

Understanding the “Tween & Teen” Brain

Is your home awl with drama, hormones, and emotional outbursts? Welcome to the teenage years! Changes in behavior start well before your child is an official “teenager.” The “tween” years mark the beginning of adolescence and start the rollercoaster of living with a teenager.

The good news is that much of that behavior is quite normal and it reflects the changes and growth going on in your child’s brain and body. We used to believe that the vast amount of “brain development” occurred well before age 10. However, recent research has shown that the period of adolescence (age 10-18) is one of profound brain growth. In fact, your brain is not fully developed until you reach age 25.

Between childhood and adulthood, the brain becomes richer, more complex, and more efficient. The greatest changes take place in the parts of the brain that are responsible for self-control, judgment, emotions, and organization.

Is your adolescent...

Indulging in risky behaviors?

Because adolescents are not fully developed, they tend to think in the present and this can lead to taking part in risky behaviors. However during this period, they are beginning to understand that what they do now can have long-term effects. Though they will not always follow your example, remember that they are still a work in progress and they may simply not be able to understand and accept your arguments – no matter how logical and decisive they seem to you.

Experiencing Emotional Outbursts?

Due to brain development, many adolescents feel they are the “center of attention” and may be extremely concerned with how they are perceived by others. With increased hormone production, adolescents have a tendency to be dramatic about life situations and feel as if no one has ever felt what they are feeling.

Acting Insensitively to Others?

While the brain is developing, it may be harder for tweens and teens to understand emotions in the voices and on the faces of others. Adolescents often misread facial expressions and as

judgment, insight, and reasoning power develop, they will become better at judging emotions.

Challenging Your Values?

Your adolescent is learning to think about things that cannot be seen, heard, or touched. Examples include faith, trust, beliefs, principles, and spirituality. Be open to talking through their opinions on these subjects. Just because they seem to sway from the values they have set does not mean they will stay that way. Most adults return to the values they learned as children.

Reality Check Time!

The reality is that the adolescent brain is very different from the adult brain and understanding that may help your relationship with your children. The good news is that you play a very real and very important role in helping “wire” your child’s brain for healthy growth and success.

- Encourage your child to use their brain in a variety of ways from school to sports to recreation. Kids who “exercise” their brains by learning to order their thoughts, understand concepts, and control their impulses are developing foundations that will affect the rest of their lives.
- Keep the lines of communication open. Adolescents may be more “friend-focused” and prefer their friends as resources for advice but plenty of research shows that parents are ultimately the biggest influencer in a child’s life.
- Give them opportunities for healthy risk taking. Think about ways you can indulge your child’s extreme appetites in safe settings. Are they interested in climbing? Take them to an indoor rock-climbing wall. Do they have a desire for extreme skateboarding? Buy them the “coolest” knee and elbow pads you can find. Steer your child toward structured activities that provide excitement and new challenges.
- Monitor your own behavior. It is all too easy to lash out or react dramatically when adolescents push your buttons. Always remain firm and fair with consistent discipline and expectations.

Above all, remember that childhood really is fleeting. Though the teen years can be trying, they are often the period that adults look back on most fondly and when “friendships” between parents and children truly develop.