

Decision-Making in Teenagers

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Neuroscientists are leading the way to help parents understand that even though teens may look and sound like adults, the reality is that their ability to reason, control impulses and understand consequences are still developing, possibly until the mid 20's. Most adolescents come through this stage normally, however, multiple factors including genes, experience, home environment, hormones, and brain development all play an important role in the development of reasoning skills.

Brain scans of developing children reveal that volume peaks in early adolescence and pruning (maturation) continues for years. The first area to mature manages movement and sensory systems and the last to mature governs the following:

- Self Regulation
- Higher Reasoning
- Controlling Impulses
- Emotional Reactivity
- Multi-Tasking
- Comparing Risk and Rewards in Decision Making

The capacity to learn is greatest in adolescence. Although perplexing to parents, this helps explain why teens often assume they are capable of making most decisions without parental guidance, and why they make poor decisions unexpectedly.

Witnessing poor decision-making is highly uncomfortable for most parents and can lead to feeling guilty, helplessness, and confusion. Here are a few tips to consider when your teenager is repeatedly making poor choices:

Blaming yourself is dangerous for you and them. Instead, take an honest personal inventory:

- Have you provided appropriate parental support: too much, too little?
- Are you giving positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior, or just giving a lot of attention to the negative?
- Are your rules clear: too rigid, too soft?
- Is your marriage or significant relationship contributing to this?
- Are you consistent as a parent?
- Do you lead by example?
- Try not to enable your teen.

- Do you continue to allow them the ability to make poor decisions? (Ex. Let them take the car despite a speeding ticket because you can't get them to practice instead of letting them take the natural consequence of their decision and miss practice.)
- Does your teen understand the consequences before the behavior happens again?
- Are you ready to act on your teen's behavior if danger exists, even if you feel it will 'harm' your relationship?
- Seek out advice. This can come from your own parents, a trusted friend, a fellow parent who you admire, clergy, or professional help.

In closing, keep in mind that most teenagers will become fully functioning and independent adults. Certainly as our reasoning and decision-making skills have evolved, we have learned how important the 'gift of failure' is. Keep in mind: some of the most interesting, productive, and successful adults were once teens who made more than a few poor decisions.

Let go of control and embrace your teen.

- Most often teens do not grow up to be what their parents want them to be.
- Teens will make many mistakes and parents can do little about it. They are supposed to make mistakes and learn from them, just as parents have and continue to make.
- Mistakes lead to maturation.
- Accept and embrace differing opinions of life, religion, politics, and philosophy – if a teen's view point is not accepted, they feel further misunderstood and distant, leading to alienation and ultimately increased poor decision making