



UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEEN'S BRAIN

There's a lot going on in there right now
(a lot of which is not conducive to good behavior!)

This guide is meant to help you understand a little bit about how the changes occurring in the adolescent brain impact their thoughts, emotions and behavior so you can begin to develop more *empathy* for them. Empathy is one of the major factors that allows you to maintain a close emotional connection with your child. A strong connection ultimately leads to better communication and the ability to maintain your influence in their life. This is because the closer they feel to you, the more likely they are to trust you, share information with you, want to align themselves with your values and “hear you in their head” when they're out in the world without you.

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Speaking
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Teens

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INTRODUCTION

Empathy was easy when they were cute little cuddly babies. But now that they're big and look more like adults, some of their not-so-pleasant behavior can make it really difficult to be empathetic.

But it's a little circular because the lack of empathy is one reason you become so laser focused on their negative behaviors and traits.

You may feel like they're manipulating you or that they could change their behavior if they tried harder or would just listen to you...if they were motivated or cared at all.

You may think they're disrespectful, rude, irrational, unthinking, or even out of control. You might even begin to question your own competence as parent. It can be maddening.

I hope what I share with you in this guide will allow you to be more empathic with your child and change the way you think about and approach their behavior.

Teens and tweens are going through a lot - a lot more than we did as adolescents. If you're not empathetic towards them, you'll have a hard time parenting them in a way that doesn't cause rebellion and acting out. Their behavior literally hangs on your ability to be empathetic - this is where it starts.

DISCLAIMER

I am not a mental healthcare provider and nothing I say in this Guide should be taken as advice regarding your child's mental health. I have researched and interpreted the information contained in this Guide from various credible resources including scientific journal articles. Please consult your child's pediatrician or mental healthcare provider if you suspect they may have an emotional or mental health issue or disorder. If they display signs that they may want to harm themselves, please call 988 for assistance or 911 for an imminent threat.

NOTE

When I use the word *adolescent, kid, child, teen, tween*, etc. in this document, I'm talking about *your* child, whether they're in middle or high school.

And when I say *parent*, I mean *you*, if you're raising or helping raise an adolescent, whether you're a grandparent, foster parent, aunt, uncle or other caregiver.



The Rational, Thinking Part of the Brain is not Fully Online Yet

The adolescent brain goes through a second and significant developmental phase from around age 10 or 12 (when they start puberty) until their mid-20s. This 15 years or so of brain developmental is very similar to what the brain experienced between birth and age 3 when it was first being programmed. That's why it's very easy to compare adolescent behavior to that of a two-year-old!

The very last part of the brain to be completed is the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that handles executive functions including self-control and making good decisions. So, during adolescence these skills are extremely difficult for teens and tweens. They aren't choosing to ignore what you say. They aren't manipulating you when they make a bad choice. Their capacity for making good decisions and using self-control is diminished in the same way a toddler's is.





The Emotional Part of the Brain is Revved up and Super Sensitive

There's a region of the brain called the amygdala which handles mainly negative emotions like anger, fear, or nervousness. Unfortunately, the amygdala is super sensitive during adolescence. This is why teens are so vulnerable to emotional outbursts, intense emotions, and general moodiness.

The amygdala is responsible for detecting threats in our surroundings and it sets off an alarm in the brain causing an automatic reaction called fight, flight, or freeze.

You know how you duck or raise your hand up when you sense something coming toward your head? You might lose your breath for a second, your heart may race a little. That's your fight, flight or freeze response working to keep you safe.

If it turns out to be a wadded-up piece of paper thrown by an office mate towards the waste basket, your fully formed, adult prefrontal cortex is able to step in almost immediately and give you the self-control and rationality to calm down (and perhaps even laugh about it).

But remember the adolescent amygdala is super sensitive, so it perceives all sorts of things as "threats", that adults wouldn't (for example, hearing the word, "no", a request to take out the garbage, a suggestion to wear a different shirt, even a neutral facial expression).

And because the adolescent prefrontal cortex is too weak to step in with rational thought or self-control, a teen can become automatically angry or nervous about things that really confuse adults. That explains a lot doesn't it?

If a teen is stressed, Stress, lack of sleep, being hungry, already being in a bad mood...all causes the amygdala to make even more mistakes.

Unfortunately, the more the amygdala sounds the alarm, the more likely it will happen again and again, which is exactly how anxiety disorders manifest.

So, when your teen is emotional, the last thing you want to do is to keep their amygdala engaged by arguing, lecturing, yelling, etc.

Keep calm, listen to them, tell them you get it and let them calm down before discussing the situation further.

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The Reward System is More "Rewarding" Than it Will Ever be

The reward system is another overly excitable area of the adolescent brain. The reward system is responsible for motivating and reinforcing behaviors that we find pleasurable.

A huge increase in the amount of dopamine floating around in the adolescent brain is what causes the reward system to become so hyper sensitive. All sorts of things can count as a "reward" to the adolescent brain's reward system; sugar, applause, drugs, praise, vaping, sports, gaming, "likes" on social media, etc. Teens are powerfully drawn to new and exciting experiences and the reward system then also intensifies their pleasure from these experiences – more so than at any other point in their life. This then reinforces their desire to experience the reward again.

This is why teens can get caught up in negative behaviors like spending endless hours scrolling Tik Tok, or worse, risky behaviors like reckless driving, drinking alcohol, vaping, or experimenting with drugs. It's also why most adults who are addicted to substances or anything else, usually started during adolescence.

Additionally, the adolescent reward system treats acceptance from peers roughly the same way as using drugs and alcohol. That's why most of their risky behavior takes place in front of or with their peers. We'll talk about peers a little more in a minute.

Remember, while their reward system's all revved up, their weak prefrontal cortex will rarely be able to jump in and help them use self-control or make a good decision.





They Aren't Lazy; They're Chronically Sleep-Deprived

According to science, adolescents need 9.25 hours of sleep per night. But, thanks to a shift in the production of melatonin in the brain, beginning with the onset of puberty, adolescents get sleepy about 2 hours later than before. And, it's really hard to go to sleep if you're not sleepy! So, your kid isn't staying up late or sleeping all day on the weekends on purpose.

So, save the lectures about going to bed earlier and getting more sleep because they can't get sleepy on demand. Many can't get to sleep until close to midnight.

And without schools starting later, they just lose those 2 hours of sleep, making it extremely difficult to get up in the morning and possibly even difficult to stay awake and alert at school all day.

Blue light from screens can also delay the release of melatonin so cell phones should be removed from the bedroom long before bedtime.

So, your kid's not lazy because they want to nap in the afternoons or sleep in on the weekends - they're chronically sleep-deprived, which can have a profound effect on their mood and increase their amygdala's reactivity by making them angry or nervous more often. They're really doing the best they can do.

A Strict Bedtime Routine can Help Get to Sleep:

Routines are as important now as they were when they were babies (arguably, more important). A bedtime routine signals the brain it's time for sleep. Depending on how long it takes to get your child headed to bed, you could start as long as an hour before bedtime.

Discuss the routine with your child and suggest including things like:

- repacking the backpack and making sure everything needed is packed for morning (allows them to sleep a little longer in the morning)
- get clothes and shoes out for the next morning (to insure no morning freak-outs and more sleep)
- take the cell phone out of the room (see below)
- write in their journal
- brush, floss, take any medicine, wash face, etc.
- turn lights off or dim and listen to a meditation app



They will do Almost Anything to be Accepted by Peers

Beginning, in early adolescence, the brain's "social system" causes them to become severely self-conscious or embarrassed about anything and everything. Again, the changing brain is to blame for a sudden change in your teen's behavior.

You've no doubt seen this in your child. This self-consciousness makes them feel as if they're constantly being watched and judged even when no one is around. So, you may notice that all of a sudden, they begin avoiding things they used to enjoy doing when they were "little kids".

At least through age 14 they are going to be all consumed with what everyone else thinks - the number one thing in life will be to be accepted and liked. Their whole self-identity is hinged on how they're treated by their peers and what they believe their peers think of them. This is an intense and stressful time for kids - it can feel as if the world is ending if they're shunned or rejected, left out or made fun of.

As I mentioned when talking about the reward system, research shows that this need to be accepted also greatly influences risk-taking behavior in teens; they will take more risks when they're with their peers. And again, as irrational as some of this behavior seems to you, remember, they don't have the prefrontal cortex to help them realize they should be making better decisions

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They Are Super Stressed Out And You Need To Take It Seriously

Your teen is super stressed out. Covid did a number on all of them and they've still not recovered. Even pre-COVID, adolescence has always been the most stressful time of life. The changes going on in the brain alone cause so much cognitive and emotional turmoil. The automatic reactions, lack of control, self-consciousness and sleeplessness. Pile on academic pressures, romance, friendship issues, social media, societal concerns, climate worries...it's horrible.

And regardless of what you may think about their level of stress, adolescents perceive their stress levels as very high. And science proves that perception is reality. They only know their world from their own point of view. They've never known the adult world or adult stress. Stress is relative to what you *know*. Please take it very seriously.

All of this stress is a major factor in adolescent mental health disorders like anxiety and depression. Almost 32% of adolescents will suffer from some form of anxiety disorder by the time they turn 18. These rates have been skyrocketing for years.

So, understanding their stress levels and knowing that you have a fully-developed brain that can handle much more stress than they can, will hopefully allow you to take their outbursts and emotional meltdowns less personally...because it IS NOT PERSONAL. They love you and again, they're doing the best they can right now, just as they did when they were little.

Learn to regulate your own emotions. Keep your adult worries and troubles to yourself. I KNOW you're stressed too, but please remember that your teen is not your confidant, your bff or your therapist and they do not need your stress on top of theirs. They need your empathy and support now more than ever.

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I hope this Guide gives you a better idea of their world from their perspective, with all the challenges and limitations caused by their changing brain.

Having this perspective and developing your empathy for them is critical to truly connect with your teen. It's this empathy and connection which can ultimately lead to a couple of major parenting goals:

First, better communication with your teen. Being empathetic and understanding they're doing the best they can do with what the brain they currently have, will hopefully help you to demand a little less, and cut back on the lectures, nagging, arguments, punishment, or "consequences". The adolescent brain perceives all of this as threatening, which just revs up their amygdala. They can't listen when they're in fight, flight, or freeze mode because their prefrontal cortex is shut down and there's no reasoning with them.

Second, empathy and connection allows you to maintain your influence throughout your child's adolescence. Without this connection, you have no influence. They will not listen to you.

When you're not around and they need to make a crucial decision or when they're at a moral crossroads, that connection is your only chance to be that voice in their head, the one that hopefully drowns out their peers, pop culture, YouTube and the like.

You don't solidify that position by constantly correcting them, fussing at them, arguing with them, or punishing them. All you'll achieve is making them better at tuning you out and at hiding things from you.

The key to emotional connection and to solidify your position as their "influencer", is empathy.

You should now have a new lens through which to view your teen's behavior, set boundaries and communicate with them. This is an excellent start but it's obviously not the whole story. There are several other things you may need to work on, like:

- making sure you're aware of how your own emotions impact your parenting
- being able to regulate your emotions – to stay calm when your teen's upset
- learning to actively listen to your teen, validate their emotions and help them to become more emotionally aware and regulated
- supporting their autonomy and teaching them skills for adulthood rather than punishing and building animosity

Hey there!

I'm Ann Coleman and struggled parenting my son during his teen years. After turning things around, I continued studying the science of adolescence and of parenting adolescents. I made the switch from attorney to parent educator and podcaster to help you avoid the mistakes I made.

What's contained in this Guide are just some of things you'll learn in **PARENT CAMP** to strengthen the relationship with your teen, decrease the conflict and improve their behavior. Check out the **PARENT CAMP** membership and learn about the course, the weekly meetups with me, the monthly expert Q & As with subject matter experts who cover everything from drug use to self-harm, and the community forum, weekly challenges, and more.

Ann Coleman



Speaking *of* Teens



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