

# Understanding the teenage brain and behaviour

## **It's tough being a teen!**

- What are some of the difficult and challenging things that teenagers face today in this culture?
- What extra pressures do they face?
- What is easier about being a teenager today than when you were a teenager, and what is harder?

## **It's tough parenting teens!**

- What are some of the difficult and challenging things that parents of teenagers face today in this culture?
- What is easier about parenting teenagers today than when you were a teenager, and what is harder?
- Would you rather be a teenager or a parent of a teenager?

## **Biblical help for those supporting teenagers**

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 NIV.

## **Teens need positively connected adults – parents, mentors and leaders**

- Teens sometimes behave disrespectfully, or inconsiderately towards their adults.
- Teens need parents and caring adults as much as when they were a toddler.
- Having a warm, supportive, involved, interested and guiding approach to adolescents and youth in your sphere of influence.
- Let them know that you will always love them, no matter what they do, say, or how they look.
- Let them know you will always be there for them – whatever their life choices and mistakes. (Hosea) I have loved you with an everlasting love. Jer. 31:3

## **Grow a strong relationship by meeting the young person's relational needs**

- Know the top ten relational needs.
- Meet their relational needs as often as possible to strengthen your relationship with them.
- Be aware of what causes painful aloneness in teens and young people and avoid doing these things.
- When in doubt - prioritise your relationship with them.

## **Actions that meet relational needs:**

Comfort	Respect
Acceptance	Encouragement
Affection	Security
Appreciation	Specialness
Attention	Support

### **Actions that create painful aloneness:**

Being judged	Shame
Rejection	Discouragement
Abuse	Fear
Criticism	Being put down
Being ignored	Abandonment

### **Be present and connected**

- Prioritise your relationship with them.
- Be willing and humble enough to apologise to teens and youth when you mess up, or when you cause them pain and hurt.
- Keep your relationship open and mended.

### **Catch them doing something good**

- As often as possible – even daily – affirm them for something they have done well and when they have made a good choice.
- This is powerfully encouraging and helps to shape their character.

### **Teens' brains are undergoing enormous changes and rewiring**

- There are many obvious physical changes during puberty.
- Their brain is working hard very behind the scenes – rewiring the system for adulthood.
- Changes in their brains are affecting everything else.
- Brain development is only one aspect influencing their behaviour. Genetics, environment, education, experiences, relationships, etc. also influence behaviour.
- Every teen develops differently. Each brain works differently.
- The brain is rearranging and re-organising itself to prepare for adulthood. Unwanted and weaker connections are pruned/rewired to make the brain more efficient and stronger.
- Good news! Their brain is at its peak performance level for learning and creativity.

### **Supporting teens through the changes**

- Be understanding and supportive rather than frustrated and critical.
- Give teenagers and young people space to develop their unique God-created individuality.
- Remember that each teenager is experiencing many influences that can affect their behaviour.
- Strong connections - family, school, community, mentors, and role-models - can all help to support the teenager and help to steady them through these changes.

### **Amygdala development**

- During teenage years the amygdala is changing rapidly.
- This is the area in the brain that is most responsible for sensations, emotions and arousal.
- This area can be very sensitive to stimulation in adolescence - they become arousal seekers – looking for pleasure and excitement.
- This *may* explain why teenagers are more prone to risky and spontaneous behaviour.

### **Prefrontal cortex changes**

- During teenage years the prefrontal cortex is also undergoing rapid development.
- This is the area in the brain most responsible for intellectual activity, self-awareness, planning, problem solving, decision making and appropriate social interaction.
- Some studies suggest that this area of the brain doesn't develop as fast as the amygdala, and this can make it difficult for the rational brain to intervene and help youth to make wise and safe choices in the face of risky activity.
- This may also explain why teenagers appear to behave irrationally at times, and why they don't always think ahead, plan and assess the consequences.

### **Risky behaviour**

- Low self-esteem, a sense of hopelessness, a disconnection from parents, peer pressure, lack of future goals, and challenges at school and home are some things that will increase their risk factors.
- Teens are **trainee adults**.
- They are just learning, and learners make mistakes occasionally.
- Some risk-taking is essential for learning to occur.
- Train them to stop and think about the consequences of their behaviour.
- Make safety/escape plans with them.
- Be there to catch them when they make mistakes.
- Give teens increasing independence.
- Let go gracefully – holding them tightly can make things worse.
- Talk about risks and your concerns for their safety and wellbeing.
- Remind them to be careful what they post on social media as this can be found by future employers.
- If things go wrong, be warmly accepting, comforting and supportive in the first instance
- Discuss what went wrong and what they could do differently next time, when the painful emotions have subsided and they feel warmly connected to you again.

### **Examples of risky behaviour**

- Leaving homework to the last minute.
- Not studying for exams and tests.
- Self-harm.
- Experimenting with drugs, sex, alcohol, and smoking.
- Trying dangerous activities and challenges.

### **Protective factors**

- Warm, open, supportive and trusting relationships with parents and family.
- Parents who help teens when they do get into difficulties.
- Faith, responsibility, good mentors and positive hobbies can all help to protect the teen.

### **Eat dinner together as often as possible**

- Eating dinner together with their family helps to protect teens from risky behaviour and encourages them to learn and excel.
- Mealtimes are for great for socialising, connecting, caring, being supportive, talking about important issues, having fun, etc.

- Play interesting games together after the meal – or even just once a week. Time for fun together is bonding, sociable and positive.

### **Know their friends**

- Create a safe and accepting place for youth to socialize together.
- Be warm and hospitable and get to know them.
- Ask for their friends' mobile numbers so they can help you if you are ever concerned about one of the youth.

### **Full of hormones**

- During and after puberty the sex hormones are released into the body – oestrogen and testosterone.
- But feelings of stress, anxiety and fear can also flood their brain with the hormone **cortisol** which can be overwhelming.
- High levels of stress hormones in the body can affect the development of the brain, especially when it is the rapid development phase of adolescence.
- Teenagers can be illogical, irrational, inconsistent and unpredictable.
- Help them manage mood swings by showing empathy, love, acceptance and understanding.
- Find soothing things to do together. Your calm presence will help them to calm down too.
- Proactively increase the positive emotions in their life can help to steady them too (love, joy, peace, laughter, wonder, feeling valued and valuable, hope, inspiration, positive hobbies, and gratitude.)

### **Sleep deprived?**

Teenagers release sleep hormone **melatonin** about two hours later than children or adults. This is why they stay up late and why they are sleepy in the morning. But they still need lots of sleep to help them learn well and behave well.

- Understand their sleep patterns.
- Encourage a calming, regular night-time routine, including putting away phones in the evening, not having devices in the bedroom overnight, winding down, and relaxing.
- Encourage them to read or before bed rather than using screens and phones.
- Let them catch up on their sleep at the weekend. It's vital for their well-being.

### **Educate and empower teens to say no to alcohol, drugs, smoking and premarital sex**

- Help teens to learn the facts about addictive substances, premarital sex and sexually transmitted diseases from reliable sources.
- Help them develop safe and strong values.
- Encourage them to Interview or learn about people who made serious mistakes as teenagers.
- Role play situations and come up with great ways for them to be a positive role model and influence – peer influencers – who can steer others away from danger in warm and positive ways.

### **Educate them in the dangers of pornography**

- Find good resources to help you – <https://thenakedtruthproject.com/>

- [www.newfreedomtolove.org](http://www.newfreedomtolove.org) (SDA pornography training and resources)
- TED talk - The Great Porn Experiment – A very good short presentation on the dangers of porn addiction
- Mark Gungor – ‘Laugh your way’ has a good talk about pornography in his marriage series
- ‘Good pictures Bad Pictures’ book – good for teaching children about the dangers of pornography from the age of 7. This book trains children to use the **CAN DO** plan – an acronym for:
  - **Close my eyes immediately**
  - **Always tell a trusted adult**
  - **Name it when I see it**
  - **Distract myself**
  - **Order my thinking brain to be the boss**
- Encourage parents to place the strongest protective internet filters on home internet system.
- Know how to create accountability partners for your teens viewing – Covenant Eyes and other services will email partners a list of all the websites a selected person has visited.
- Good book for teenage boys and girls – **“Applying the Handbrake”** by Ben Dyer. Available to order online. “The book is the perfect mix of honest and relatable experiences, real truth about God’s views, and amazing advice on how to live as a Christian in today’s world.” (15 year-old boy)

### **Authoritative leaders and parents**

Authoritative leaders and parents are warm and loving, responsive and empathic, and they set firm and clear boundaries together with teens.

- Discuss family/group rules with teens that are designed for their safety and well-being.
- Ask “What rules do we need and why do we need them?”
- Let them know you care about them and love them.
- Clarify rules together and explain why they are important for their wellbeing.
- Show respect for teens by asking for their opinion and listening to their ideas.
- If you have different opinions state them calmly and clearly and explain your concerns and why you don’t agree.
- If they break the rules, invite them to suggest possible disciplines that involve logical consequences.
- Help them move towards increased independence and responsibility.

### **Communicating with teens**

- Sometimes teens grunt, turn away, go silent, or show indifference. But this doesn’t mean they don’t want to talk to you.
- Sometimes they just don’t know where or how to start the conversation or how to express what’s happening inside because it’s all very confusing for them.
- They need to feel safe first.

### **Listening so they speak**

- It helps if we have listened to them well when they were younger.
- Avoid asking lots of questions and interrogating them. This can feel unsafe and can be quite confusing for them as they struggle to find and verbalise their answers.

- Play games with them, drive them where they need to go, sit and chat late at night...
- Ensure privacy and avoid shaming teens. They desperately want and need our respect.
- Listen to them first. Don't rush them.
- Sum up what they say – so you're saying that?... Can I just check I understand properly?...
- Empathise – let them know that their feelings touch you in some way – I am so sorry that you are feeling...That must be so...I am sad that you are having to struggle with this...
- Respond to the feelings that are fueling the words rather than reacting angrily to their words and tone of voice.
- Listen for their unspoken needs (help, respect, affection, time with you, comfort, security, encouragement, etc.)
- Ask them how you can help.
- Keep your promises and their secrets.

### **Speaking so they listen**

- Choose a good time for them and you.
- Stay calm and speak quietly – this reduces the release of the stress hormone cortisol in their brain and helps them to listen and respond more calmly.
- Let them know you love them.
- Express appreciation.
- Turn complaints into polite requests:
- In this situation...when this happens...I feel...and it would really help me if you would... and then I can help you by...What ideas do you have?

### **What's behind the argument?**

Underneath most arguments teens, and others, are really asking one or more of the following questions. If we answer them in the way we relate to them every day – showing kindness, appreciation, understanding, support and commitment to them, then this tends to reduce their need to argue with us.

- Do you love me/care about me?
- Are you able to understand what I am feeling right now? Can you empathise with me?
- Are you willing and able to help me when I am struggling?
- Will you always be there for me? Can I depend on you?

### **Boundaries**

- Many conflicts happen because teens want to push the boundaries.
- Boundaries help them to feel safe and loved.
- Enforce boundaries warmly and make it easy for them to comply.
- Rules should be made for the benefit of the teen, not for the parent's/leader's convenience.
- Rules without a warm relationship leads to rebellion
- Help the teen understand the importance of complying with the rules – safety, well-being, future hopes, etc.
- Avoid harsh punishment – it can lead to greater conflict.
- Don't taking away personal property like phones and tablets.

**Foster resilience**

- Nurture, affirm and encourage the teen's positive character strengths.
- Help them to stick at difficult things.
- Support them well so that they can bounce back from challenges with your help and love.
- Pray for them daily – It's tough being a teen!

**Some resources**

- Conflict with teens - [www.scottishconflictresolution.org.uk](http://www.scottishconflictresolution.org.uk)
- Helping with troubling behaviours and helping them to flourish [www.handsonscotland.co.uk](http://www.handsonscotland.co.uk) – especially look at “emotional balance” on flourishing side of website.
- Dan Siegel – Power and purpose of the teenage brain – You Tube – look for the video about 2 hours long
- Brainstorm – Dan Siegel's book for teens about what is happening in their brain

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