

# The Teenage Brain: Insights for Faith Communities

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*The church's relationship with the young is a delicate one: How do you stay connected while honoring the teenagers' need for freedom? How do you keep the young people safe without squelching the excitement of adventure?*

Parents remember teaching their toddlers how to walk and how to use a spoon to feed themselves. For the parents, the first four years of their children's lives are a mix of exciting firsts and anxious moments. Johnny and Janie fell down more than they walked. The spoonful of applesauce found its way into every orifice but the mouth. Clumsy at first, the toddlers' command of their motor skills developed and eventually they mastered walking and feeding themselves, barring disabling illness or injury.

Now, Johnnie and Janie are 12 years old. There's a new clumsiness; it's a clumsiness of thought and expression, of intention and follow-through. Gaffes abound; they run and yell when convention dictates walking and whispering. They fall down socially more often than they walk. They know that everyone else is looking at them, talking about them. They take risky, sometimes dangerous chances. What's worse, this awkward time seems to last a long time, well into young adulthood.

Parents and caregivers who love teenagers sometimes wonder if Johnny or Janie have a brain in their heads. Reasonable and cautious one day, teens can act in unreasonable, risky, and dangerous ways the next. Youth seemingly cannot wrap their brains around the consequences of driving 60 miles per hour through a school zone, having pre-marital sex, or ingesting drugs and alcohol.

Recent brain research helps us understand these tendencies in young people. Long believed to have completed its development in childhood, the human brain actually develops well into adulthood. Adolescence signals an extended period for the brain's re-wiring. We might even say that, based on research, it is normal for adolescents to act impulsively, misjudge cues and emotions, act in dangerous or risky ways, and ignore potential consequences.

The frontal cortices (behind the forehead) develop late, not achieving maturity until the third decade of life. This part of the brain controls reasoning, consequential thinking, and decision-making. In the adult brain, the frontal lobes help us think before we act. If it seems like our teenagers aren't thinking about consequences, they aren't.

Additionally, the brain's sensitivity to dopamine, a neural hormone, spikes during adolescence. Dopamine stimulates the brain's reward center. That's why teens can often seem to be on the lookout for the next exciting and stimulating experience. Driving fast can be exhilarating, until it's not; so the teens look for the next experience to alleviate their boredom.

Oxytocin is another neural hormone that figures prominently in the adolescent brain's activity. Oxytocin stimulates the connection between social ties and reward. Peer relationships can be highly rewarding; peer pressure can up the ante on risky behavior, especially because of the connections between social acceptance and the potential payoff of doing something "stupid."

On the positive side, the impulsiveness of the teen brain is often expressed in creative and passionate ways. When teenagers' passion and creativity are honored, good things can happen. See the movie *Pay It Forward* for a cinematic exploration of the contributions of the teenage brain. A Presbyterian youth group initiated the passionate, creative "Souper Bowl of Caring" ministry to help those who are hungry.<sup>1</sup>

Researchers assert that in order for the brain to reach maturity, it must pass through the adolescent phase of development. Teenagers who take risks are more likely to risk leaving home for mission trips, joining the military, going to college, pursuing a life's goal, or even talking to strangers. All of these activities broaden the adolescents' world. They are essential tasks for the development of coordinated thought, action, and reflection.

## Implications for Parents and Caregivers

The implications of the research confirm developmental theories that describe adolescence as a liminal ("threshold") period. Erik Erickson and Margaret Mead proposed this liminal "time between the times" as a psychosocial moratorium. If parents and community have established a sense of belonging and trust in the child, adolescence can be a keen time for identity development. To begin to realize full potential, teenagers require greater freedom.

Building on the conformity to parental and caregiver expectations during childhood, adolescents require less conformity and more time and space for innovation. Freedom to practice different ways of living and believing help the teens establish their identities in adulthood, just as trying on different clothes and social groups aids them in "trying on" different identities. Putting off lifelong decisions until later in life makes sense according to the research. It also makes sense for the youth to practice making short-term commitments, like planning service projects or volunteering in the local homeless shelter. These kinds of experiences give the teenager practice making decisions and following through on commitments made. It also potentially activates the pleasure and reward centers in the brain and stimulates the teens' involvement.

However, practicing risky behavior and trying on different identities does not happen in a vacuum. Since adolescents do not have fully functioning frontal lobes, and therefore, do not always see the consequences of their risky behavior, parents and caregivers help them see the pitfalls and promise of their actions.

For parents, life with a teenager can sometimes seem like a balancing act between extremes. Sometimes, parental instincts tend toward restricting the teenager's behavior and reducing the risks. Other times, the parent is tempted to give in to the teen's impulses, granting the child more freedom than they can handle safely. Somewhere in the balance, parents best guide their teenage children with a gentle but firm hand. They negotiate a connection to their teenage children while allowing them independence within established boundaries.

1. [souperbowl.org/page\\_navs/57/History](http://souperbowl.org/page_navs/57/History)

Through this long awkward period, teenagers need someone to walk with them and guide them. Parents provide the boundaries within which the youth exercise their freedom. They provide a safe zone for their kids to take healthy risks. For example, parents approve their kids taking part-time jobs as long as they keep up their homework and grades. Parents agree with the teenagers' desire to travel during the summer following high school graduation and develop a plan to pay for the trip and to stay safe and connected to home while gone. Parents and caregivers offer critical guidance and oversight. Their primary task is to keep the kids alive, healthy, and safe while they spread their wings little by little.

Brain research does not give young people a pass on making good decisions. However, an awareness of the different way the teenage brain functions can help caregivers anticipate and respond appropriately to the behavior of adolescents.

## How do we interpret the research as Christians?

1. A chief tenet of the Christian faith is that the God of creation created humanity in the image of God and proclaimed us very good (Genesis 1:26, 27, 31a; Psalm 8; 139:1–18; Ephesians 2:10). This is a profound statement about who we are. If the research is correct, that the brain's adaptations during adolescence are normal and needful for maturation, then the Christian rightly responds with gratitude to God. Created in God's image, we are like God in our creative activities and in our capacity for relationship. Dopamine and oxytocin excite the teenage brain's reward and social connection receptors. And it is very good!
2. To belong to the church means to share in the values of the church. On the one hand, we have boundaries established by Scripture and the traditions of the church; on the other hand, we have freedom to make decisions for ourselves, to push against boundaries and to test the church's teachings whether they be God's will or not. Thus, within the community, there is room for us to move about. Within the boundaries of the church, there is freedom, but this freedom is bounded by love and responsibility. Freedom within bounds is a singular gift the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition has given to the broader church.

The presence of the teenage brain reminds us that Jesus calls us to freedom. Christ calls us to repent, to change our minds, to go another way. It is a call to claim a radical faith. To take the narrow road, the difficult path. To give up a secure job to join the mission field or teach in the inner city schools. To give up the possessions that possess us. The faith Christ calls us to is a risky, dangerous faith that many believe has been dulled, tamed, and institutionalized.

Christianity is a radical faith, in both senses of the word. It is "radical" as in "rooted," grounded in the traditions of past generations of the faithful. Paul uses "tradition" as a verb when he reminds the Corinthians that he handed over the tradition of the Lord's Supper. Christianity is radical when it calls us back to the basics, the essentials of the faith.

It is also “radical” as in “thorough-going or extreme.” Christianity embraces radical, risky change against the tide of “the way we’ve always done things around here.” The Christian church thrives in the tension between these definitions of radical, when both the generations of “what is” and “what if” are present.

Teenagers and young adults, who seek an adventurous faith, offer the church the impetus to live faith into the future. How does the congregation, the majority of which lives a safe faith, embrace the young and its daring ideas?

3. Through baptism, the church embraces a theology of care and nurture for the baptized. We care for the baptized as members of a covenant established by God; we guide our young into a relationship with God.

In establishing covenant, God has given caregivers responsibility for training “children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.” (Proverbs 22:6)

However, Proverbs 22:6 misleads us if we interpret it to mean there is one “right” way. Better stated, we raise a child in the right way for *him or her*. Brain research suggests that there are ways of teaching and guiding young people that are more fitting for some than others. It is vital that parents and teachers pay attention to individual teens and learn how to speak and listen to them. For some teens, for example, telling them that premarital sex can be detrimental to a person’s growth, development, and overall health is enough. For others, citing Bible verses proves the point. Yet still others respond better to an in-depth discussion; and for others no amount of talking will deter them, only fear works.

While we can agree that we do not want our teenagers to have sex, we had best be open to varying ways of talking about the subject with them. Programs such as “True Love Waits” respond to the teenagers’ need to fit in and the potential reward of waiting. Parents who recognize the value of positive peer pressure can help steer their kids in that direction without being heavy handed. An admired adult can share with the young people his or her own adolescent struggles in an approved context (with parental permission and without titillating details!).

While part of the care we extend is of necessity protective of the young, we miss the boat if our care fails to include activities that connect with the teenagers’ desire for novelty, excitement, passion, and an accepting community. The research suggests that the brain’s adaptations during adolescence are normal and necessary for the young person’s preparation to leave home. The church helps make that transition a healthy one by the ministries it offers for young people and their families.

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It is tempting to sequester the young people, provide separate programs, and separate staff persons who are charged with keeping the kids out of our hair and off the streets. However, given the research and the tenets of our faith, the church is at its best when it claims the giftedness of the young people and draws on those gifts for its shared ministry.

The teenage brain is particularly adaptive to its stimuli; teenagers remind us to embrace our traditions without holding on to them too tightly. When taken with all seriousness, adolescent questions that begin with “what if” and “why” can initiate significant discussions that will lead the church into God’s promised future. Teenagers also bring a fierce desire for community to the church. When we pay close attention to the ways teenagers live into community, we may learn how to be for each other in vital ways.