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Does 'teen' mean 'brain damage?'

by Linda M. Clement

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My oldest daughter turned 13 at her last birthday, and when she turned did she ever turn! Within days her very first 'you don't understand me' fell from her mouth as if she'd been saying it for years. Quickly, it was followed by a 'you don't love me' and a few 'you can't control me's. Do these changes come with the acne and the hips? This is my pleasant, mild-mannered introvert, who has watched and listened for years before trying out something new. Janet is not of the scientific mind, one who needs first-hand experience to decide if something is or is not a good idea to do with her own body. She's happy to watch and learn from other people's mistakes.

Soon, she started hitting me and her sister. This child, never spanked in her life -who'd never lashed out physically at anyone in her life- is now belting her sister and trying to look innocent. Who took away my pleasant and cheerful daughter and who is this bizarre terror in her place?

Do hormones cause brain damage?

All this was going through my mind when a friend forwarded an article from a US newspaper: "Every parent dreads it. Almost overnight a sweet, cheerful, obedient child mutates into a churlish monster prone to recklessness and unpredictable mood swings," ("Blame it on the Brain" by Matt Crenson, Bellingham Herald, Jan 8, 2001.) I was

right!

Turns out, according to the author (backed by some serious research by Fulton Crews, a neuroscientist at the University of North Carolina and others), that while the brain is expanding dramatically in size - particularly the prefrontal cortex, that sexy part at the front of our heads that is all about making rational choices and seeing probable outcomes of our behaviour, applying complex rules, etc - many neural connections are being cut.

Those connections are the things your teenager (and mine) used to know: how to behave at a grandmother's table, why hitting is not acceptable behaviour, why doing what you said you would do is a good idea, and, for about a year and a half, what the answer was to the question she asked 15 seconds ago.

About 30% of the connections are severed in the expansion, partially explaining why teens sometimes notice that they don't seem to remember as much of their childhood as they used to remember.

This is where I think it gets important. Matt Crenson quotes Jordan Grafman of the (US) National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Stroke: "During adolescence, the developing brain picks up cues from the environment and uses them to help determine "normal" behaviour.

If the environment provokes or encourages aberrant behaviours, those behaviours become the norm." For some researchers, the issue was tobacco use and the adolescent brains response to nicotine, but as serious as smoking is (and the majority of smokers begin in their teen years), I think the problem is so much more fundamental than this.

When a child 'becomes' the brain problems she is currently living, it will take years, maybe even decades to 'grow' out of the stereotype. Children at around 13 often suddenly lose their parents' trust, their school marks take a nosedive and they begin experimenting with dangerous behaviour and substances. Those alone are serious problems, but consider the child who is surrounded by people who are convinced that this is who the child is now - not a phase, or a sudden loss of brain capacity, but who the child is becoming and who she will be as an adult. That is just depressing.

Did you know all this? I didn't! Wow, would I ever have had a different adolescence, if I knew that grade 8 was hard because my brain was making it hard for now - not because there was no way I was ever going to make it through this really hard material. I would probably have still spent two-thirds of grade 8 grounded, but at least I would have known it was a brain issue rather than a character flaw. Well, if my parents had kept reminding me, I'd have known.

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