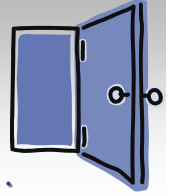


RACS Prevention Newsletter

a publication of Rockbridge Area Community Services

opening new doors to the schools and community...



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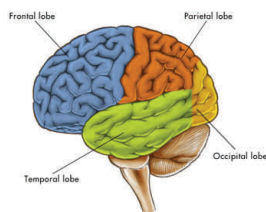
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“WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!?”

If you're a parent, a coach, a teacher, or someone involved with adolescents on a regular basis, chances are pretty good that you have said this at some point, probably loudly, with much disbelief and frustration. “What were you **thinking?**” It might even have been followed by another question: “**Were** you thinking?” You know the way this works. Your teen has just done something so obviously foolish that you are speechless. Well, almost speechless. You did manage to exclaim, “What were you thinking?”

What we need to realize is that what seems so readily obvious to us as adults, isn't nearly so clear to adolescents. Much conventional wisdom blames peer pressure for foolish decisions. While it's true that factors like peer pressure, raging hormones, drugs and alcohol are all factors that contribute to bad decision-making during adolescence, new research provides another logical explanation for the often illogical choices our teens make. Using high-powered MRI technology, scientists have demonstrated that the adolescent brain, while fully grown in size, is NOT fully developed. In fact, the human brain is not fully developed until the mid-twenties!



One of the last regions of the brain to mature is the prefrontal cortex. The cortex is the outer layer of the brain, the section under the rippled surface that most people think of when they think of the brain. The prefrontal cortex is the section of the cortex that is in the front of the brain, behind the forehead. What tasks does this part of the brain control? The prefrontal lobe of the cortex is responsible for high level thinking tasks such as problem solving, reasoning, and complex decision making skills -- things

like planning, setting priorities, impulse control and weighing the consequences of one's actions. So, the part of the brain that we need in order to make good decisions is the last to develop! The adolescent brain is still under construction! So leaving teens to make their own decisions with a brain that is not yet fully formed puts them at risk for serious consequences that will result from poor choices.

Knowing the limitations of the adolescent brain shouldn't excuse bad behavior, but it should reinforce the need for parents to stay in touch and involved. Here are a few things you can do as a parent to help them stay safe.

Stay in Touch

Spend time together and keep the lines of communication open, even when they are making it difficult. And they will! It's developmentally part of their job! But it is our job as parents to make the most of opportunities to influence them and share our knowledge and experience.

Set Clear Expectations

Let your teens know on a regular basis what is and is not acceptable behavior. Don't make assumptions. What is painfully obvious to us as adults, may not even occur to the still developing brain of our teens.

Be Consistent

The human mind, and especially the teen mind, needs to hear a message multiple times before it sinks in. Set limits with clear rules and consistent consequences for breaking them. Since the brain's cognitive skills are still developing, it is critical for teens to see clear cause and effect relationships – consistent consequences follow certain actions.

Don't Overreact

Everyone makes mistakes – so parents need to both expect and plan for those situations. And when they happen, remember that we knew they would

happen and we planned for them. Treat the situation as an “incident” -- a learning experience -- and then move on. Part of what is still under development is a teen's ability to assess emotions. They see anger or hostility when none exist. They mistake fear or concern for anger or irritation. So we need to remember that we are not on a level playing field. Their brain is still under construction and we need to exercise patience and understanding. We need to listen as well as talk.

Discourage Drugs and Alcohol

Clearly the adolescent brain is developmentally not capable of making mature decisions with respect to risky behavior. And drugs and alcohol just impair their judgment even more, making them more prone to risk-taking. So insist on a drug-free, alcohol-free standard for your teens until they reach the age of twenty-one.

So the next time you have the urge to ask, “What were you thinking?” remember that in part, they weren't thinking because the prefrontal cortex, the so-called “thinking” part of the brain, is still under construction. By asking a different set of questions, we can help teens become increasingly aware of the consequences of their actions and hopefully develop better problem-solving skills. Questions to ask include: “What happened when you did that? Did you like the results? Could you have done something differently? How do you think I feel about what you did? What do you think I would prefer that you did instead?”

Parenting teens is tough, but it is important to remember that it is not a popularity contest. They may resent you now for things that they will later thank you for. So stay in touch and involved.

And remember, it's not pestering ... it's parenting!

Submitted by:

Wendy C. Morgan, Manager of Prevention Services

PEP Talk

Backpack Safety

Don't be a bully. Don't talk to strangers. Don't do drugs. As a parent, there are certain things you expect to warn your children about. But don't carry a backpack that's too heavy? Who would have thought that was a must-have conversation with the kids? But, according to the experts, making sure your child is using the right backpack, wearing it properly, and not overloading it is vital to his health.

Experts say that your child's backpack shouldn't weigh more than 10% to 15% of his body weight. Why is a heavy backpack such a no-no? More and more, experts are seeing younger and younger kids with serious injuries related to their packs. In fact, in addition to back pain, children are at risk of causing damage to their spines, necks, and shoulders.

To make sure your child isn't carrying more than 15% of his body weight, throw his backpack on the scale from time to time. If it's too heavy, go through it book by book to figure out what he can leave at school or if he may need two copies -- one for home, one for school.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends buying a pack with wide straps, since narrow straps can dig into a child's shoulders. They also recommend using the waist strap to help distribute the weight better.

Teach your child to load his backpack with the heaviest books closest to his body. This will make it easier to lift and help him maintain his balance better. Consider a rolling backpack. That way, if your child's load gets too heavy, he can just opt to roll it along behind him.

Adapted from:
www.family.go.com

Submitted by:
Wendy C. Morgan, Manager of Prevention Services



ask dr. mom...

Dear Dr. Mom-

My sixteen year old daughter got her driver's license last month. Now that she drives herself to and from school and most other activities, I don't have that extra time with her in the car to check in and chat. How can I still stay connected to her without intruding?

- No longer the Chauffeur

Dear No Longer the Chauffeur-

Driving teens to and from school and other activities is a great way to have a captive audience. So it can be a difficult adjustment when this phase ends and your daughter starts driving herself. While this is just one more step in the sometimes painful process of letting go, it is important to trust that you can transition into this new relationship and still maintain good communication. Make it a habit to have a set time to check in, such as right after school, mealtimes, etc. This isn't always easy, but cell phones and text messages make it easier to stay in touch. Or you could make plans to meet later on for an after school snack or dinner.

Try to establish new rules for checking in that

fit your teen's schedule while also letting her know where **you** will be and when **you** will be available. Remember that this is an age where one day you are not wanted and "need to get your own life", and the next day she will turn to you in tears, seeking your guidance with a problem. And remember that when she does reach out, don't feel as if you always need to have the perfect answer to her problems. Especially for older teens, parents are at their very best when they listen with an open mind and act as a sounding board. When you listen fully with love and support, while resisting the impulse to fix everything, you give her the gift of letting her figure things out on her own.

- Dr. Mom

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Did You Know...

April

...is Alcohol Abuse Awareness Month...Child Abuse Prevention Month...Garden Month...and Humor Month...the 4th week is Administrative Professionals' Week AND Volunteers' Week...the 1st is April Fool's Day...the 7th is World Health Day...the 15th is Income Tax Day...the 19th through 25th is TV Turn Off Week... and the 22nd is Earth Day.

