

# The Teenage Brain



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## The Myths

We used to think that the teenage brain is just a younger version of an adult brain. In fact, we thought that it was better than an adult brain because it hasn't aged or been abused. New findings show that the greatest changes to the parts of the brain that are responsible for functions such as self-control, judgment, emotions, and organization occur between puberty and adulthood. This may help to explain certain teenage behavior that adults can find mystifying, such as poor decision-making, recklessness, and emotional outbursts. We now know that, although the size of the brain won't change much as teens grow, there is a lot of changes going on inside the brain.

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### **Recommended Reading**

**Getting To Calm**  
- Laura Kastner

**Screamfree Parenting**  
-Hal Runkel

**Homework:  
A Parent's Guide To  
Helping Out  
Without  
Freaking Out!**  
-Neil McNerney

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## The Brain Cells: Cutting & Pruning

The first biggest thing we have learned is that the teenage brain is doing something that is completely new in our understanding of brain function. At the beginning of adolescence, there is a major increase in gray matter production, mainly in the area of making new nerve connections between each brain cell. This is why so much learning can happen, since major cell growth is happening. Major increases in learning, music, art, and sports skills can happen during this time.

Also around this time, pruning happens. The new nerve connections that haven't been used frequently begin to get cut. This can sometimes look like loss of learning, moodiness, and difficulty making good decisions.

## Insulation Is Not Just For Wires

The next difficulty a teenage brain has to deal with is that all of these new brain cells are not properly insulated.

Our nerves are a lot like the wires in our house. The electric wires have a plastic coating which insulates it from losing power and shorting out on other wires. The new brain 'wires' do not have good insulation, which means that thoughts will often short out much quicker. Therefore, the ability to make good decisions is sometimes much harder for the teenage brain.

## How Does This Affect My Teen?

Generally, it affects them in ways that you see every day:

Moodiness, temper, difficulty paying attention, risk taking, fluctuation in grades, difficulty assessing others' moods, etc.

This is very important to understand. If we can understand why our teen is doing things, there is a greater likelihood that we can stay calm during the tough times. When we are calm, we can then be the leader our teen requires. When we lose our temper or take things personally, we give our teens an instant excuse for not learning from their mistakes. Instead of focusing on their mistake, they will now focus on our temper.

## What Can I Do?

1. Learn the difference between expecting behavior and tolerating behavior. Just because we should expect risky behavior doesn't mean that we should tolerate it.
2. Stay Calm. This is the most crucial time when your teen needs to know that you can handle it.
3. Keep in mind the "Willpower Fuel Tank" and how it affects both you and your teen.
4. Stay Calm. When we lose our temper we give our teens an instant face-saving opportunity.
5. Did I mention to stay calm?

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