

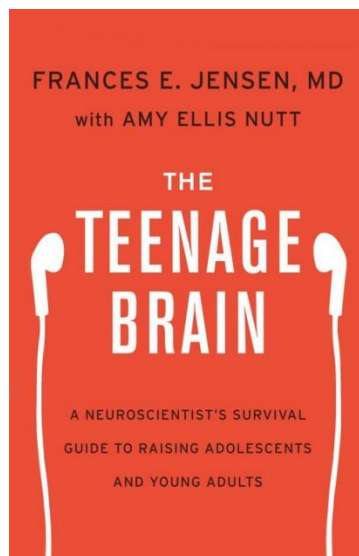


## The Teenage Brain

A review of *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults* by Frances E. Jensen, M.D., with Amy Ellis Nutt. (Harper Collins Publishing, 2015)

### TAYLOR GAJDOS

Research Intern, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada



Trouble getting out of bed in the morning, poor grades, emotional outbursts... the list could go on and on when describing difficult experiences for parents—and children—in the teenage years. A mother of two, physician and professor of neurology, Frances Jensen translates the latest teenage brain science for parents in *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults*.

She makes the case that neuroscience has uncovered information over the last decade that will not only benefit families, but could have positive implications for education, health care, social policy and the legal system. The author provides approaches on how to navigate a complicated and until recently, poorly understood life stage.

Dr. Jensen explains that teen years can actually be golden years for learning and development. Parents need to learn empathetic approaches and responses. Teens are often in a state of confusion, but when they know what is actually going on inside their brain from a scientific perspective, they can begin to piece things together. The relationship between parent and teen can then proceed on the best possible footing.

### Different than adults

The assumption is often made that a teenager's brain is very similar to an adult's. Not so, says Dr. Jensen. The frontal lobe is the last to mature since the brain develops back to front. Risks are evaluated, insight is developed and decisions are made in the frontal lobe. As a result, it's no surprise that teenagers show immaturity in judgment.

For this review, we will examine addiction and sleep. The author also writes extensively on stress, learning, mental illness, the digital invasion, gender and crime and punishment, among other prevalent issues.

## Addiction

A teenager's brain is exceptionally susceptible to addiction and vulnerable to injury. The consequences of drug use are heavier for teens as compared with adults. This means longer lasting and possibly permanent impairment to memory and problem solving functions, even with small amounts of exposure. Dr. Jensen writes:

The most significant factor in the association between marijuana abuse and potential brain damage is age. Early teen users are twice as likely to become addicted, and those who indulge in pot before the age of sixteen have more trouble with focus and attention and make twice as many mistakes on tests involving planning, flexibility, and abstract thinking. Also the younger a pot smoker is, the more he or she smokes. Bottom line: the earlier the use, the greater the abuse. (p. 150)

The question on most parents' minds is why do they do it? Dr. Jensen explains:



Part of the answer may lie in the fact that the adolescent brain, because it is firing more often and more intensely than an adult brain, is also experiencing more stress, and with increased stress comes an increased desire for relief. Enter pot. (147)

Dr. Jensen also advises parents to stay collected by showing facts and research to get teens thinking, which has proven effective in an extremely research-based society. However, she warns that teens often need to hear the same information repeated before it's absorbed.

## Sleep

Dr. Jensen explains why it can be so hard to get teens to go to bed on time and get up in the morning:

Beginning at around ages ten to twelve, young people's biological clock shifts forward, revving them up by about seven and eight o'clock at night and creating a 'no sleep' zone around nine or ten o'clock at night, just when parents are starting to feel drowsy. One reason is that melatonin, a hormone critical to inducing sleep, is released two hours later at night in a teenager's brain than it is in an adult's. It also stays in the teenager's system longer, and this is why it's so hard to wake your highschooler up in the morning. Adults, on the other hand, have almost no melatonin in their system when they wake up and therefore don't have the same groggy feeling. (p. 90)

Besides LED light from phones, computers, and TVs interfering with learning and sleep, stress plays a major part. Bedtime is not the time to argue about incomplete homework. Another suggestion is to unwind at least a half hour before bed and make this a "no cell phone time." Again, using properly presented research, some parents might actually be convincing when conveying that this is a good idea. The authors also suggest that, "the bed itself should also be just for sleeping; avoid associations with eating or watching television – or even homework!" (p. 102)

## **Stay calm and parent on**

It is easy to fear for our teenager's safety, and rightly so. Instead of being anxious, parents should advocate, be involved, be patient and be knowledgeable about your teenager. Parenting comes down to relationship. Even difficult teenagers want to look to their parents for help, wisdom, limits and advice. *The Teenage Brain* is a remarkable resource to help parents stay calm and parent on in face of a rapidly changing world.

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