



# LIFEGUARD YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®



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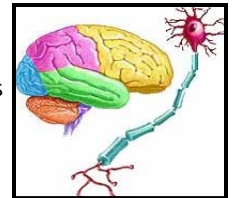
## Understanding the Teen Brain

### *The Prefrontal Cortex & Brain Molding*

As parents, educators, and role models, trying to get through to teens and make sense of their actions might sometimes seem like an impossible task. Teens can do some crazy things, things that can leave you scratching your head saying, "what were you thinking?!" Well, that might just be it—they weren't fully thinking. According to recent research on the teen brain, **the brain is not fully developed until around age 25**. Understanding the changes that the human brain goes through (especially during the adolescent and teen years) is vital in helping teens make wise decisions. In the next couple newsletters, we will look at some of the most important areas of the brain and the hormones involved in decision making. Hopefully, this information will help you understand that teens need continued adult guidance, possibly into their early to mid 20s.

#### **The Prefrontal Cortex: The "CEO" of the Brain**

One of the last parts of the brain to develop is the prefrontal cortex, which is located in the frontal lobe (or towards the front of the yellow part in the picture of the brain to the right). This area of the brain is responsible for more complex processes such as judgment, impulse control, foresight, and setting goals. In other words, since this part of the brain is underdeveloped in teens, they are more likely to make impulse decisions without regard to the effect it could have on their future well-being. Adults need to help teens realize that this part of their brain is "under construction", which *might* make them trust your advice a little more and to learn to think about the consequences of their actions. In a sense, adults need to "be" a part of their teen's prefrontal cortex—to take authority as a parent to make certain decisions for them and enforce rules and boundaries for their children (maybe longer than you might think you should). As the teen matures, adults should make less and less decisions for them to help them become independent and learn from their mistakes. However, thinking that a 16-year-old is mature enough to make all their own decisions might not be the best idea; **teens need your continued support and guidance as their brain develops until they can better exhibit maturity in self-control, foresight, and the like.**



#### **The Importance of Brain Molding**

The brain in all its complexities actually forms in two simple but powerful processes. First, the brain produces way more cells and connections than it will use. Then, the connections and cells that are used will survive and the rest will be cut off. This "use it or lose it" principle is very important in helping teens thrive. The connections they use often, good or bad, will survive and become stronger. Therefore, **how they use their time and what they put their energy into learning provides huge opportunities and risks**. You can help teens by encouraging them to get involved in healthy activities that they enjoy—such as a sport, a club, or learning to play a musical instrument. Parents can play a part in their teens positive brain molding by not letting them spend hours watching TV or playing video games. Instead, set time limits on activities that aren't very productive to provide more time for them to do something fun but productive. In a sense, **by the brain's standards, you are what you do—so make sure that's a good thing!**

## Parenting Strategies

*Now that you better understand the types of development a teen goes through, it can be difficult to know how to alter your parenting style from year to year. The following will provide you a general outline of how much guidance parents and adults should provide during different age groups.*

**The Pre-Teen Years:** During this time, they still need a lot of guidance and they learn best by example. This is when it is most important for adults to **model the type of behavior you expect from them as they get older**. You can start talking to them about risky behaviors such as pre-marital sex, drugs, and alcohol. Lay the foundation for having open conversations by being approachable and taking the time to listen.

**Teenagers (up to 18):** At this age, they need to be allowed to make a lot of their own decisions based on what they have learned and on their limited experience. **Parents should still play a role in bigger decision making, but to also try to let the teens gain independence**. Start helping them apply their knowledge to the choices they make and the possible outcomes of those choices.

**18 and older:** At this time help them learn to understand long-term consequences associated with their decisions (good and bad). Avoid being overly critical when your teen makes a mistake, but rather **help them to reflect on their experience to learn how to make better decisions next time**. At this point, your input should still be important and valued by them, but the teen should ultimately be responsible for their decisions.

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