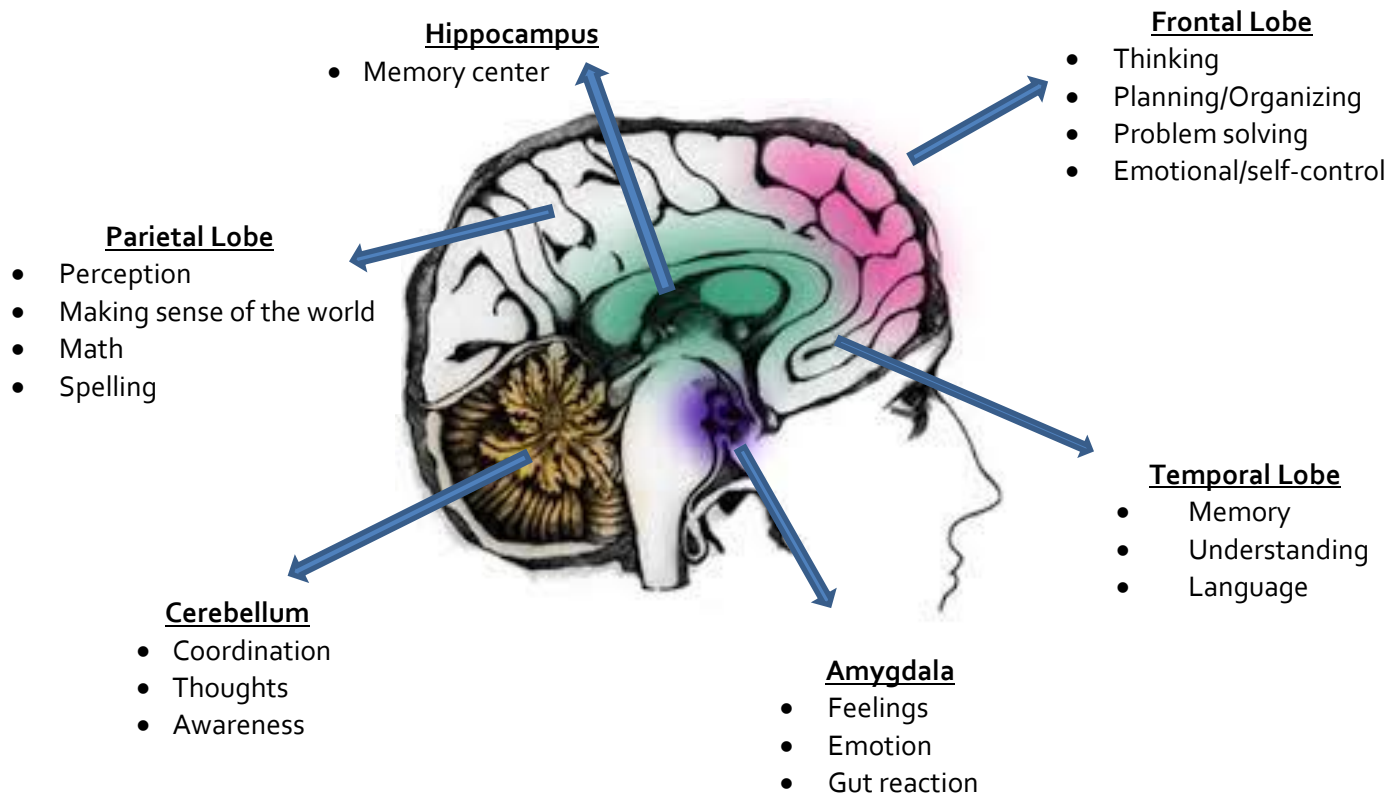


Parenting for Prevention

The Teen Brain

Have you ever wondered why your teen's temperament changes so quickly or why teens make the decisions they do? It can be challenging for parents to understand why their teens occasionally behave in an impulsive way. It may feel impossible to keep up with their mood changes or it may seem like teens do not fully consider the consequences of their actions. Research shows that there is a biological explanation for these behaviors. The human brain continues to develop well into early adulthood and adolescence is a particularly active period for the developing brain. Knowing just a little about the teen brain can help parents a lot, especially as you guide and support your teen through adolescence to make good decisions, take positive risks and avoid alcohol and other drugs.



What Parents Need to Know about the Teen Brain

It takes about 25 years for the human brain to fully develop. Adolescence (generally defined as the ages between 11 and 19) is a critical time for brain development.

Experiences that are reinforced during adolescence help shape lifelong behaviors; those that are not repeated are lost. This is a good time to encourage positive behaviors such as good study habits, a sport or activity, playing an instrument, a job skill, or an interesting hobby.

The teen brain has not yet developed the capacity to cope with the dramatic social, emotional and cognitive fluctuations of teen life. Intense emotions are characteristic of adolescence.

The human brain develops from back to front. The frontal lobe is the last region of the brain to develop and may help explain why teens often find it difficult to make complex judgements and make seemingly irrational decisions.

Understanding the Teen Brain

Because the teen brain is still developing, teens have not yet acquired the abilities to respond to situations as an adult may. Compared with adults:

Teens are more likely to ...

- act on impulse
- misread or misinterpret social cues and emotions
- get into accidents of all kinds
- get involved in fights
- engage in dangerous or risky behavior

Teens are less likely to ...

- think before they act
- pause to consider the potential consequences of their actions
- modify their dangerous or inappropriate behaviors

Alcohol (and other drugs) and the Teen Brain

There is evidence to suggest that the teen brain responds to alcohol and drugs differently than the adult brain. This may help explain why the younger someone starts drinking or using drugs, the greater the risk of dependence or addiction.

- Developing brains may be more susceptible to damage as a result of alcohol or drug use and these substances can have harmful effects on your teen's overall health.
- Research shows that alcohol abuse during the teen years has a negative impact on the *hippocampus* - the memory center of the brain.
- Alcohol or other drug use may disrupt the development of a healthy teen brain, making it more difficult for teens to cope with social situations and the normal pressures of life.
- The brain's reward circuits (the dopamine system) do not function properly when under the influence, leaving teens to feel unsettled when not using drugs or alcohol. This creates a negative cycle of using again to regain the euphoria felt when drinking or using drugs.

RESOURCES

10 Facts Every Parent Should Know about their Teen's Brain

www.livescience.com/13850-10-facts-parent-teen-brain.html

Inside the Teenage Brain

<http://www.pbs.org/wggbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain>

The Teen Brain

<http://www.drugfree.org/why-do-teens-act-this-way/adolescent-brain-development/>

The Teen Brain: Behavior, Problem Solving & Decision Making

http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/The_Teen_Brain_Behavior_Problem_Solving_and_Decision_Making_95.aspx

The Teen Brain – Still Under Construction

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml>

Supporting your Teen

The more you know about the teen brain, the more you can support your teen during these developmentally important years.

The science behind teen brain development can explain some of their behavior, but it does not give teens an excuse for poor decision-making without consequences.

Be patient with your teen, give them space to work things out on their own, and help guide them through these years. Stay involved, reinforce good decision-making and be firm in communicating your rules and expectations.

Remember, it is normal for teens to be impulsive, irritable, or rebellious. However, if you are concerned that your teen is exhibiting these behaviors in extreme, talk with your teen or consult your family's physician for advice and resources.

Parenting for Prevention is a Decisions at Every Turn Coalition educational series for parents and other caring adults to increase awareness and knowledge about important youth issues and to encourage dialogue about making healthy choices.

Please visit <http://www.AshlandDecisions.org/parent-tip-sheets.html> for our complete library of tip sheets.

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