Recent research on the human brain provides parents with shocking new evidence to possibly explain the sometimes irrational, illogical and impulsive behavior of teenagers. Brain researchers can now scan the live teenage brain to observe and examine why these curious and perplexing creatures make so many impulsive and egocentric decisions, that may even sometimes lead to risky behavior.

As it turns out, brain development during the teenage years is radically more active and dynamic than previously thought. During these years, the part of the brain that requires a person to make responsible decisions, understand consequences, and process problem-solving is under heavy construction, and much of the time dysfunctional. Even though the brain is almost physically mature, the grey matter in the thinking part of the brain (pre-frontal cortex) is still making connections. So teenagers are left with most of the information reaching their brains being processed in the emotional part (limbic system).

Information processed in the limbic system, without benefit of higher level processing in the pre-frontal cortex, may result in impulsive, egocentric, and maybe even risky, behavior. Because of this ongoing construction in the thinking part of the brain, a teenager is, many times, not capable of fully processing information that is necessary to make responsible decisions. Combine this brain challenge with a teen's temperament, maturity level, developmental stage and environmental impact, and it begins to become understandable why parents may find this time so exhausting and frustrating.

Realizing that major construction is going on inside the pre-frontal cortex of the teenage brain does not excuse inappropriate or irresponsible behavior from the teen. But understanding the teenage brain is crucial to figuring out how to interact with it. For the teenager, this time in his or her life can be a creative and emotional roller coaster ride with plenty of thrills and chills (and maybe some spills), but for parents it can be just nerve-wracking and terrifying. Healthy communication and effective discipline are what a teenager needs to help navigate this important time, especially since the brain is not yet necessarily ready or able to face all of the inevitable challenges, without support.

Each interaction with a teenager will affect development of his or her brain, helping the teen make connections in the pre-frontal cortex. During this time of heavy construction, the teenage brain needs focused and intentional support and teaching to help form and solidify these hopefully healthy connections. Parents can benefit from the understanding that there's much work that can be done while the teenage brain in still under construction and with proper perspective and effort, a teenager can learn to be less impulsive and egocentric, and make better and more responsible decisions.

As parents decide how to more effectively communicate with the developing teenage brain, it's vital to also consider who a child actually is, and what kind of parenting styles the child is exposed to. Most of us are the result of an even dose of nature and nurture, and understanding the nature of who a child is, and how his or her surroundings have impacted that child, can help parents formulate more effective techniques when facing challenging situations during the teenage years.

The nature of a teenager is a complex and fascinating combination of temperament, stage of development, personality, maturity level, and social connection. In addition, parents need to consider the teenager's emotional health (self esteem) and relational health (to what degree have the teen's closest relationships positively impacted his or her development).
And then there's parenting styles. Healthy and effective parenting (described as authoritativ,e) can help the positive development of the teenage brain. Using healthy communication tools like active listening, reframing, timing of teaching moments, I-messages, etc. and effective discipline tools like healthy limit setting, consequences, picking and choosing battles, few rules, etc. can greatly help the teenager's pre-frontal cortex develop solid connections to enable responsible behavior.

For more information on understanding the complex nature of who a teenager is, how his or her brain develops and processes information, and to practice new and easy-to-learn healthy parenting tools, please visit: ResponsibleKids.net

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