

## A Guide for Parents of Adolescents

First, a little background on **brain development**:

**The prefrontal cortex** - the part of our brain that plans, makes decisions, controls impulses, and tries to predict consequences for actions *is still under construction during adolescence*.

What does this mean for adolescents and parents?

- **When making decisions, adolescents tend to overemphasize what they see as the positive outcomes and underestimate the potential negative outcomes.** It's not that adolescents don't understand that there will be consequences to their choices--they do! It's just that they're greatly overestimating the reward, and so the consequence becomes trivial by comparison. For example, a teen will understand that sneaking out of the house has consequences, but the immediate reward of seeing friends is likely to be overestimated.
- **Teens have more dopamine in their brains.** Dopamine is one of the brain's "feel good" chemicals, and teens get a bigger dopamine release than adults in response to experience. For instance, an adolescent tasting sugar will experience a bigger dopamine release than an adult, and that sugar will taste sweeter. Why does this matter? Well, if teens overestimate the short term reward of a decision, and activities that "feel good" feel even better to teens, they're more susceptible to engaging in all activities that come with a short term reward, even when those activities might carry substantial risk (driving fast, experimenting with drugs and alcohol). This isn't because teens are stupid, or reckless--rather, it's a function of their cognitive developmental phase.

Next, let's discuss **Autonomy Threat**:

- Psychologist Diana Divecha coined the term *autonomy threat*, explaining "...when teens feel overcontrolled or coerced, or even when adults do too much for them, it can trigger 'autonomy threat,' which shuts down teens' willingness to collaborate or engage, (Divecha, 2017).
- Adolescence, in many ways, is about a young person's transition from childhood to adulthood. Many adolescents want to feel capable, trustworthy, autonomous, and self-reliant. Research shows that strategies that work in parenting children often stop working around 8th grade, when youth develop an increased need for autonomy.

- When teens feel overly controlled, or feel they're being "babied," it registers as an **autonomy threat**." Autonomy threats may be perceived from any behavior by a parent or authority figure that indicates to the adolescent, "you're not capable or trustworthy."
- According to Divecha (2017), "scientists are now starting to think that so-called 'teenage rebellion' is not an inevitable part of adolescence but rather a reaction to autonomy threat. For example, studies show that teens are willing to comply with parents when they think the rules are fair (like moral choices or decisions involving safety), but they resist when the rules seem personal (e.g., what clothes to wear) or unjust. In other words, they don't rebel across the board, just when they think something is out of bounds..."

Examples of topics that might trigger autonomy threat:

- Homework/Schoolwork
- Athletics
- Curfew
- Screen-time
- Driving
- Social time

And much, much more!

### **So what can parents do?**

Parents can reduce autonomy threats by:

- asking questions instead of lecturing
- showing respect
- demonstrating an interest in their young person's perspective
- taking a collaborative (not coercive) approach.

**Parenting teens is hard! Shifting your approach, from "manager," to "consultant," may be helpful.**

*Reframe [a] teen's desire for autonomy as a sign of their growing maturity rather than a threat to your authority (Divecha, 2017).*

- When parents struggle with adolescents, they often resort to one of two approaches: the "my way or the highway" approach, or the "do what you want, since you won't listen to me anyway" approach. An ideal approach lies somewhere in the middle: parents still have control, but respectfully work to gain their adolescent's perspective, and involve them in decision-making processes.

**For example:** A 16 year old teenager has his driver's license, and wants to start taking the car out on weekend nights. There's disagreement about how often he can go out, where he can go, and how late he can stay out. Parents have a few options. They could say "absolutely not, we're not comfortable with that," and shut down the conversation. They could give up in frustration, and say, "do whatever you want." Or, the parents could state their fears, and lay out conditions that if met, might allow them to grant their teen more privilege. In doing so, they might solicit their teen's ideas and input as to how those requirements could be met. This is not to say everyone will leave the discussion having gotten everything they want! Rather, the parents' act of asking for their teen's input, and involving them in the discussion, is likely to indicate, "my parents think my ideas are important, and that my opinion is valuable." These feelings are the antidote to autonomy threat.

- Find healthy ways to cope with your own grief related to your teen wanting to spend more time with peers and less time with you. Parents aren't being replaced—it's just that adolescents are developing new, important connections outside of the family. This is a hugely important part of growing up, as the adolescent brain is hungry for new connections and experiences!
- Adolescence gets a bad rap. The stereotype of the hormonal, moody, teen is pervasive. If you notice yourself falling into the trap of ragging on adolescence, consider how exciting this time can be. Adolescents', "creativity, their energy, and their idealism are what remake society and carry us forward into the future with new ideas and solutions. Validating, protecting, and guiding their growing autonomy is important to their wellbeing and to keeping those gifts intact," (Divecha, 2017).
- Parenting teenagers can be such hard work! Sometimes it might feel like you're doing everything right, and not getting any positive feedback for your efforts. Remember that parenting is a long-game, and many of your choices/actions as parents won't have immediate payoff. Keeping this perspective may help you move through the moments where it feels like nothing you're doing is working.

### **Some Perspective on Risk:**

- Teens are widely reputed to be "risk-takers," but sometimes, taking risks can be vitally important to our growth and maturation. We can help teens take measured risk, with the understanding that not all risk is bad. Yes, we don't want our teens binge drinking or taking risks that significantly endanger them, but measured risks can carry great value. Consider that a risk is just a decision where the outcome is unknown, and trying things with an unknown outcome is how teens learn about the world. Encourage and support your adolescent in exploring new things, new places, new activities, and new relationships. These kinds of risks promote growth and maturity.

**And finally, some wise words from Brene Brown on “Wholehearted Parenting”:**

“Who we are and how we engage with the world are much stronger predictors of how our children will do than what we know about parenting. In terms of teaching our children to dare greatly in the ‘never enough’ culture, the question isn’t so much: *Are you parenting the right way?* As it is: ***Are you the adult that you want your child to grow up to be?***”

### **Resources**

Portland Family Counseling: <http://portlandfamilycounseling.com/parenting-blog/>

Howard Hiton, LPC: <https://www.hitonassociates.net/>

Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. New York: Avery.

Divecha, D. (2017, December 1). Teenagers Might Have a Problem With Respect But It's Not the One You Think. Retrieved from <https://www.developmentalscience.com/blog/2017/11/29/teenagers-might-have-a-problem-with-respect-but-its-not-the-one-you-think>

UO research comes to life in a new YouTube video series. (2019, August 2). Retrieved from <https://around.uoregon.edu/content/uo-research-comes-life-new-youtube-video-series>

### **Book Recommendations:**

- Brainstorm, Dan Siegel
- The Teenage Brain, Francis E. Jensen and Amy Ellis Nutt
- Decoding Boys, Cara Natterson
- Boys & Sex, Peggy Orenstein
- Boys Adrift, Leonard Sax

### **Website Recommendations:**

- commonsensemedia.org (addresses all things media/screen-time)
- scarleteen.com (sex-ed resource for teens)
- boysalive.com (resource for parents of boys of all ages)
- ahaparenting.com (parenting resource)
- drdansiegel.com (great resource for info about brain-development and parenting)