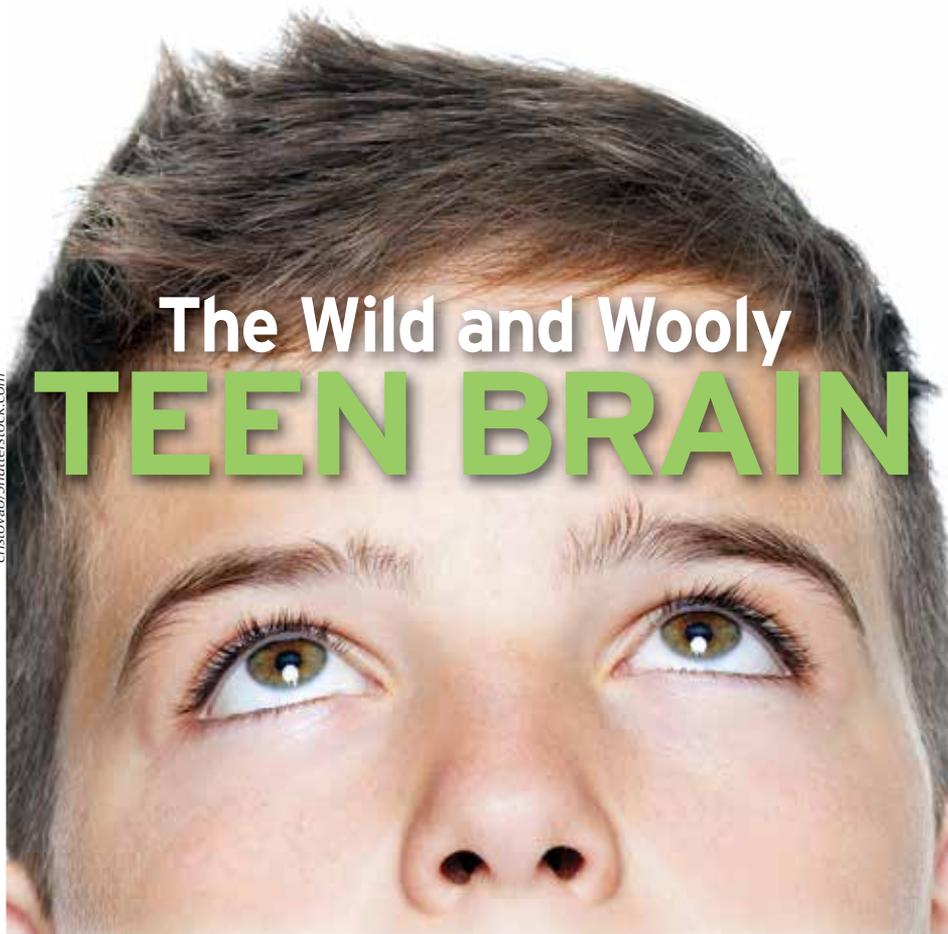


crisovao/Shutterstock.com



The Wild and Woolly TEEN BRAIN

What Kids Need from Us to Grow Wise

by April Thompson

Peer pressure and body consciousness are universal challenges facing teens and their parents. Experts find that by modeling healthy habits and maintaining open lines of communication, adults can help foster healthy independent thinking and responses to inevitable situations.

Respect Developing Capacities

Some teen struggles are literally all in their heads, according to Dr. Frances Jensen, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine, in Philadelphia. "The brain is the last organ to mature, and isn't fully complete until young people reach their late 20s. This allows the brain to adapt to its environment, which can be both good and bad," says Jensen, author of *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults*.

Compounding the challenge, the frontal lobes, responsible for higher functions like insight, judgment, impulse control and empathy, fully mature last; it's no coincidence that teens struggle in these areas, according to Jensen. The plasticity of the teenage brain is

optimal for learning and adaptation, but without the frontal lobe feedback, it's a challenge for them to moderate the heightened emotions, novelty seeking and sexual impulses adolescents are also experiencing.

"We expect teenagers to act rationally, but there are many reasons why their brains aren't taking them there," says Jensen. "Acknowledging this can lower frustration levels for everyone."

Create a Safe Haven

Teens learn more from experience than lectures, so parents should facilitate positive experiences and influences at home, advises Carla Atherton, director of The Healthy Family Formula, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, which fosters family well-being by holistically addressing root causes of poor health. Such activities can include regularly preparing meals together and going for family walks, rather than eating dinner in front of the TV.

"Doing everything you can to connect with kids while they are in an environment you can control gives them a good foundation they can take into the world," says Atherton, the mother of three teens.

Parents have to give trust to gain kids' trust stresses educator Naomi Katz, of Galilee, Israel, author of *Beautiful: Being an Empowered Young Woman*. "Create an environment where kids feel like they don't have to hide or lie about anything," Katz says. She also encourages parents to empower adolescents in decision making: Rather than telling them not to try drugs or alcohol "because I said so," provide them real facts to help them draw their own conclusions.

Support Quiet Respite

In today's hyper-connected world, Katz observes, "Social dynamics can get really confusing and painful and impact kids in far-reaching ways. We used to come home from school and be away from those issues until the next day; now that break doesn't come because of social media and smartphones."

Katz recommends encouraging journaling or other forms of self-expression to help teens unplug and reflect. Breathing exercises can help calm nerves and allow them to think more clearly in tough social situations before they react. Katz also suggests teens set aside time each week for a feel-good activity like playing sports or music, to give them a reliable source of pleasure and accomplishment, no matter what else is going on in their lives.

Stay Alert to Signs

Despite a parent's best efforts, kids can and will make unhealthy choices, and parents need to be prepared to manage the consequences. If a child is suspected or found to be engaging in dangerous or addictive behaviors like self-harming or an eating disorder, it's important to address these immediately, seeking professional help if needed, counsels Katz.

Jensen remarks that it's easier to learn unhealthy patterns

when the brain is malleable, and addictive behaviors are harder to eliminate than if they are acquired as an adult.

The signs of unhealthy behaviors can be subtle, so it's important to recognize cues without making flash judgments or placing blame, says Atherton. For example, a parent that notices her teen eating differently or obsessed with working out should consider initiating a conversation with him or her about body image.

Talking to teens about images in the media can help them gain a more balanced and positive self-perspective. "You can tell your kids, 'These advertising images are trying to sell you someone's idea of a perfect look, but it's not reality,'" says Atherton.

For whatever issues teens are trying to cope with, parents need to cultivate their own sense of inner calm; to be the rock that they can cling to. "Caring adults need to give teens a periodic frontal lobe assist," says Jensen. "It helps when we share more details and insights about how we organize our lives and make decisions. Modeling the rationality and empathy that teenagers may lack can be an effective counterbalance."

Connect with freelance writer April Thompson, of Washington, D.C., at AprilWrites.com.