



Are Teen Brains Hardwired for Hazard?

Teen Brains Are Wired for Risky Behavior

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There's a lot of evidence to suggest that the teen brain is hardwired for hazard. Studies have found that the areas of the brain involved in social interaction and emotion mature at an earlier point than those that regulate behavior. One 2007 Iowa State University analysis surveyed more than 10,000 adolescents about what went into their decisions, including choices about their behavior.

The answer? Not much. Most seem to rely little on premeditation or planning.

Experts say that the best chance parents and caregivers have of steering their kids safely through the teen years is remaining vigilant about looking for the signs and symptoms of problematic behavior, talking to their children when they suspect trouble and getting help at the earliest opportunity. Here, a guide to the risk factors and steps parents can take to combat risky teen behaviors.

Drugs and Alcohol

At Risk: A sharp uptick in drug and alcohol use occurs as teens enter middle school (sixth or seventh grade) and again when they enter high school (ninth grade). "This is when they encounter an unsettling new environment, and with that comes vulnerability and exposure to drugging and drinking," said Sean Clarkin, director of strategy at [The Partnership at Drugfree.org](http://ThePartnershipatDrugfree.org). A family history of drug abuse, a traumatic incidence such as a death in the family or divorce and other mental disorders increase susceptibility.

Red Flags: Red eyes, slurred speech and the smell of pot or alcohol are obvious warning signs, but Clarkin urged parents to keep an eye out for less obvious signs, such as overall changes in behavior patterns. "Teen drug users can be moody, petulant and resistant to discipline, so sometimes it's hard to tell those in trouble from an ordinary teenager, but if a kid is down for a sustained period of time," said Clarkin, "if they have been a reasonably good student or athlete and this begins to slip, or they begin to hang out with a totally different group of friends,

parents should be prepared to have a tough conversation."

Take Action: "So many parents say they thought something was wrong and wished they had trusted their instincts," Clarkin said. "When you see there is a problem, you need to act immediately." Having someone outside the family intervene, such as a close family friend, clergy or therapist can be a good first step.

Many kids experiment with drugs, but from a parental standpoint, delaying this phase as long as possible is a wise tactic. Studies find that many long-term addiction problems begin at 15 or younger. Most experts don't recommend snooping except as a last resort -- it's a sure way to break the fragile bonds of trust that may still exist. Instead, begin having a dialog about anything and everything from an early age so the lines of communication are open when it counts.

"Parental monitoring sounds jargony, but you need to stay on top of what your kids are doing, who their friends are and who the kid's parents are so you can connect with them," Clarkin said.

Suicide



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