?" is an often-heard refrain from parents of adolescents. It's not that the adolescents are not thinking. Rather, given the way their brains process information, the emotional impulses often win out over cool, rational thought.

What parents can do

The most important thing a parent can do is to understand that an adolescent often is not capable of making a calm, logical and rational decision when under emotional pressure. It is vital to keep the lines of communication open and to talk frequently with teens about pressures and threats they may encounter in their day-to-day interactions.

- Get to know the people your child associates with, including other kids and adults.
- Set clear ground rules for your teen. Expect your teen to tell you where he or she is going, with whom, why and for how long. Use appropriate discipline to respond to breeches in trust such as missed curfews.
- Set aside time frequently to talk to your teen, and really listen to what is going on in his or her life. Avoid the urge to be judgmental, and teach your teen about safe, healthy responses to pressure.

A complicating factor: puberty

One hundred years ago, maturation of cognitive, emotional and sexual function occurred in most people at approximately the same time, during the mid to late teen years. Today, adolescents tend to reach puberty at a significantly younger age, as early as 12 or 13 years for the average girl. This complicates cognitive/emotional processing in that teens are finding themselves with grown-up, sexual bodies before they have grown-up, logical brains.

Feelings of being loved and desired, the excitement of early romantic involvement and new sexual urges create a firestorm of emotional responses, and cool, rational thinking does not often break through. This situation makes teens especially vulnerable to predatory behavior and peer pressure when it comes to sexual activity.

- Trust your instincts. If you are uneasy about your teen's relationships with others or his or her activities, respond by guiding your teen in a better direction. Remember that establishing independence and pushing boundaries are a necessary and normal part of your teen's development and that a head-on confrontation is not likely to get the desired response.

Resources for parents

- Contact Children's Hospital of Wisconsin at (414) 266-5423 to request your free booklet, "Practical Advice for Parents of Teens."
- Contact Children's Health Education Center at (414) 765-9355 for information about parent education sessions including Communicating with Kids and Parenting Teens.