

Adolescent Development

As parents we are familiar with the developmental milestones of early childhood. We anxiously and eagerly watched for our babies to roll over, sit up, crawl and walk. We photographed the first smiles, celebrated the appearance of the first tooth, and patiently repeated “Mama” or “Dada” until they got it right.

We didn’t expect our newborn to hop out of the car seat and walk into the house. We had an understanding of what to expect and that it would take time for our baby to become more independent.

It is no different with our teens. We do know something about the changes that are physically transforming their bodies. Our little girls start growing breasts and body hair. Before long they are menstruating and we roll our eyes knowingly whenever the word “hormones” is mentioned. Our sons sprout hair in all kinds of places, their voices crack, then deepen, and we may find naughty magazines hidden under the Sears catalogue in the bathroom.

But there is great deal more than new hair growth going on.

Our teens are making the transition from being a child, for whom a parent made all the important decisions...to an adult, who will be totally responsible for controlling their own life.

Brain research

Brain researchers now tell us that there are two periods of intense structural change in the human brain:

- before birth
- during adolescence.

The structural changes during adolescence are concerned with increasing the efficiency of the synapses or connections between the brain cells. Most scientists believe that these structural changes are guided by both genetics and by the use-it-or-lose-it principle. How a teen spends his or her time may be very important in determining the brain “power” they will have available to them.

But no matter how any one brain is stimulated or stifled, brain development through adolescence proceeds in stages, usually from the back to the front.

The first areas to reach maturity are those at back of the brain that are concerned with sensory functions like vision, hearing, touch and spatial functions. These are the functions that are concerned with skills like finding out what’s around the house in the dark, but they are also the sensory functions that lead teens into sensation seeking and risky behaviours.

The very last part of the brain to be “re-developed” is the pre-frontal cortex, home of what brain researchers call the executive functions—planning, setting priorities, organizing thoughts, suppressing impulses, and weighting the consequences of one’s actions/

In other words, the very last part of the brain to mature is the part that would plan to:

“...do my homework, then mow the lawn, then call my girlfriend...”

So...the bottom line on all this is that your teen’s brain is undergoing active redevelopment and that is a good thing—but the areas of the brain that look for sensory satisfaction are being stimulated before the areas responsible for judgement are mature.

That explains a lot, doesn’t it?

Understanding what is going on in your teen’s brain will hopefully give you more patience with them...but does not excuse irresponsible behaviour. Nor does it remove our responsibility as parents to keep challenging them to take control of their own lives and learn to make good decisions for themselves.

Developmental Process

A young woman walked away from a baby lying on a change table. As I rushed over to ensure the baby didn’t roll off...the young woman looked back at me and said,

“She doesn’t roll over yet. She won’t do that for another month.”

My response:

“Babies don’t read development charts. You won’t know she can roll over until she does it.”

It is in this spirit that the following developmental charts are offered for adolescent development. They provide a guide...but not the definitive guide to *your* teen. Teens go through the stages at *their* own speed and with differing levels of intensity and behaviours.

Developmental characteristics provide clues to what is going on in your teen’s head and are an important reminder that growing up and maturing is a *process* that happens over years. Just because our 13-year-old hits six feet in one summer does not mean their brain is there too. They are quite likely to be further along in one area of development but lagging behind in others.

PRETEENS

| Developmental Characteristics | Typical Resulting Behaviours |
|---|--|
| Reproductive maturity achieved (girls: 8 ½ to 13 yrs & boys: 9 ½ to 15 yrs) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the beginning of sexual experimentation |
| Growing independence and self-sufficiency | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> can take care of own physical needs start spending less time with family |
| Learning new social skills and deepening friendships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> spend more time with friends and may become very close to a “best friend” |
| Developing more concrete logic skills and now understand not just what “is” but what “could be” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> now capable of using language as a weapon against others – cruel jokes increased levels of arguing and debate |

YOUNG TEENS 12 -14 years

| Developmental Characteristics | Typical Resulting Behaviours |
|--|---|
| Fluctuating hormones cause mood cycles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> very stressed teen unpredictable and challenging behaviour results in a smiling, agreeable teen one moment, argumentative and angry teen the next |
| Growth and physical development spurt | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> constantly evaluation and stressing out about body and appearance confusion about what to do with this new body, particularly if they are advanced in comparison to peer group |
| Exploring identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> need privacy – lots of time alone or with “best friend” experimentation with appearance and identities – trying on roles (especially stereotypes they see in celebrities) exploring sexual identity / orientation |
| Need to separate from family | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> more secretive, stop confiding in parents less interested in family activities more identification with peers |
| Self-conscious, concerned about what peers think | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> defensiveness preoccupied with self and appearance |
| intellectual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> world is black or white, awesome or awful developing capacity for critical analysis idealistic analyzing and criticizing family members |
| Invincibility – nothing <i>really</i> bad will ever happen to them | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> poor impulse control reject health and safety warnings |

OLDER TEENS 15 - 18

| Developmental Characteristics | Typical Resulting Behaviours |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Completed physical development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • struggling with being treated as an adult • concerned with making body more attractive |
| Sexuality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • defining sexual orientation and becoming more sexually active |
| Development of abstract thinking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sarcasm • thinking is not so black and white – able to see the greys – starting to show some flexibility • able to speculate |
| Increased struggle for independence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • risk taking • feeling invincible • heavily involved with peers • conflict with parents – this is the “get off my back” stage • more open to accepting responsibility |

LATE ADOLESCENCE 18+

| Developmental Characteristics | Typical Resulting Behaviours |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Independent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • re-acceptance of parental advice and values |
| Adult body | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acceptance of body changes • comfortable in body |
| Peer relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less time with peers and more time in intimate relationships |
| Identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • refinement of values • ability to compromise and set limits • know what they want – set goals • realistic vocational goals |
| Intellectual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more capable of solving complex problems but still relatively inexperienced and may act without thinking |

While adolescents are moving through this developmental process, they are doing so for the purpose of accomplishing the following developmental tasks