



Parent Worksheet 1

Youth Development

This worksheet is one of a series aimed at supporting caregivers to parent their teenagers. The 4 worksheets include: 1) Youth Development, 2) Boundaries, 3) Positive Family Relationships and; 4) Communication.

Adolescence is a time of great change and for families with teenagers, it comes with challenges and rewards. There are many factors that affect a teenager's emotional state and behaviour. These can include peer influences, family dynamics, community and national attitudes and government policies. One key factor that has an impact on how a young person behaves is the development of their brain.

Below are some things worth thinking about when dealing with your own son or daughter's behaviour during their teenage years.

Brain growth and development in adolescence

Throughout adolescence the physiological structure of the teenage brain goes through significant change and growth. Parents have long suspected what research now supports, that a teenager's brain is quite different to an adult's.

Brain imaging scans (such as MRI) have shown that the teenage brain is not a finished product but is a work in progress. Between puberty and adulthood, the greatest change occurs in parts of the brain that are responsible for self-control, judgment, emotions and problem solving. The changes in these specific parts of the brain (particularly the pre-frontal cortex) may help to explain certain teenage behaviour which adults may find mystifying; things like recklessness, impulsivity, emotional outbursts, lack of consequential thinking and moodiness.

Successfully developing these areas of the brain requires learning by experience (including making mistakes) within a safe, consistent and nurturing environment, one that features age appropriate rules and boundaries.

The development of a teenager

Erik Erikson, a respected developmental psychologist, described teenage hood as a transitional period where the main task involves moving from being dependent on parents (childhood) to being independent and having a sense of identity and uniqueness (adulthood). Erikson thought that developing this sense of identity was a key psychological step for all teenagers to negotiate in their journey to become a happy, productive adult within society.

Youth 2012 Survey

The Auckland University released the following statistics regarding New Zealand young people and substance use:

- 1 in 4 secondary school students engaged in a binge drinking session within the last 4 weeks,
- 45% state they currently use alcohol,
- 23% say they have tried using cannabis,
- 16% of female students (9% of males) reported symptoms of depression which are likely to be clinically significant.

Statistics for young people not engaged in education are likely to be worse.



Sometimes teenagers find this transition period difficult and can end up feeling confused or insecure about themselves and how they fit into the world. He suggested that teenagers need lots of encouragement and reinforcement if they are to emerge from teenage hood with a strong sense of self and a feeling of independence and control. He also talked about the tension of this period between freedom and responsibility. Part of the parent's challenge is balancing the increased freedom that is required for teenagers to grow, along with the added responsibility that comes with it.

Sociological factors

Environmental factors such as social institutions, social class, race and gender all play a role in influencing a teenager's values, beliefs, language and behaviour. Teenagers are currently bombarded with messages about how they should live their lives and this occurs during a period when teenagers are uncertain about their own identity. These societal values, both positive and negative, are pushed heavily upon teenagers via technology such as TV, internet and social media.

Specific examples of this include the influence of New Zealand's 'binge drinking culture', where people drink with the intention of getting very drunk as opposed for social reasons. Likewise New Zealand is one of the highest cannabis using nations in the world and in some communities the use of cannabis is pretty much normalised. These things can make it difficult for parents to provide a consistent and safe message about the place of substance use in teenage development.

Substance abuse

As a general rule, delaying and minimising a developing brain's exposure to alcohol and drugs allows it to develop normally. On the other hand, early and heavy exposure to drugs and alcohol increases the chance of problems occurring. This translates to an increased risk of mental health problems (such as depression) and increased risk of addiction problems later in life. Not using substances is a challenge for young people however, as being a teenager is about trying new things and pushing against social norms and expectations.

Cannabis is a common drug that exemplifies the long term effects substances can have on the body. It is fat soluble, which means it builds up in fatty tissue such as the brain. The psychoactive chemicals (tetrahydrocannabinol or THC) from one joint of cannabis can stay in the brain matter for up to 7 days. In heavy users cannabis can remain in the system for well over a month. This means that even after the initial buzz from cannabis has gone (getting stoned or high), a young person's brain may not return to normal functioning for some weeks.

Some of the effects from cannabis use in teenagers are decreased motivation and energy, poorer short-term memory, concentration difficulties, low mood and irritability.

If a young person with regular heavy cannabis use, suddenly reduces or stops using they may experience withdrawal symptoms. Their brain, which is used to functioning in the presence of cannabis, can struggle to readjust to a new lower levels of cannabis in the system. This can cause effects such as irritability, cravings, mood swings and headaches. These symptoms decrease with time (a week or so) as normal brain chemistry is restored.



Reflective Questions

Think about the communication you have with your teenager:

1. Could any of the factors discussed above explain some of your young person's behaviour?
2. Have you noticed any changes in your young person's mood/behaviour that could be explained by substance use?
3. Could there be other reasons to explain this behaviour?
4. In what ways does your young person demonstrate their independence?
5. Has your teenager displayed signs of successfully moving towards independence or added responsibility? How?
6. How might the culture your son/daughter is living with affect the way they see the world or behave?

