



In the Matter of the Teenage Brain

Have you ever wondered what's behind your teenage mentee's occasionally confusing or risky behavior? Moments of insensitivity, or apathy, distracted attitude or perhaps impassioned emotions? When these moments occur, trying to understand and then effectively communicate support can be a challenge at the very least. However, take heart, mentors! Brain research assures us that while your teen mentee's behavior may be puzzling or unexplainable, it makes sense when we consider what is happening with their brain.

The human brain is made up of white and grey matter. Grey matter stores information and begins to mature when a person is between 11 and 12 years old. The white matter forms connections between the different parts of the brain and doesn't completely develop until a person has reached their early twenties. In other words, the brains of teenagers are not physically fully connected, which is why the teenage brain is often referred to as "under construction."

Teenage behavior is often explained away as "hormones" and generally, that term brings to mind sex hormones. Teenage behavior is actually related to changes in the brain coming from all kinds of hormones. For a rollicking, somewhat edgy explanation of all kinds of teenage hormones and resulting behaviors, see this 10-minute tutorial from SciSchow: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiduiTq1ei8>

For a calmer, more scholarly approach, try this 13-minute video from Dan Siegel, a nationally known figure. He particularly discusses the importance of empathy and compassion for the teenagers in our lives: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLULtUPyhog>

So, how does a mentor communicate their support for a teenager whose brain is under construction? Seedling mentors know that effective communication involves active and empathetic listening. To do this best, the 70/30 rule is recommended:

Listen at least 70% of the time and talk no more than 30%.

By following the 70/30 rule, conversations become a two-way process in which information is exchanged back and forth. Good communicators are able to concentrate, stay attentive, process information without judgment, and give feedback in a thoughtful way.

Are you interested in sharpening your communication skills and learning effective open ended questions? If so, please mark your calendar for the next Mentor Training, to be held October 28th. Watch your email for more information.

Information for this article was taken from:

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml>

<http://knowledgedenuts.com/2014/07/25/the-difference-between-teenage-brains-and-adult-brains/>

Jensen, Frances E., and Amy Ellis. Nutt. The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults