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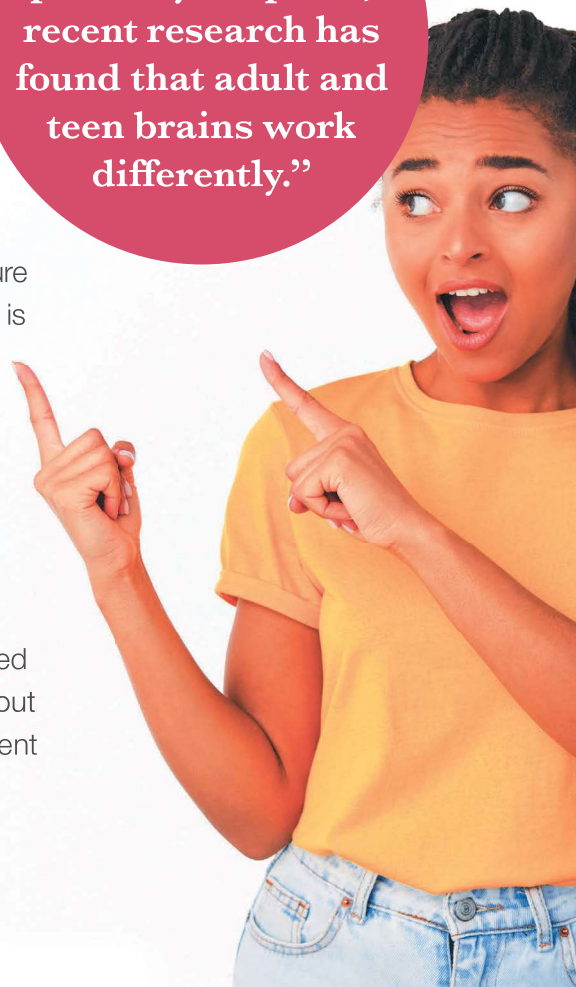
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Understanding the teenage brain

“As every parent of a teenager probably suspects, recent research has found that adult and teen brains work differently.”



Dealing with pressure and stress is no small challenge for a fully mature brain, much less one that’s in transition from childhood to adulthood. That’s why it’s important for parents to understand what their children’s brains are going through. Dalena van der Westhuizen, cognitive development specialist, master brain coach and co-founder and MD of BrainAbility, shares some insights

“**T**eenager” – the mere mention of the word can spark *lo-o-o-ng* conversations about the good, the bad and even the ugly of parenting an adolescent. One thing I know for sure from working with so many families is that being the parent of a teenager isn’t easy. Nor is being one.

I never really comprehended this until I, too, became the mother of a teenager.

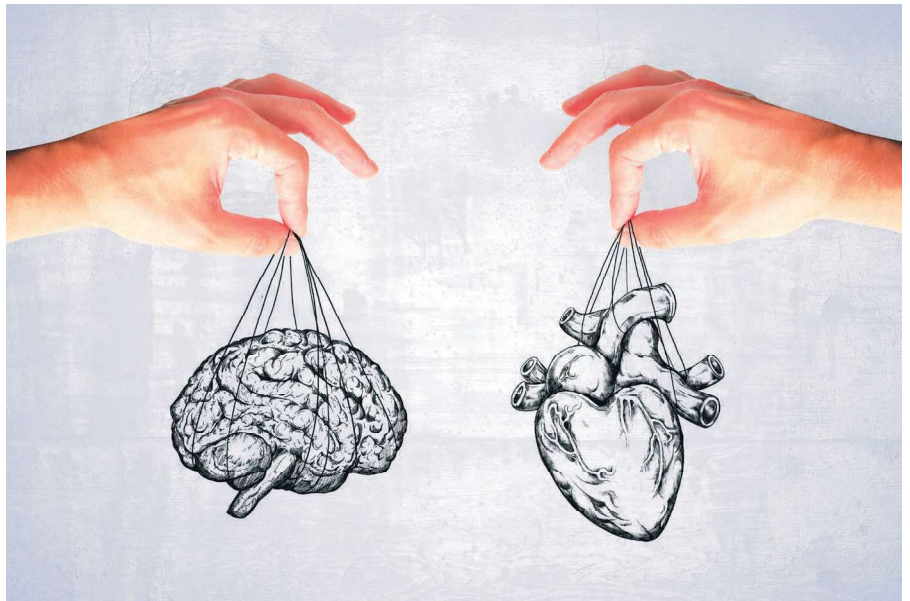
Let me be perfectly honest: I’m writing this article because I wanted to see if I could miraculously find out more about how my own adolescent son’s brain works.

It's so much easier dealing with other parents' children who we've witnessed growing up into adolescence. Yet, when it comes to our own, we're so busy juggling all the demands of work and home that it feels as if they've somehow turned into teenagers overnight. We simply can't remember at what point that actually happened.

Perhaps, like me, you look at this strange-yet-familiar-know-it-all-but-still-have-so-much-to-learn young person in front of you and oscillate between pride in the individual they're about to become and sorrow because you want them to remain a child a little longer.

Let's take this journey together and delve into what research tells us about the teenage brain.

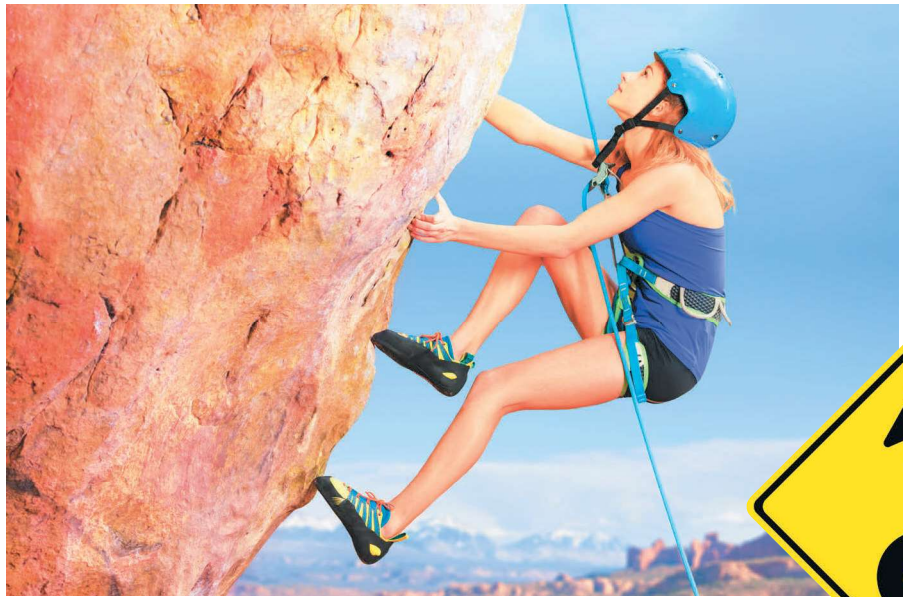
- Significant changes occur in the brain from the ages of 12-25.
- The brain is known to have a high degree of neuroplasticity, which refers to its lifelong ability to adapt and change. This simply means that the teenage years are an exceptionally good period in which to tap into neuroplasticity and improve the way the brain processes, retains and recalls information.



- As every parent of a teenager probably suspects, recent research has found that adult and teen brains work differently:
 - o Adults think with the prefrontal cortex, the brain's rational part which responds to situations with good judgement and an awareness of long-term consequences.
 - o Teens, on the other hand, process information with the amygdala. This is the emotional part of the brain.



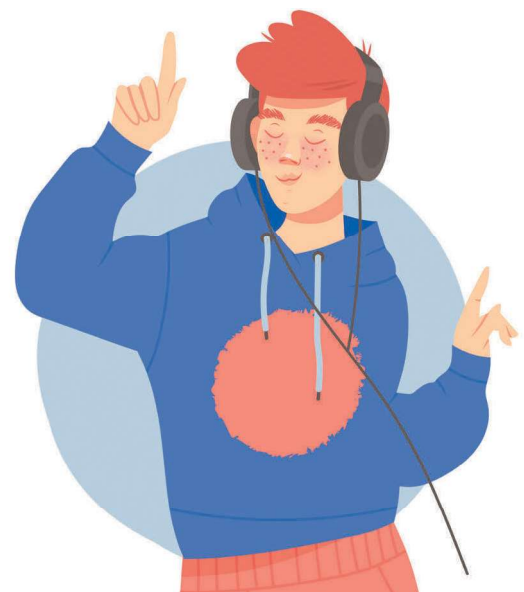
- In teens' brains, the connections between the emotional part and the decision-making centre are still developing – and not always at the same rate.
- The rational part of a teen's brain isn't yet fully developed and will only be so at the age of about 25. This is why, when teens have an overwhelmingly emotional response to a person or situation, they're later unable to explain what they were thinking. In fact, they weren't thinking as much as feeling.
- While a teen's brain is developing, they might:
 - o take more risks or take part in high-risk activities;
 - o express more and stronger emotions;
 - o make impulsive decisions.



- Sleep is an important part of learning. Research has repeatedly confirmed that getting enough sleep every night is extremely important for a teenager (although your teenager will vehemently disagree). Recent studies have shown that a huge percentage of teenagers are sleep-deprived and have highlighted the negative effect this has on their development, learning ability and emotional regulation.

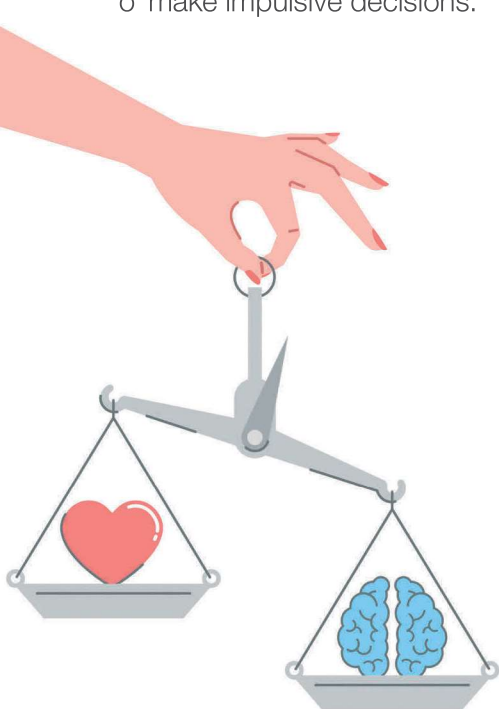
1 Remind your teen that they're resilient and competent. Since they're so focused on the moment, adolescents have trouble realising that they can play a part in changing bad situations. Remind them of times in the past that they thought would be devastating, but turned out for the best.

2 Discussing the consequences of their actions can help teens link impulsive thinking to facts. This helps the brain make these connections and wires it to create them more often.



So what's a parent to do?

Here are some tips for encouraging good behaviour and strengthening positive brain connections:



3 Become familiar with things that are important to your teen. You don't have to like their taste in music, movies and fashion, but showing an interest in the things they're involved in tells them that they're important to you.

4 When your teen comes to you with a problem, ask whether they want you to respond or simply listen. You'll be surprised at the difference this approach makes to your conversations and your teen's willingness to open up to you about things with which they're struggling.

5 The way teenagers spend their time is crucial to brain development. The combination of your child's unique brain and environment influences the way they act, think, learn and feel. It's very important to keep your teenager's brain challenged and exposed to different situations in which they can grow and improve.

6 You're an important part of your child's environment. The way you guide and influence them will help them build a healthy self-esteem (and brain). Be a positive role model. Your own behaviour will demonstrate the behaviour you expect from them.

7 Let your child take some healthy risks. New and different experiences help your child develop an independent

identity and strengthen their ability to handle different situations with confidence.

8 Help your child find new creative and expressive outlets for their new (and strong) feelings, many of which are influenced by their hormonal development, which is activating their sexual identity. Many teenagers find that taking part in or watching sport, as well as listening to music, writing and other art forms, are good channels for their emotions.

9 Talk through decisions step by step with your child. Ask about possible courses of action your child might choose and talk them through the potential consequences. Encourage your teen to weigh up positive consequences or rewards against negative ones.

10 Use family routines to give your teen's life some

structure. These might be based around academic and family timetables.

11 Provide boundaries and opportunities for negotiating those boundaries. Teens need guidance and limit-setting from their parents and other adults.

12 Spend some alone time with your teen every now and again. Make sure you're available and in the moment (so put that cellphone away!). Here it's about the quality of the time spent together, not the quantity, so make every moment count!

13 Talk to your child about his/her developing brain. Understanding this important period of growth might help them process their feelings.

I hope you enjoy this exciting, scary, exhausting – but thoroughly wonderful and rewarding – journey we're on with our teenagers!

