



### **Help Your Teen's Glitter Settle: A Metaphor for Parents**

As an individual enters adolescence, his/her brain undergoes rapid developmental changes in order to become more powerful and efficient. Although this end goal will occur in time, the journey there is relatively messy. The more primitive areas of the teen's brain (which contain the emotion centers) are upgraded first, as early as age 10. However, the reasoning areas of the brain which help the teen use logic and maintain perspective are upgraded last and may not reach full maturity until age 25! The result of this difference in development looks like a rational teen when calm, but a highly emotional and irrational teen when upset.

So, as adults, what do we do when teens' "yet to be upgraded" reasoning/logic abilities are being fully overpowered by their emotional centers? Well, you are not alone if you generally begin by asking questions to figure out what's going on and try to help by jumping into full problem-solving mode. Regardless of our good intentions, it is not uncommon for teens to then continue melting down (in some cases, they can become even more emotionally aroused). Some psychologists like to explain this phenomenon and how to approach it using a glitter jar metaphor. It goes a little something like this:

If you take a jar of water filled with glitter and shake it up, the glitter represents the teen's thoughts and emotions when upset. They are rapidly swirling around, seemingly out of control. Imagine yourself as an adult holding this jar and trying to get the glitter to stop moving. You'll soon realize, you can't! There is absolutely nothing you can do to stop that glitter from swirling. Your only real option is to hold the jar still or set it down and patiently wait for the glitter to slow down and fall to the bottom of the jar on its own.

**When teens are upset, asking them questions and/or immediately offering suggestions or solutions can be the equivalent to further shaking up the glitter jar.** Instead, we've found it most helpful to pause and comfort teens by sitting with them quietly or allowing them to have some time alone, as well as offering them some water. This is what it looks like to let the teen's "glitter settle." **Once your teen has this time to settle their emotions, you can ask them if they would like for you to continue to listen or offer advice.** They often will begin explaining what is going on in their world and will be better able to access the reasoning centers of their brain.

As adults, we must remember that emotions come like glitter in a glitter jar; they rise, swirl around, and then fall. If we react as if teens' distressing emotions must be eliminated as quickly as possible, it often will cause them to feel overwhelmed and scared. Instead, we can sit with them and make them as comfortable as possible while their glitter settles.

#### References

Damour, L. (2019, February 12). *How to help teens weather their emotional storms*. The New York Times.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/12/well/family/how-to-help-teens-weather-their-emotional-storms.html>