

Psychology

What is Wrong with the Teenage Brain?

Comedian Bill Cosby said that all teenagers suffer brain damage. “How else can you explain it?” he asked. “They hit their brother, you saw them, and then they say, “I didn’t do it? What else can you conclude about someone who thinks someone else entered their body and made their hand move?” Cosby listed a number of other indicators of brain damage such as youth forgetting to come home, thinking that they are invulnerable to risks, and believing that their parents are from different planets. Fortunately, said Cosby, this brain damage is self-correcting, in most cases, by the time the youth reach 20.

Recent research has revealed that Cosby’s “psychology” was not too far off the mark. Immediately prior to adolescence the brain begins a growth spurt not matched since infancy. The frontal cortex – that part of the brain responsible for conscience, predicting consequences, and controlling emotional behavior – is undergoing a tremendous thickening and reorganization with much of it “off-line” for periods of time. Adults use this part of their brain to read emotions in other people, but teenagers typically use a part of their limbic system that specializes in their own emotions. Experiments have shown that these youth simply do not read, accurately, emotions in adult faces. They frequently think, for example, that the adult is angry or sad when, in fact, the adult is not.

Hormones also play a big role at this time of life. First, hormones give teenagers the feeling that they must become different from their parents in some ways. This may lead to a questioning of parental values, but since youth have underdeveloped frontal cortexes, they will have difficulty developing their own values in a complete and holistic way. Hormones are also behind sexual attraction, and youth may mistake this attraction for love. As adults we realize that love is a combination of cognitive and emotional factors, but since the adolescent’s brain is not fully cognitive, they experience “puppy love” mistaking it for the real thing.

During this time of disconnect with their parents when their brains are more vulnerable to addictions than at any other time in their lives, youth are susceptible to peer pressure. Because of their difficulty in connecting their actions with consequences, they may begin to view their parents as the enemy. Some groups of youth teach that there is something wrong with fellow youth if they have not been in serious trouble with their parents. They teach that it is okay to lie to parents. They may manipulate some adults for sympathy and then feel “understood,” thereby reinforcing their bad behavior.

Psychologist Jeannette Ambrose says that parents must become their children’s frontal cortex during this time. This means that while recognizing their children’s increased need for independence, responsible parents put limits and structure on that independence. Some youth rebel. Rebellion should lead to consequences, but some youth are not accepting even those consequences that are logically tied to their behavior. They may run. Such youth are vulnerable to street life, drugs, crime and prostitution. As parents we want to protect our children from these possibilities.

We cannot give into our children's demands for money because that only teaches them that they do not have to work for what they want. We have to show them how they may get what they reasonably want through legitimate means. They may have to wait for some things, and this means teaching responsibility and patience. At the same time, there are things they must do. If they refuse to go to school, for example, we must be prepared to accompany them. If they are suspended from school, we must be prepared to enforce a work ethic, so that they do not benefit from an unearned holiday. If they insist on going out with peers who are poor influences, we must be prepared to control their time by checking on their whereabouts and imposing consequences for bad behavior.

As parents, we need to be supportive of each other in supporting the role of family in protecting our children, even from themselves. Sometimes the police have to be called in. It is well known that police can pick up a runaway under the age of 16, but it is less well known that the police can charge anyone who assists such a runaway with abduction. A child who is completely out of control may benefit from being placed in a group home. Take heart in Bill Crosby's observation; the "brain damage" is usually self-correcting with age.

We have invested too much in our children to give up on them. With good and loving communication we can avoid most of the worst problems. Sometimes communication will not be enough. At those times we need to be prepared to exercise "tough love," and, with the help of others, take whatever means necessary. Standing together as a community we can protect our children's futures.