

What's Wrong with my Teen?

Most parents have managed to get through the preschool years and the elementary years with their sanity intact. Then their darlings turn 13 and they don't know what hit them. In the parenting classes that I teach for Prince William County's Virginia Cooperative Extension, participants share story after story of impulsive behavior, poor decision making, risk-taking, and rudeness. They blame the other teens, the other parents, the society, the schools, and behind it all, they are afraid something is wrong with their teen (or worse, with them).

I experienced the same bewilderment when my 3 children reached their teen years. I set up systems for budgeting time and money. I put a big calendar of chores up on the wall, color-coded with their names. I set boundaries and rules and consequences. I hoped that by setting up these systems the family would return to a well-oiled machine that needed little maintenance. That never happened. I was constantly involved with explaining, redirecting, imposing consequences, and wondering why I had to keep repeating everything. Now I know why.

Using MRI technology, Dr. Jay Giedd at the National Institutes of Health, looked at healthy teenage brains. In 1997, he realized that the normal teen brain goes through a growth spurt, particular in the frontal lobe. Guess what the frontal lobe does? It carries out the executive functions of the brain, weighing risk versus consequence, making plans based on anticipated results, and delaying gratification.

While there is a growth spurt of brain matter, the brain connections needed to carry out these functions are made with repetition over time. Repetition means repeating the behavior, repeating the consequences, repeating the reasons, repeating the experiences of planning, however poorly, of waiting for the reward, of anticipating results. We can't do it for them. All we can do is provide opportunities and point the way, but point the way we must. It won't happen automatically, and it might not happen at all if we stay uninvolved.

I found the book "WHY DO THEY ACT THAT WAY A Survival Guide to the Adolescent brain for You and Your Teen" by Dr. David Walsh to be a really good resource on brain development and parenting of teens. Dr. Walsh is on the faculty of the Family Education Department of the University of Minnesota, and has also been a high school counselor. He says "The new discoveries about the adolescent brain have huge implications for parents, teachers, and other professionals involved with adolescents. Now we can get more specific about what's going on inside the teenage brain, and you can really figure out why they act that way and what you can do about it."

He gives a series of 'Parental Do's and Don'ts' that provide a supportive behavioral framework for your teen (pp 53-54).

DO

- Set clear rules and expectations for behavior. For example, instead of saying, "Be nicer to your brother," say, "You cannot hit your brother, call him names, or use put-downs."

- Have the conversations about expectations and consequences when things are calm and everyone can think clearly. For example, if your daughter comes in an hour after curfew and you are very upset, let her know that you are angry and that you will talk with her in the morning. You will be better able to handle the necessary discipline when you are less agitated. Of course you must make sure that you follow up as promised.
- Spell out consequences for noncompliance. Consequences for adolescents usually involve the loss of privileges. For example, “If you cannot limit your video games to one hour a night, then you will not be allowed to play video games for one week.”
- Have your son or daughter state out loud his or her understanding of both the rules and consequences. This both clears up any ambiguity and helps adolescents take responsibility. Write them down, if needed.
- Choose consequences that fit and make sure you can live with them. For example, instead of saying, “You’re grounded for the next month for taking the car after I told you not to,” say, “You’re grounded for the weekend, and you may not use the car for two weeks.”
- Follow through on consequences.
- If your adolescents start yelling during an important discussion about rules, don’t try to shout them. Say, “We don’t seem to be able to have a discussion about this right now. When you’re ready to discuss this without yelling, we’ll talk.” Then make sure to come back and finish the talk. They should not be allowed to go on to their next activity until the discussion has been completed.

DON’T

- Don’t be surprised when adolescents get surly.
- Don’t harass an adolescent about every little thing. Pick and choose issues that matter.
- Don’t get dragged into power struggles. Calmly state your expectations and consequences and let your teen know that you expect that he will comply, but that if he chooses not to, then he will have to accept the consequence.
- Don’t make consequences into threats.
- Don’t let your emotions get out of control when your son or daughter starts yelling. Take a break if you need to.
- Don’t let your adolescent get his or her way by yelling and threatening or by further objectionable behavior. That can reinforce a dangerous pattern.

My children are all in their 30's/40's now and their frontal lobes seem to be carrying out their executive functions just fine. All the repeating, choices, consequences, and even sometimes tough love was worth it. Had I known that I probably would have enjoyed their teen years more. So take advantage of what I didn't know, and put back on the training mantle you thought you could put down, and enjoy the ride!

Julia Tilton has a Master’s Degree in Family Development and works as a Parent Educator for Prince William County’s Virginia Cooperative Extension.. She works with parents of adolescents using the the STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) program. She has found this curriculum to be a really good resource for learning how to provide the opportunities necessary for teens to exercise their brains in ways that are needed to become a responsible adult.