

Chapter 1

THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN

Michael's mom sat in my office sobbing, repeatedly attempting to reason with her raging and verbally vicious adolescent son. After watching his endless bullying and her tormented begging for too long, I sent him out of the room, turned to her and said, "Why are you talking to him like he makes sense?" "What do you mean?" she sobbed. I gave her the same shrugging "Duh" gesture her son had just used a dozen times and I almost yelled, "He's nuts! You can't talk to crazy people like they make sense." Her eyes and mouth flew open, astonished at my insensitivity. Slowly her wrenching sobs transformed into chuckling, softly at first, then building to a crescendo of raucous laughter that rang off the walls. "Oh, God," she howled, "How I needed to laugh like that! It feels wonderful. You're right. Michael is nuts. And I'm nuts to sit here and talk with him like that."

In our final session several months later, she reminded me of that exchange. "That," she said, "was the beginning of our healing."

MICHAEL'S PERFORMANCE illustrates a lot about contemporary adolescents, which we'll examine shortly. My own performance illustrates much about us as responding adults. While we address this fully in Part Two, let me jump ahead for a minute to help you see the importance of training, which starts with this chapter, as you learn about your kid's brain. And training, after all, is what this book is about.

That cool, controlled psychologist was working hard to restrain an old rule-based urge to eviscerate Michael. This keeping-cool stuff is not as easy as it looks. Part of me wanted to make him cry really hard for daring to be disrespectful to both me and his terrified mother. I wanted

badly to physically intimidate him, to jack him up against the wall and scream, “JUST WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?” My alternate response came from years of retraining and experience focusing on unlearning my old rules (what I saw my father do) as much as learning new skills.

Parenting an adolescent in today’s world is much the same as flying a jet aircraft or performing brain surgery. Any training you received 30 years ago is not only useless, it can actually impair your ability to perform well. Neurosurgeons and pilots constantly upgrade their skills, replacing outmoded thinking with new training that reflects contemporary realities.

No one questions this evolutionary process of learning, except when we talk of parenting. With a near-religious fervor, we often enshrine (and thus cripple) parenting as something sacred and beyond our routine functioning. We love to support the romantic delusion that, unlike surgery, we should intuitively and permanently know how to parent adolescents based on how we were raised, either by doing just what our parents did or the exact opposite, but always as some form of *reaction* to what we experienced decades ago. We attribute the problems of our children to liberalism, conservatism, godlessness, godfulness, evolutionism, creationism—anything that seems to make sense, except the quiet notion that contemporary parenting is a *complex set of learned skills, many of which seem counterintuitive to us*. It’s not religion and it sure ain’t politics. And it can be learned from good and bad sources, so we must constantly question and upgrade our learning.

Successfully parenting an adolescent in today’s world requires levels of skill, endurance, wisdom, and strength that make piloting an aircraft pale in comparison. No joke. Most of all, parenting an adolescent requires training much more personally intense than any pilot can imagine. Simply having a conversation with your contemporary adolescent child can require special skills never before required. What you learned 30 years ago might have worked 30 years ago. You were trained on a Boeing 707. Do you really think you can safely fly the Concorde? Are you sure you can safely raise that 15-year-old? With the right retraining, the answer is yes!

The first step in this retraining is to learn how your kid’s brain works. Besides being informative, this will give us an excuse to get a little revenge, and gossip about the nutcase upstairs—the one lying in a sea

of pizza boxes and dirty clothes, playing air guitar with his toes and listening to earphone music (music?) that you can actually hear out in the hall because it's so incredibly loud and/or because either he and/or you kicked in his door last week. [Author's note: Throughout this book, whenever I use the word "music," I follow it with a question mark. This is my passive-aggressive way of striking back at my very funny, very sarcastic son whose questionable taste in music (music?) differs from my own excellent taste.]

You may have recently lost your sense of humor regarding your kid, so here's a travel-worn "more truth than humor" story that psychologists have told for years:

Parent: "I want you to evaluate my 13-year-old son."

Doctor: "OK. He's suffering from a transient psychosis with an intermittent rage disorder, punctuated by episodic radical mood swings, but his prognosis is good for a full recovery."

Parent: "What does all that mean?"

Doctor: "He's 13."

Parent: "How can you say all that without even meeting him?"

Doctor: "He's 13."

Who would have thought this tired old joke would turn out to be a dead-on prophecy?

Technically Speaking, They're Crazy

Up until now, psychologists had a lot of great-sounding theories to explain why adolescents tend to act so crazy at times. We believed that all that risk-taking, judgment-impaired, aggressive, and oppositional behavior was a function of early childhood experiences, peer pressure, the hormonal effects of puberty, and, most hurtful of all for too many mothers and fathers, poor parenting. No one thought that massive structural changes in teenagers' brains were largely to blame. We had no clue that their brains were changing.

The textbooks now being used state that brain development races in early childhood, and then calms to a slow but steady pace toward adulthood. Based on studies of brain volume, or size, science tells us that 95 percent of the brain develops in a child by about age five. From this fact, came all of the popular and now useless thinking that the first few years

of life were the most critical for your kid—that in early childhood her skills, personality, and everything else get fixed in place, or “hard-wired,” as researchers like to say. Up until now, we believed that after those “critical” early years, changing those hard-wired brain components was either difficult or impossible. That’s why in the movies the psychologist always says, “So tell me about Johnny’s early childhood.”

But our science was terribly flawed. While it is true that 95 percent of the brain is developed by age five, *the most advanced parts of the brain don’t complete their development until adolescence is pretty much over.*

How We Found Out

Two very recent ground-breaking studies have come together to blow apart our old view of the adolescent brain and provide us with astonishing insights into your kid’s head that offer explanations for crazy teen behavior and revolutionize our thinking about how to best help our children survive these difficult times.

Starting in 1991, Dr. Jay Giedd, chief of brain imaging at the Child Psychiatry Branch of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), started taking pictures of kids’ brains over a nine-year span. He was curious to know to what extent children’s crazy behavior is willful, and to what extent it is beyond their control. He and his colleagues at UCLA and McGill University in Canada used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to study exactly how a child’s brain grows from ages 3 to 18. They studied almost 1,000 “normal” kids (including two of Dr. Giedd’s children) at intervals ranging from two weeks to four years. What they found was nothing short of astonishing, and it completely rewrote our understanding of the adolescent brain.

First, contrary to previous thinking that the brain is completely developed by age five, they saw that throughout the teen years and into the twenties, substantial growth occurs in a brain structure called the corpus callosum. The corpus callosum is a set of nerves that connects all the parts of the brain that must work together to function efficiently, as in making good decisions. This set of “wires” is critical to things like intelligence, consciousness, and self-awareness. This initial finding was revolutionary enough, but these researchers weren’t finished.

With amazement, they also found that the prefrontal cortex of the

brain goes through a wild growth spurt that coincides with the onset of adolescence. In fact, they found that this part of the brain does the bulk of its maturation between the ages of 12 and 20. The prefrontal cortex is where the most sophisticated of our abilities reside. Emotional control, impulse restraint, and rational decision-making are all gifts to us from our prefrontal cortex, gifts your kid hasn't yet received. Perhaps Dr. Karl Pribram, director of the Center for Brain Research and Informational Sciences at Radford University in Virginia, described it best when he said, "The prefrontal cortex is the seat of civilization."

At about the same time, Dr. Deborah Yurgelun-Todd a neuropsychologist at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, ran a fascinating study that dove-tailed perfectly with Dr. Giedd's findings. Again using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), Dr. Yurgelun-Todd first showed how adults use two different brain parts to make sophisticated judgments such as interpreting social signals. In her research, she showed a group of adults pictures of faces contorted in fear and then asked them to interpret the emotion the faces conveyed. As the adults responded, she found that both the prefrontal cortex and the brain's limbic system worked to process the task. The limbic system is a kind of primal emotion center that deals with emotions like rage and fear. Once the limbic system is aroused, the prefrontal cortex can process or moderate the reactions or impulses of the limbic system. Using this two-step process, the adults all recognized fear in the faces shown to them in the pictures.

When Dr. Yurgelun-Todd tried this with teens, however, many were unable to process the pictures correctly. She found that the pictures aroused the teens' limbic systems, but *their prefrontal cortexes were not working*. In other words, the teens were moved by the pictures, but were unable to figure out what they meant.

What This Means to You

So what do these studies offer you? Well, we have good news and bad news.

The good news is that positive things such as sports, music, school achievement, responsibility, and social consciousness can be hard-wired into that expanding adolescent brain. You may owe God, Mother

Nature, fate, or whomever you choose a nice dinner out because he, she, or it designed your child to get a second chance at life. All of that new growth in the prefrontal cortex is available for use by your kid. The old view that there is little room for change in your child by the time he is a teen is wrong.

The bad news is that you may want to curse God, Mother Nature, or fate because this second-chance brain programming can be used toward negative things, too. If the teen years are filled with rage, dysfunction, and alienation, they may be “set in stone” in our kids’ heads. The old thinking that the brain game is over by age five is wrong. The most critical years for your young adolescent are likely yet to be.

The good *and* bad news is that, first, this wild brain development may create new, unpredictable thought pathways, wherein action thoughts can outrace judgment capabilities just as they did in early childhood. Second, teens may be neurologically handicapped in recognizing and processing social emotions such as anger and fear. This is bad news since it shows the monumental obstacles confronting our adolescents as they try to grow up. The good part is that these behaviors are not character flaws or signs of an evil nature. In adolescent children, the maddening behavior is just the result of mixed-up wiring that will straighten out in time if, if, and only if we adults respond not with raging, hurtful punishments, but with carefully crafted responses intended to calmly but firmly teach brain-challenged children to become functional adults.

Remember 12 years ago when your teen was a toddler and you walked in to find him sitting in the cat box munching on some very scary litter? Remember last week when your teen used the pressure washer to clean your car, stripping off about \$500 worth of paint before she realized this was not such a good idea? Do the words *impulsive* and *poor judgment* come to mind? Can you draw that 2-year-old face onto that 12-year-old body? Learn this trick well, because we’re going to use it a lot. Both that toddler and adolescent brain at times are unstable, dysfunctional, and completely unpredictable. They both have just developed a bunch of brain circuits that may fire off unexpectedly. Also, they both have neurologically deficient controls to moderate these impulses and to understand the likely outcomes of their actions. In the science of mental health, we have a word for that. We call it crazy.

This book is going to answer the question that is probably running

through your head right now: *So what can I do as a parent to get this brain-challenged teen through to adulthood alive, functional, and, dare I say, happy?* First, though, let's point out some evidence that whoever designed teenagers certainly had a sense of humor.

Mother Nature's timing of this adolescent brain growth is either lousy or great depending on the day you've had with your kid. On the positive side, his impulsiveness and risk-taking are critical to his growing up and becoming his own person. This will ultimately help him form the adult personality needed to tackle the challenges that lie ahead. The negative side is that his brain is going wild just as he's seeing himself as an adult, deserving of all the grown-up privileges of autonomy, independent decision-making, and self-regulation.

Common Adolescent Disorders

It is this aspect of teen brain dysfunction that explains the following bewildering displays you may have witnessed with your own child. These stories are actual events from my case notes and illustrate that what looks so uniquely insane, enraging, and terrifying about your child turns out to be pretty commonplace stuff. Your neighbors will never admit that their kid does any of this because they're afraid you'll think their kid is nuts. And you'd be right.

The "disorder" joke-titles are intended to get you to smile through your pain, a skill no family should be without. My son just completed a family coat-of-arms for a school project and his motto is "Keep your sense of humor." Smart kid.

Here are some common adolescent "mental disorders":

◆ *The Shepherds Germanus Seizure Syndrome:*

Following her arrest for deliberately driving Dad's Range Rover over 10 grand-worth of new landscaping in front of the private school at which she consistently achieved excellence, Susan's parents asked her the dumbest question you can think of: "Why?"

That was the same dumb question Ronald's parents asked when he decided to push the big plastic gas can up the driveway with the lawn tractor, blade running, causing the can to rupture, spraying flaming gas

everywhere. (Ronald escaped with singed pride, but the tractor was toast.)

When asked “why,” both children seized in the manner you’ve likely seen by now with your own adolescent. Eyes wide open, head slightly tilted, tongue hanging out, and slow drooling with nonresponsiveness. This is very much like the look you get asking your German Shepherd puppy, “Why?”

No joke, both the puppy and the adolescent rarely know the “why” of their bizarre actions. We grownups always want to find out what the deep-rooted psychological causes might be for our kids’ craziness. Some will spend a lot of money on therapy to sit and speculate in long, complex discussions searching for obscure, unconscious conflicts justifying the aberrant behavior. In turn, we psychologists can expound for hours on great-sounding psychosocial models that neatly explain away the apparent madness of a teenager.

The more likely and mundane truth is that there usually is no deep, mysterious psychological explanation for *occasional* episodes of adolescent insanity. It’s just the wiring. Usually your kid is at least as amazed as you are at her behavior. She’s just responding to weird, brain dysfunction-based, irresistible impulses to do irrational things. She’s losing a race in which her brain impulses outrun her judgment. Frontal lobe stuff. She honestly wishes she knew the answer to “why,” for life would then be much easier for her. She usually doesn’t know why, and life usually isn’t easier. We call this being nuts.

Frequently being asked “why” by parents, and just as frequently not knowing the answer, can lead to another teenage “disorder.” Again, the behavior I describe is quite real, as you know all too well. The “disorder” titles are comic relief.

◆ *Aphasia Whenus Iwannus:*

Common to adolescence, this sudden loss of speech appears without warning. It may occur in conjunction with a total but temporary hearing loss. Interestingly, this hearing loss seems most pronounced with sounds that mimic parental voices asking questions about chores or homework. This disability often miraculously improves upon hearing a mechanical voice say, “You’ve got mail.”

Jokes aside, adolescents do feel that they have the option of choosing not to respond to certain parental questions. Parents typically find this a maddening display of arrogance, but it is more often tied to their

kid's self-confusion. The silence is frequently a signal that the child can't explain something even to herself, so she doesn't even bother trying since parents may only hammer her more.

◆ *Maturationnus Erraticus:*

John's dad told me his story slowly, as if afraid of some terrible diagnostic pronouncement. "This morning is a good example of what I mean. My 16-year-old son approached me with his baby sister's 'Tinky Winky' doll under his arm. I had actually watched him play with this thing for the preceding 30 minutes. He competed nicely, but nevertheless competed with his sister for possession of the toy. He then came over to me and asked for the car keys to go pick up his girlfriend. When I asked him where they were going, he exploded: 'YOU ALWAYS TREAT ME LIKE I'M A KID!' As he yelled, he was shaking Tinky Winky in my face. I have to tell you, sometimes I feel nuts myself. I laughed, felt sad, and got mad all at the same time. I didn't know that was possible. My son had no idea why I thought any of this was odd."

Also described as the "Six or Sixteen Syndrome," most adolescents display this behavior to some degree, with maddening results for everyone, especially for the adolescent. He is trapped between the two worlds of childhood and adulthood, and can't find his way out. Like a science fiction character, he finds himself existing in two separate dimensions at the same time, with two completely different sets of rules, expectations, needs, and fears. In one afternoon he might find himself playing Wiffle Ball, having sex, playing with his old army soldiers, and trying to decide if his friend is right about heroin being harmless if you just snort it. This could make anyone nuts, even with good brain wiring, and this level of stress can lead to the onset of this next "more-truth-than-humor" disease.

◆ *Moodus Elevatoris Irrationnus:*

Fourteen-year-old Harrison, according to his father, bugged Dad relentlessly for three weeks to go the seashore. The morning they were leaving, Harrison was up at 5:00 A.M. (a miracle in itself) packing and pushing everyone to get ready. He ran upstairs to grab one last thing, and never came down. "I'm not going," he finally

screamed out his window as the family kept calling him. “I hate the shore. Why do you always make me go there?”

These out-of-the-blue mood swings can set land-speed records, causing parents to wish their kid had a digital forehead readout to indicate what floor he’s on at a particular moment. It looks uniquely crazy. Turns out it’s just commonly crazy.

All of these temporary “mental disorders” are normal experiences common to adolescence. One could well argue that most big kids are nuts based on demonstrable brain dysfunction alone, without even taking into consideration the terrible moral-psychological-physical issues they are wrestling with—sex, religion, drugs, sex, power, identity, sex, self-image, sex, violence, sex, and sex (more on this in Chapter 2). Further, their days are typically saturated with messages that loudly and publicly delineate their failures and worthlessness. It ain’t easy being a teen.

It starts with the opening of his eyes “WHY CAN’T YOU GET UP ON TIME?” carries into morning “WHY CAN’T YOU RAISE YOUR HAND?” evolves through the afternoon “WHY CAN’T YOU FIELD GROUNDERS TO YOUR LEFT?” and continues into the evening “WHY CAN’T YOU MAKE ENOUGH MONEY TO TAKE ME TO THE ‘FLAMING PUKES’ CONCERT?” As the day ends he drifts off to sleep hearing that sweet adolescent lullaby, “PIGS COULDN’T STAND TO LIVE IN YOUR ROOM.”

So be a little understanding. These are often terrible times for your kid. He is probably brain-challenged, overwhelmed with irresolvable conflicts, and forced to constantly see mostly his failures. Your daughter is nuts and she’s scared of not looking right, sounding right, or even thinking right. As such, she requires special handling. Just trying to have a little conversation with a teen caught in the crush of adolescent mental dysfunction can be an art form.

Recognizing the Pain and Confusion

Adrienne stared coldly at her mom in my waiting room, pretending she couldn’t hear her mother’s repeated pleas to go into my office. She calmly studied her mom’s tense smile, searching for her next target.

With a snicker, she found it. She realized her mom was secretly praying not to have yet another humiliating scene in front of a stranger, namely me. “Don’t think you’re HOT SH. . . ’cause you got me here, MOTHER. I’m not saying a f’ng thing to this SHRINK.” She fired her last words towards me, and then turned her head away.

“And what the hell are YOU staring at?” she snapped without even looking at me, as if addressing the wall. For a second, I didn’t realize she was talking to me. “Sorry,” I responded, “I get told a lot by teenagers that I’ve got this bad habit of staring. It drives them nuts.” “OTHER kids come here?” she snorted incredulously. “I don’t believe it! Your music SUCKS!” I nodded. “I’ve been told that too. You should hear my son do his jokes on my music. He’s a riot.” She looked away, as if tiring of punching a big marshmallow. Then she boxed herself in: “Well, I ain’t goin’ into your office. I’m sittin’ right here and there’s nothin’ you can do about it.” “OK by me,” I shrugged while pulling up a chair. “Mom, why don’t you go down the street and grab some coffee for an hour? We’ll be fine.”

Watching the door close behind her mother, Adrienne looked almost vulnerable. I had to somehow meet her at her level to connect. I went with the “we’re both adults, so you choose” tack. “Look, Adrienne, I can’t tell your mom anything you tell me anyway, unless it’s something that could kill you or someone else, so you’re in charge here. You can talk, sing, curse, say nothing, whatever. But my next client likes to come in early, so would you rather say nothing out here with strangers or say nothing in my office with me?” I unconsciously held my breath for my gambit, then exhaled too loudly as she slowly got up and walked to my office door. She quickly turned with exasperation and yelled, “NOW WHAT?” She was used to hearing adults sigh a lot behind her. “Nothing,” I laughed, “I just get nervous meeting new people.” Looking away, she may have grinned.

Adrienne was perplexed. To regain control, she wouldn’t sit down in my office, choosing instead to slowly cruise the room while she defiantly clutched the intake form she had filled out.

“You were in the army?” she asked politely, looking at my mementos. I nodded. With precisely the same “polite” voice she asked, “Did you kill any babies?” I held my response for dramatic effect. I can play, too. “Not recently, although my kids tempt me from time to time.” Without any reaction she continued her search of my walls.

Unwittingly she was getting ensnared. “These your kids?” she asked. “Is that the boy who always busts on you?” “That’s him,” and with obvious love I added, “Doesn’t he look like a real wiseass?” Now she turned on me. “Speaking of wiseass, here’s your F’ING FORM,” she snarled, tossing the intake sheet at me. I stooped to pick it up.

It felt like the bottom of the ninth inning, two on, two out, full count. She must be bringing her heat. Under the heading “Name” she had scrawled “SCREW YOU!!!” She fixed her gaze on me to see how her fastball would do. “Scroo Yu,” I read aloud. I looked up at her, held her eyes, and deadpanned. “That’s an Asian name, right?”

She stared. She smiled. She laughed. She lost. She won. We had connected.

Adrienne is a wonderful example of how crazy adolescents can be. Whenever I’m debating the premise of this book with colleagues, I often ask them to describe to me how they handle talking with a difficult teenager. Try this exercise yourself.

Think about how you prepare to talk to your kid when he’s in a crazy phase. Do you feel at ease talking fully and openly about your thoughts and questions? Or do you find yourself carefully editing your words so you don’t set your kid off? Have you had that horrific experience known only to stand-up comics and parents of teens, where you get on a roll only to completely lose your audience by one slightly ill-timed punch line? Are your toe, neck, or stomach muscles sore from all that secret nervous tensing your muscles do after a 10-minute chat with your teen? Does giving those reminders about homework/chore/dinner with grandmom feel like a walk through an Albanian minefield?

Learning how to verbally approach adolescents today is the same rigorous baptism-by-fire known to rookie cops and new workers at mental hospitals. You can’t just say what you think because many of the people you work with are mentally ill and cannot handle normal conversation. After a while, you get better at developing a style, but you always know that you have to carefully handle these folks with a trained verbal and emotional discipline. You can’t just be natural with your troubled teen. That’s because he’s nuts.

I’ll train you in Parts Two and Three on teen-speak because you do need to learn how to verbally engage your child without getting clawed.

But the very idea of having to learn to talk to your own kid can be tough to get used to.

“Britanny is MY OWN CHILD, for God’s sake. I created her inside my womb, carried her, gave birth to her, nursed her, raised her, left an abusive man for her, and struggled just to survive. We’ve been close for 14 years, with no secrets, ever. SHE IS MY BLOOD AND MY LIFE. AND NOW YOU HAVE THE NERVE TO TELL ME HOW I HAVE TO TALK TO MY OWN CHILD?” As her anger cooled into sadness, her tears overcame her for a moment. Then Tia paused, sighed, and continued in a quiet voice. “I’m sorry. I already knew that I needed to come here and have someone like you teach me how to talk with my own child. That breaks my heart and it makes me hate you. Can you understand that?” “Yes,” I answered, “I can understand that. I would hate me too.”

I wasn’t kidding. The whole concept of having to go and see a stranger or read a book to learn how to be with your own child is disheartening and infuriating. It can make you hate both the shrink and your kid, but try hard to remember that you already have the important parts of parenting mastered: the love, the commitment, and the willingness to get disheartened and infuriated. A therapist, or this book, only acts as a mechanic suggesting how to connect all that good stuff you bring to the relationship.

As infuriating as your kid can be, for now try to remember that it’s much worse to be stuck in that adolescent body that yells at you every time you try to talk. As I said, don’t talk to crazy people like they make sense. Here, this means don’t personalize her outrageous behavior and react as if it came from someone sane. Your child doesn’t qualify as sane for now, and that’s not a happy way to be.

Being truly mentally ill is perhaps the worst experience we can endure. Think of watching yourself out of control, reacting to things you know aren’t real, yet somehow *are* real. Real mental illness robs us of our soul, in a hideously painful fashion.

Adolescence, at times, is a kind of mental illness. That raging child you love, who seems to be delighting in her torment of you, is often in just that kind of terrible pain. She is fighting for her soul, and she can’t

let anyone know, least of all, her Uncle Louie, who loves to constantly tell her, “These are the best years of your life, kiddo. It’s all downhill from here.” Thanks so much, Uncle Louie.

By the way, are you feeling a strange, familiar connection with my words, beyond what you see in your kid? I’ll tell you why. It’s “*déjà vu* all over again.” You probably experienced this yourself as an adolescent. I surely did. *We were all the same way*. Since we’ve begun to keep such records, researchers have found that, psychologically speaking, teenagers are very consistent creatures from generation to generation. Yet a romantic myth has somehow evolved that today’s kids are so different from the way we were in our day—that as teenagers we were more responsible, less violent, less sex-driven, more spiritual, and so on.

What confusing nonsense this is. Our research shows adolescent personality to be amazingly similar over time-comparison studies, which now makes sense in light of our new adolescent brain research. I can remember a number of kids I grew up with who certainly would have been involved with guns and explosives if these had been available to them. Do you recall many adolescent males in your day that would have turned down the opportunity to have sex, protected or not? And just how responsible were your driving habits?

So if kids are essentially the same as we were, why do they seem so particularly crazy these days? Two reasons.

The first reason is a very subtle yet immensely powerful societal change that’s been slowly progressing for decades. It’s best summarized by saying that we’ve somehow come to view adolescents as if they were adults and not children. From the kid’s perspective, this wish is nothing new. Teenagers of all generations have lobbied for adult privileges with the swaggering assurances that they can handle “it.” The fact is that they cannot handle “it” *and they know this*. They cannot handle the dangerous pressures confronting them without some structure from their parents, yet they’ll go to war over imposed parental structure.

Paradoxically, kids will tell me how scary it is to be in situations where their peers are in full control without adult supervision, such as parties (no, you can’t leave him home alone for the weekend). They really want competent adults to be in charge; at the same time, they’ll challenge any adult who tries to be in charge. They’ll share with me, as their shrink, all of these conflicting feelings, but never tell you as their

parent. Don't take it personally. It's just that you represent the other side of the privilege bargaining table, so there's no way they can give you such information. You'd probably respond by setting appropriate limits or something crazy like that.

For now, know that all teens have always wanted to be treated like adults. What's new is that we've somehow signed onto this disastrous notion that they *are* adults, capable of handling "it" completely solo. It's not working. Teens left on their own as small adults not only screw up big-time, they become depressed and rageful in the bargain.

Our current society of adolescents supports the warning on my son's favorite T-shirt: "Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups." With loving apologies to my kid, I must ironically note that adolescents today are powerful because we've allowed them to become that way, stupid because they're brain-challenged, and seriously at-risk because of the second reason they look so scary: The world we've created around them is truly insane. But, unlike your child, it won't get better on its own.

Take three deep breaths and continue on to Chapter 2. How's your seat belt?

