

Understanding the Teen Brain and Building Strong Relationships: A Foundation for Supporting Healthy Decisions

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Key Takeaways

- Better understanding teen brain development and viewing the adolescent years in a positive light empowers caregivers and youth.
- Positive relationships are essential for healthy brain development and open conversations.
- Positive relationships are built on emotional safety, connection, and confidence.
- Risk-taking is developmentally normal for teens, and parents or guardians can help provide opportunities for safe risk.
- Caregivers need to have open conversations with youth about the dangers of substance use and set clear rules and boundaries.

Introduction: The Teen Brain

When you think about the teen years, what comes to mind first? Irresponsibility, rebellion, and confusion? Or perhaps creativity, excitement, and adventure? Many adults and teens tend to focus on the challenges of adolescence, often attributing undesirable behaviors to the underdeveloped teen brain (Silva et al., 2020). However, understanding the rapid development happening within your adolescent's brain and viewing these changes as positive and exciting can help parents feel more connected and compassionate. This shift in perspective can empower parents to build stronger relationships with their teens

during this remarkable phase of growth (Figure 1; Clark & Clark, 2016). Moreover, when teens adopt a positive outlook on their brain development and unique abilities, they are more likely to develop healthy coping strategies for setbacks, such as academic or social disappointments (Altikulaç et al., 2019).

Adolescent Brain Development and the Importance of Healthy Relationships

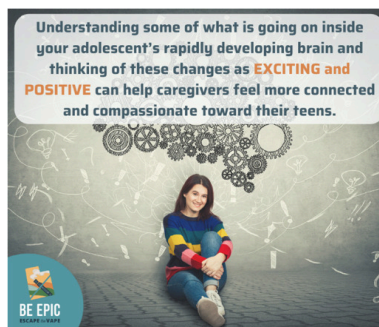


Figure 1. *Regarding Adolescents' Rapid Brain Development in a Positive Light Empowers Parents and Teens*

Data source: Clark & Clark, 2016

What amazing changes are happening in the brain during these critical adolescent years? You've likely heard that the human brain continues to develop well into the mid to late 20s, with the prefrontal cortex—the part responsible for impulse control and critical thinking—being one of the last areas to fully mature (Casey et al., 2008). This means teens often rely on the parts of their brain focused on pleasure and rewards rather than their still-developing prefrontal cortex to make decisions (Blakemore & Robbins, 2012). While this might seem concerning to adults, it's not necessarily bad! In fact, because of their unique stage of brain development, teens are exceptionally fast learners and tend to absorb information from their environment more efficiently than adults (Murdock, 2020). Just because teens make decisions using different parts of their brains doesn't mean they're incapable of making good choices.

One of the most effective ways caregivers can support adolescents in making sound decisions is by building strong relationships with them. Research shows that an "environment of relationships" is crucial for the development of a child's brain architecture, and the impact of these relationships continues throughout life (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Not only do positive relationships foster healthy brain development, but caregivers who have strong bonds with their teens are better equipped to discuss challenging topics—whether it's

navigating friendships, challenges related to growing up, or substance use (Center on Addiction, 2019).

Adolescents and the Importance of Healthy Risk-Taking

Due to their unique stage of brain development, characterized by heightened reward-seeking and a strong desire for peer approval, teens are more likely to engage in risky behaviors and activities that trigger powerful dopamine responses (University of California, Los Angeles [UCLA], 2017). However, risk-taking doesn't always mean negative behaviors. In fact, some risks are healthy for teens and can be highly rewarding while promoting positive growth. Of course, not all risks are beneficial, and teens often need guidance to navigate these situations. Figure 2 shows examples of healthy vs. unhealthy risks.



Figure 2. Caregivers

Can Encourage “Healthy Risks” vs. “Unhealthy Risks” for Teens

Data source: UCLA, 2017

Build Relationships, Stay Informed, and Set Clear Rules

As a caregiver, you play an invaluable role in guiding your youth toward healthy choices (see Figure 3). Below are three strategies for strengthening relationships and helping youth navigate pressure to participate in negative risks, such as substance use.

3 KEYS FOR KEEPING ADOLESCENTS SAFE




-  Build a strong relationship with the youth in your life.
-  Stay informed on risks youth face.
-  Set clear expectations and rules.

Figure 3. Three Keys for Keeping Teens Safe

Data source: Centers on Addiction, 2019

1. Build strong relationships.

It's important to remember that parents continue to play a critical role in the lives and development of their tweens and teens. While it may appear that your kids prefer spending time with their friends, they still care about your opinions and are influenced by your values (UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent, n.d.). One of the most impactful things parents can do is foster a strong relationship with their child or teen. Dr. Matt Swenson (United Way UC, 2020), creator of the [EveryDay Strong](#) program, recommends using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1948) as a framework to strengthen relationships by addressing a youth's needs for safety, connection, and confidence (see Figure 4).

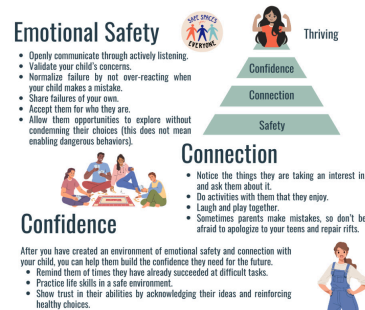


Figure 4. Tips for Building

Emotional Safety, Connection, and Confidence in Your Teen

Data sources: Maslow, 1948; United Way UC, 2020

2. Stay informed on the risks youth face and openly communicate with them.

It is essential for caregivers to stay informed about the various risks and challenges that today's youth encounter and to have open conversations with them about these issues. The goal isn't to lecture, shame, or scare them but rather to build connections with them while learning about their thoughts and feelings as well as sharing your own values, and setting clear expectations (Parents

Empowered, 2024). Open communication fosters trust and understanding, making it easier to guide them through difficult situations.

- **Not sure how to start conversations about difficult topics?** See Figure 5 for some scripted suggestions you can use with your tweens and teens about vaping. Remember, when you have built emotional safety and connection with your teens, these conversations flow more naturally.



Figure 5. Tips for Starting

Conversations with Youth

Data sources: Concepts from Coordinated Approach to Child Health [CATCH], 2021; Parents Empowered, 2024



- **After starting the conversation it's important to be clear about expectations, addressing the what, why, and how.** As illustrated in Figure 6, by having clear conversations with youth, caregivers can discuss what their expectations are, why the topic is important (e.g., preventing youth vaping), and how youth can respond in the real world (e.g., to peer pressure to vape)



Figure 6. Tips for Starting
Conversations with Teens Using the What, Why, and How
Conversation Framework

Data source: CATCH, 2021

3. Set boundaries and consequences.

When parents set clear boundaries and expectations, teens feel more secure.

While teens are developing a sense of autonomy and naturally seeking more independence, it's still important for parents to establish clear rules and boundaries. In fact, teens feel more secure when they know there are high expectations and limits in place (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). You can respect their growing need for independence by involving them in decision-making for things like curfew, clothing choices, and extracurricular activities. However, when it comes to matters of health and safety, caregivers must set firm rules and be explicit about their expectations.

When the rules are clear, coming up with consequences is often easier. You can sit down with your teen and brainstorm the consequences for breaking specific rules together. Consequences should (1) encourage behavior change, (2) be time-specific, and (3) be connected to the original issue. **Note:** You should personalize your conversations to fit the needs of your family and teen.



Figure 7. Teens and
Caregivers Can Learn Together, Celebrate Successes,
and Create Memories

Learn Together, Celebrate Successes, and Create Memories

Remember that raising a teen—and being a teen—is a learning process for both you and your child. Even if you've parented teens before, each child is unique and brings their own strengths and challenges. Take time to notice and celebrate your adolescent's successes, rewarding them with your love and approval. Create lasting memories by spending quality time together and connecting whenever possible (Figure 7). Embrace this journey as an opportunity for mutual growth, and remember that mistakes will happen—and that's okay! Keep the lines of communication open, ensuring your teen knows they are loved and appreciated. Above all, keep trying.

Additional Resources for Caregivers

Websites

- [Healthy Relationships Utah](#) (Utah State University [USU] Extension, free research-based workshops)
- [Relationships](#) (USU Extension, more research-backed resources for parents/guardians and other relationships)
- [EveryDay Strong](#) (United Way of Utah County)

Articles and Publications

- "How to Parent a Teenager With Patience and Love" (Hatch & Yaughner, n.d.-a)
- "Strengthening Attachment to Allow Teens Choice and Responsibility Without Dangerous Behavior" (Hatch & Yaughner, n.d.-b)
- [EveryDay Strong Resilience Handbook](#) (United Way of Utah County, 2022)

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