

# “Teenagers Scare the Living Sh\*\* Out of Me”

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The title of this session comes from the song “Teenagers.” It was released by the band My Chemical Romance in 2007. The lead singer, Gerard Way, wrote the song after finding himself in a subway car with a bunch of high schoolers. “That was the first time I felt old,” he said. “I was nervous and I was a target. I felt like I had become a parent figure or part of the problem.”

I found this interesting, because even looking at Way in 2017 I thought he was barely out of his teens. I did the math, and he wasn’t quite 30 years old at the time he had that experience and wrote this song. If you look at this very Emo guy, you can’t help but think, “If **this** guy, whose main audience and fan base are teenagers, if **he** can get overwhelmed by a pack of teens on the subway, of course the rest of us have a hard time!”

## Understanding Your Teen

### Remodeling of the Brain

The brain is going through a remodeling process during the second dozen years, or so. The basic foundation was created in the first dozen years. But it is still unbalanced and uncoordinated in how it functions and how efficient it can be. The remodeling happens from back to front (older to newer).

“Adolescence is all about integrating the brain, and to do that, you’ve got to remodel the brain.” - Daniel J. Siegel

### Pruning

Pruning: the brain is actually destroying itself on purpose. It is choosing connections that it doesn’t need anymore. Pruning them away.

The pruning process allows the adolescent brain to function more rapidly for tasks that are already known, but decreases the brain’s capacity to learn new tasks or acquire new skills. So, when our kids hit adolescents, there is a loss of neurons. The research that is being done believes there may be some factors that determine what gets pruned from each teen’s brain:

1. Genetics
2. If you are activating certain connections, those will be the ones to remain. Ever heard “Use it or Lose it?”

## **Myelination**

Myelination - a super insulator for our neural circuits. A healthy sheath that grows around these connections. Once a nerve is myelinated, it can fire 3,000 times faster! It is important to remember this is something that is happening during this time - it is not yet complete!

The pruning and myelination starts at the back part of the brain, the older area, and very slowly works its way forward. The prefrontal cortex is the last to be completed in this process.

The frontal lobe, the judgment center or CEO of the brain, allows the individual to contemplate and plan actions, to evaluate consequences of behaviors, to assess risk, and to think strategically. It is also the “inhibition center” of the brain, discouraging the individual from acting impulsively. The frontal lobe ultimately develops connections to many other areas of the brain, so that experiences and emotions are processed through the judgment center. The frontal lobe does not fully mature until approximately 23 – 25 years of age.

## **The Amygdala**

The amygdala is the emotion center of the brain. Because it is affected later during the pruning and myelination process, teens have a more difficult time interpreting their emotions and the emotions of others. They are more likely to make emotional decisions instead of logical decisions.

“Executive function and emotional responses are not just less developed or different in teens: These two capacities are also less closely linked than in the typical adult brain. As a result, a teen may intellectually understand an issue and emotionally have a response to that issue, but those two processes may occur nearly in parallel rather than in dialogue. Emotional and executive functions must work together to bring about almost any kind of decision.” from Adolescent Medical Decision Making and the Law of the Horse

## **Down with Dopamine**

The early adolescent brain, with its increased number of nerve cells, has higher levels of dopamine circulating in the prefrontal cortex, but dopamine levels in the reward center of the brain (nucleus accumbens) are changing throughout adolescence. These changes in the dopamine levels in the reward center suggest that the adolescent requires more excitement and stimulation to achieve the same level of pleasure as an adult. So the teenager will attempt riskier behaviors to achieve elation. Dopamine is also the neurotransmitter secreted when individuals participate in various addictive behaviors.

In the teen brain, dopamine rushes happen when curiosity is explored and risks are taken. This is there for a reason. Teens need to start to go out into the world on their own. They need to take risks and try new things. They also need us to help them balance this natural development with very real consequences of risk taking behaviors.

“Knowing that their brains are wired for taking risks and not yet wired for making informed decisions, as parents we need to realize that they are not intentionally trying to do things against us, and be their allies.” - Judy Willis, MD, MEd

Josh Shipp - example of getting on a roller coaster and pulling and tugging on the safety bar. Our kids don't pull and tug against our boundaries hoping we'll cave. They are doing it to prove we are going to be there, to keep them safe, to show up.

“They are not giving you a hard time. They *are having* a hard time.” - M.J. Silva

## **Helping Your Teen**

### **Sleep**

Teens need 9.25 hours of sleep every night.

They can't naturally fall into that “good sleep” until about 11 pm. During adolescence their circadian system actually shifts so that they start producing melatonin later in the evening.

Talk with their doctor about melatonin supplements.

Offer to pay them minimum wage to work on a sleep program for a month (one hour a day), pay half of that for following through the next month, and then it becomes new guidelines for your home. But you are paying them to make these big changes to how things have already been. It is a great way to encourage them to do it.

The Sleep Program will look like this:

- No screens one hour before bed. No phones or computers in bedrooms.
- Sleep wins over homework. They can make up homework before or after school or ask for extra tutorial help.
- At bedtime, have only one low light and read books, listen to audio books or calm music.
- Fans or ambient noise.
- Sit in the floor reading until eyelids are heavy. Then crawl into bed. If they can't fall asleep, get back out of bed to turn on the light and read some more.
- Turn the clock around so they don't see it during the night.
- It can take a full week to get their "sleep clock" to kick in.

## **Sex**

From ages 8-15, there is a 30-fold increase in testosterone in boys. Adolescent boys have sexual thoughts an average of every six seconds. Boys aren't able to shut this off. It peaks in mid-adolescence.

Oxytocin is extremely active in the teen female brain during physical touch or even intense gazing. When it is released, it increases the chances that they will trust their sexual partner. However, it also simultaneously decreases the functioning of the frontal cortex.

About 80% of all human beings have sex for the first time before their 19th birthday.

Research suggests that when sexual interaction is approached as a "normal anticipated and potentially healthy part of adolescent development" the rates of teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections are lower. Taking this approach also, on average, delays the age at when teens become sexually active.

Work through resources together with your teen, talk candidly and openly about birth control, sexually transmitted infections and the emotional piece of relationships.

## **Being a Consultant**

In the early years of childhood, you are the manager of your child's life. Somewhere around middle school, our kids fire us as their managers.

Unfortunately some parents tend to react by either pulling away too much or fighting for control.

Our kids are supposed to fire us from this role, and we are supposed to naturally grieve this shift. However, our next goal should be to get hired back on as a consultant.

*Influence instead of control.* We have to actively resist the desire to create control in our interactions with our teens.

Collaborate: take time to think about guidelines and consequences and ask your teen to do the same. Come together and collaborate on these things.

Consequences are best when they fit what happened. They are also more effective and have more positive learning effects when they involve doing something (making a repair) instead of having something taken away from them.

After a repair is made, have a conversation with your child. Ask, "When you were about to do x-y-z, was there ever a part of you that thought about making a better choice? What got in the way of listening to yourself?" After they respond, finish up with, "So, there is a part of you in there you can listen to, and it will help you." Then - stop talking. Just let that information be there. No need to lecture or say anything more. You've used questions to have them process through it themselves.

## **Social Media**

Start with tight boundaries and expand them as they grow. When they blow it and mess up, focus on backing up slightly - not rewinding back to ground zero. Only keep boundaries beyond an age appropriate time if it is decided with their therapist. Even then focus on how you can give them privacy and encourage it. Go out of your way to support what they CAN have.

Understand that while you may monitor some texts or messages, you also have to allow your kids to be teenagers! Only step in if safety lines are crossed, if they or a friend is a danger to themselves or someone else or if they have broken a boundary like sexting or sending nude photos.

## **Connecting**

Vulnerability leads to vulnerability - you go first!

Find out what their favorite movie is and watch it with zero judgment. What can you learn about them through that? (same with music)

Do. not. lecture. (says the woman who gets caught up in lecturing her teens a LOT!) When you feel like lecturing, restate your lecture as a question!

Text with them if they will not talk to you. Set a reminder on your phone for once a week to just start a random conversation.

Practice empathy. Empathy is not asking “if” what your teen is saying makes sense, but “how” it makes sense to them.

If they ask to do something that is an easy “no” for you, instead of cutting them off and correcting, ask your child **why** they want to do something and **affirm** what they tell you first.

Chat with your kid regularly in a nonjudgmental, non-business way.

If we only talk to our kids when there’s a problem, we start to sound like a smoke detector in their ears.

When presented with a potential huge reward, the teen brain will light up much more than a child or adult brain. However, if the reward is small, the teen brain hardly fires at all. So, while it is important to say, “Good job!” to your teen, they are much more likely to respond to something bigger ... or seek out something bigger. Which leads to some poor choices, sometimes. We need to be in “Project Graduation” mode and help create opportunities for them that fires up their brain - in the way we talk to them and in the activities and experiences they have.

## **Scripts**

Instead of “How Was Your Day?” try these:

What five kids do you hang out with the most? Okay, now pretend you get to give them each an award like “Most Likely to Succeed,” “Most Likely to Be Famous,” etc.

What do you think your teachers talked about in the faculty room at school this week?

What do you think your principal could do better.

If you had \$1 million, what would you change about your school?

Which one of your teachers would survive a zombie apocalypse? Why?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate today? What would have to change to bump it up a few points?

Who was a jerk today?

What would make your school better?

Tell me one thing you learned today.

If your day today was a movie, what movie would it be?

If you could read minds at school, what teacher's mind would you read? Why?

What friend's mind would you read? Why?

What are the top three things you hear people say in the halls?

Who have you helped lately?

Who has helped you lately?

What part of the day do you look forward to? What part do you dread?

## Resources:

<http://www.drdansiegel.com>

[kidsinthehouse.com](http://kidsinthehouse.com)

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/print/2011/10/teenage-brains/dobbs-text>

[http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/new\\_scientist/2013/04/teenage\\_sleep\\_patterns\\_why\\_school\\_should\\_start\\_later.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/new_scientist/2013/04/teenage_sleep_patterns_why_school_should_start_later.html)

<http://www.livescience.com/12896-7-mind-body-aging.html>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/body/articles/lifecycle/teenagers/sleep.shtml>

<https://www.wsj.com/news/articles/>

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<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/inside-the-teenage-brain/>

<http://www.livescience.com/21461-teen-brain-adolescence-facts.html>

<https://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/15/science-tackles-mystery-of-the-teenage-brain/>

<http://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/human-brain/teenage-brain.htm>

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2005/mar/03/1>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/work/>

<https://youtu.be/hiduiTq1ei8>

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/12/061211124302.htm>

<https://youtu.be/LWUkW4s3XxY>

<https://www.acpeds.org/the-college-speaks/position-statements/parenting-issues/the-teenage-brain-under-construction>

<https://www.andrologyaustralia.org/journal-articles/testosterone-and-adolescent-mood-behavior>

[https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/The-Teen-Brain-Behavior-Problem-Solving-and-Decision-Making-095.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/The-Teen-Brain-Behavior-Problem-Solving-and-Decision-Making-095.aspx)

<http://www.acpeds.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/4.25.16-clean-copy-The-Teenage-Brain.pdf>

<https://youtu.be/2U8KV34NMlg>

S.E.X., second edition: The All-You-Need-To-Know Sexuality Guide to Get You Through Your Teens and Twenties

[www.scarleteen.com](http://www.scarleteen.com)

[www.teensafe.com](http://www.teensafe.com)