



The Amazing
Teen Brain

**What Parents
Need To Know**

By Linda Burgess Chamberlain PhD, MPH



THE AMAZING PLAYLIST.

1. Help the brain to grow. with
4. Make good decisions.
5. Good friends + healthy relationships.

A Work in Progress

The teen brain is still growing! During the teen years, the brain is going through lots of changes and building millions of new connections. These changes will help the brain to become faster, sharper, and smarter. Parents and other caring adults can help teens to grow healthy, strong brains. Here's how.



Encourage Your Teen to Do Things That Help the Brain to Grow

Starting around age 9 to 10, the brain has a growth spurt that lasts into the mid-20s. The outer covering of the brain (called the cortex) gets thicker. The brain follows the simple principle of use it or lose it: the brain connections that teens use again and again become stronger. The connections they do not use just fade away. How teens spend their time matters. What teens do will help to shape their brains.

One of the last areas of the brain to mature is called the prefrontal cortex. Located right behind the forehead, the prefrontal cortex helps teens to learn how to solve problems, set goals, and control their feelings.

Here are some ways you can help your teen's brain to grow:

- Encourage your teen to try a new hobby or practice a new skill like learning a musical instrument.
- Help your teen learn how to manage time and tasks. Teach your teen to make lists of things to do. Help her or him use a calendar to keep up with homework and chores.
- Help your teen to be physically active. Sports, exercise, and being outdoors are good for the brain.
- Work with your teen to set time limits for the computer and TV. Also set limits for cell phones and playing video games.
- Find ways to expand your teen's role in family decision making, how to budget money, and other tasks.

Talk with Your Teen

The teen years can be challenging. You can make it a more peaceful time by understanding how the teen brain thinks. When it comes to emotions, teens are working out of a lower area of the brain called the limbic region (the “emotional center” of the brain).

Teens often have mood swings. And they often act on how they feel before thinking things through. Changes occurring in the adolescent brain slow down a teen’s ability to identify emotions. They may struggle to understand their own feelings and the feelings of others. Teens often misinterpret the look on someone’s face or body language. For example, they may see anger instead of fear or concern. As their brains mature, teens will become more skilled at identifying and thinking through their emotions.

The following steps can help you talk with your teen:

- Say clearly how you feel. Use “I” statements such as “I care about you” and explain what is making you feel that way: “I am worried because you didn’t call me to tell me you’d be late...” Be sure to use words – not facial expressions – to say what you mean and avoid generalizing, blaming statements (“You never do what I ask.”)
- Ask your teen how he or she feels. Remember that your teen’s feelings may change a lot. Mood swings are not unusual.
- If your teen is angry or upset, stay calm. Don’t lose your temper.
- Set some rules for talking about problems. Say “I want to know why you are upset. But you cannot yell, scream, or swear at me.”

Help Your Teen Get Lots of Sleep

Sleep is very important for teens and their growing brains. During these years, major changes occur in the sleep centers of the brain. The brain releases a chemical that makes teens get sleepy two hours later than when they were children. Teens do not feel tired until later at night and have a harder time waking up early. The chemicals that control teen sleep patterns also help to build important brain connections. Teens need over nine hours of sleep every night.

Here are ways you can help your teen to get enough sleep:

- Talk about why teens need more sleep. Sleep helps to build a stronger, smarter brain. Sleep helps to lower stress. Sleep helps with memory. Teens who get more sleep do better in school.
- Help your teen plan for time to sleep. Sleeping in on the weekend can be a good thing!
- Talk about ways to relax before going to bed. That means no video games, no heavy exercise, and no coffee, soda, or energy drinks late at night.

Help Your Teen Learn How to Make Good Decisions

Teens are drawn to new and exciting experiences. They want to be free and do things on their own. Chemical changes in the brain motivate teens to look for risks and challenges. This is normal. But, the part of the brain that helps teens assess risk and control impulses is still growing. This means that teens may not think about the consequences of their actions.

Teens need your help to think through the outcomes of their decisions. Teens also need practice in making decisions. You can provide chances to share responsibility, to make decisions, and to weigh the pros and cons of different types of choices. This will help your teen develop good judgment.

You Can:

- Help your teen take positive risks, like trying out for a new sport, making new friends, or visiting new places. This will build confidence and self control.
- Let your teen decide what, when, and how to do things. This will help your teen become a leader. Community service projects, summer jobs, and after school programs are good for the brain!
- Get to know your teen's friends. Together, set rules on how often your teen should check in with you. Say that you want to know what she or he is doing, where, and with whom. This builds trust between you.
- Work together to set rules and agree on curfews. Together, decide what will happen if your teen breaks the rules. Listen to what she or he wants. Talk about what you want for your teen.

Boys' and Girls' Brains Really are Different!

Male and female brains are different. Some of these differences are happening during puberty due to hormones that affect how the teen brain develops. The female brain matures earlier than the male brain. Some areas of the brain become larger in females while other areas grow larger in the male brain. Differences in the male and female brain may help to explain different patterns in learning and behavior between boys and girls; therefore:

- Provide opportunities for all-boy and all-girl activities to take advantage of gender-based learning patterns and interests.
- Learn about the differences between boys' and girls' brains and how gender can influence their educational needs, such as extra support for learning certain skills and subjects.
- Model healthy relationship. Provide lots of opportunities for boys and girls to practice healthy relationship skills including communication, negotiation, and problem-solving.

For parents who want to learn more about the amazing teen brain, go to: <http://www.instituteforsafefamilies.org>

Help Your Teen Make Good Friends and Have Healthy Relationships

Teens want to be close to others. Making good friends is a big part of the teen years. This includes having girl friends and boy friends. While many parents want their teens to wait to have sex, most teens are sexually active by the time they are 20. Hormones and chemicals in the brain (called neurotransmitters) affect teens' sexual growth and desires.

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You can help your teen to have healthy relationships and make smart decisions about sex.

- Talk about the changes to the body during the teen years. These changes are a healthy, normal part of growing up.
- Let your teen ask you about love and sex. Be honest. If you don't know something, say so. Then find out the answer. Teens who talk with their parents about sex are less likely to take sexual risks. They are more likely to use condoms.
- Talk with your teen about waiting to have sex. And talk about birth control and condoms. Be sure your teen knows where to go to get them. Talking about birth control and condoms won't make your teen go out and have sex.

• Rape is too common among teens. Make sure that your teen knows that she or he has the right to say no. Make sure your teen knows that no means no. Make sure your teen knows what to do and how to get help if she or he is raped or forced into any unwanted sexual activity.

• Your teen may want to talk about private things with someone else. This might be a doctor or nurse or an aunt or a friend of yours. What you want is for your teen to be healthy and safe. So, say that it's okay for your teen to talk with someone else.

Help Your Teen Stay Away from Alcohol and Drugs

Many teens drink alcohol, use drugs, or smoke cigarettes. All of these substances can harm your teen's brain. Teens can become addicts more quickly than adults. Teen drinkers can have problems learning. Drugs like Ecstasy and Meth can cause depression.

You can help!

- Explain to your teen how the teen brain works and that it is extremely sensitive to alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. Work together to identify risky situations and possible consequences. Practice ways to avoid risks, particularly under pressure from peers.
- Be sure your teen knows how you feel about drugs and alcohol and be consistent in what you do to reinforce these values.
- Learn about the drugs that teens are using in your area. Talk with your teen about these drugs.
- Lock up drugs your doctor gives you. Get rid of old drugs you don't use.
- Find out what students learn at school about drinking and drug use. Make sure your teen's school addresses both of these issues.
- Spend time with your teen. Teens who feel close to their parents are less likely to drink or use drugs.

Stay Tuned In to Your Teen's Life

Teens need you as much as ever, here are some ways to be there for your teen:

- Be a good example. Get out and exercise. If you drink, be responsible. Eat healthy foods. Do fun things with your family.
- Expect some drama such as mood swings and easily hurt feelings as your teen goes through the many changes and challenges of adolescence.
- Give your teen both freedom and rules. Help your teen try new, fun things.
- Work to make home peaceful. Accept this time of transition in your teen's life. Listen and talk. Do things together that you both enjoy.

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Resources

Resources for teens and parents about healthy relationships, peer influences, and sexual risk-taking:

WHY Do They Act That Way?: A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen by David Walsh PhD (2004). Published by Free Press, NY, NY.

The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries about the Teenage Brain Tell Us About Our Kids by Barbara Strauch (2003). Published by Doubleday, NY, NY.

www.advocatesforyouth.org

Provides information about adolescent sexual and reproductive health to parents, health care providers, educators, and advocates. The Parent's Sex Ed Center contains tips and resources to help parents communicate effectively with their teens.

www.shelternet.ca

Offers teens information and a quiz to help build healthy relationships. Provides suggestions for how to talk to a friend who is in an abusive relationship and explores options for how to get help and safety planning.

www.freevibe.com

Provides information and resources to teens using drugs and alcohol and offers support for those who have parents with substance abuse problems. Sponsored by the Federal government.

www.empowered.org

Provides prevention education to address bullying and peer aggression.

www.focusas.com

Serves as a clearinghouse for information, resources, and support. Large volume of resources dealing with teen and family issues including state resources.

<http://au.reachout.com>

Provides information about a number of mental health concerns including depression, loss and grief, and substance abuse, as well as other teen issues such as friendship.

www.teenshealth.org

Addresses a wide range of teen health concerns including cutting, tattoos, sexual health, personal safety, and diseases.

www.reachout.asn.au

Provides information about a number of mental health concerns including depression, loss and grief, and substance abuse as well as other teen issues such as friendship.

www.teenshealth.org

Addresses a wide range of teen health concerns including cutting, tattoos, sexual health, personal safety, and diseases.

www.loveisrespect.org

Targeted to 13- to 18-year-olds, this national teen dating violence resource offers teens who are experiencing dating abuse the opportunity to log in and get help from trained associates in a one-on-one private chat room. This website is co-sponsored by the National Domestic Violence Hotline and Liz Claiborne Inc.

There are a growing number of resources for learning and socioemotional development that integrate information and strategies from new research about brain development. For example:

<http://www.brainwise-plc.org/>
<http://www.copingskills4kids.net/>



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The Institute for Safe Families (ISF) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to prevent family violence and promote the health and well being of each member of the family and their community. Since the early 1990's, ISF has developed innovative programming and built coalitions that unite health care providers with social service, policy experts, researchers, academicians, and victim/survivors. One of ISF's unique strengths has been to create forums for cross-systems dialogue aimed at building greater capacity for more effective prevention and response to family violence. www.instituteforsafefamilies.org



Multiplying Connections of The Health Federation of Philadelphia is a cross system collaborative whose mission is to translate the research on early childhood brain development into better practice through professional training and organizational and policy change. Multiplying Connections is developing materials and strategies to promote trauma informed and developmentally appropriate care across the public child and family service system in the City of Philadelphia. This capacity building initiative is funded by the William Penn Foundation. www.multiplyingconnections.org



Advocates for Youth is dedicated to creating programs and advocating for policies that help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. Advocates provides information, training, and strategic assistance to youth-serving organizations, policy makers, youth activists, and the media in the United States and the developing world. www.advocatesforyouth.org

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