

MARK OESTREICHER

A

# PARENT'S GUIDE

TO UNDERSTANDING

**TEENAGE BRAINS**



*WHY THEY ACT THE WAY THEY DO*



simply for parents



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## **A Parent's Guide to Understanding Teenage Brains**

Why They Act the Way They Do

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# CHAPTER 1: WHY DO PARENTS NEED TO UNDERSTAND TEENAGE BRAINS?

The scene: Last week (as I write this), in the family room of my house, with nine sixth-grade boys. My youth ministry small group. I meet with them every Wednesday night for a combination of silliness and spiritual conversation.

Sixth-grade guys are normally fairly concrete in their thinking (we're going to talk a lot more about what that means in this book), and having spiritual conversations about abstract faith ideas is sometimes a bit of a challenge. So I was caught a bit off guard by Chris' amazing and semiconfrontational question: *Why won't anyone give me answers to my questions?*

He said it more as a statement, with a big dose of frustration and a hint of anger. And I couldn't have been more excited.

A few months back, our group had been talking about the incarnation (it was early December, and Christmas was on all of their minds). In the midst of my description of how amazing it is that God chose to insert himself *into* his own creation in order to connect with us, Chris interrupted. He sighed, and asked, “How do we know any of this is even true?”

At that moment, I wasn’t sure if Chris really wanted an answer. Maybe I should have repeated Jesus’ question to blind Bartimaeus: “What do you want me to do for you?” Or maybe a subtle variation: “What is it you’re really asking, Chris?”

One of the other sixth-grade guys, clearly raised in church and loaded with preteen confidence, pushed back on Chris: “You shouldn’t ask questions like that!”

I stepped in, affirming Chris strongly. I told him that asking questions like that is fantastic, and a super important part of following Jesus. I told him he should *never* feel awkward or ashamed or afraid to ask questions.

But I didn’t answer his question. I saw it as an opportunity to affirm his asking, thinking that was the real issue.



It wasn't.

Now, these months later, Chris was upset and had obviously been wrestling with this question and others like it for a long time. He went on to say that he'd asked more than one person, and everyone kept telling him it was good to ask—but no one would answer his questions. He even pointed to a book I'd written for middle schoolers about faith (which I'd given to him), and stated that the book did the same thing!

Yup, it was absolutely time to answer Chris' questions. I set aside my plans, and asked him what he wanted to know. He led with: "Well, I want to know how we know the Bible is true."

Another guy jumped in, asking, "What if we get to heaven and find out we had *the wrong* God?"

So I dived in. I affirmed, over and over again, how important it was to wrestle with these things, and how it's a part of them growing into men of faith. I couched my responses with, "This is what I believe to be true, and why I'm confident in my explanation; but you might need more than my answers, and that's where faith comes in."

Here's what I absolutely knew in that moment: Chris was—rather gloriously, I will say—revealing the interaction of adolescent brain development and faith. Chris was showing me his changing brain.

And without an understanding of teenage brain development, I might have either missed the moment or shut down his curiosity with easy answers that didn't satisfy the intensity of the questions.

I am both passionate about and fascinated by teenage brains. As a 30-year youth ministry veteran and a father of two teenagers, I find that my continually growing understanding of teenage brains informs almost everything I do in ministry and parenting.

My hope is that this little book will give you some insight, some “oh, that explains things” moments. But my bigger hope is that, as a result of these insights, you will be more engaged in the life of the teenager in your home. If I could separate parents of teenagers into two broad categories, based on years and years of observing thousands of parent/teen relationships, I would use these categories:

- Homes where at least one parent is meaningfully engaged in the life of the teenager.

- Homes where parents are physically present, but not meaningfully engaged in the life of the teenager.

As a parent of two wonderful but not angelic teenagers, I know firsthand how challenging that first bullet is. My own two teenagers often give me the impression that they don't really want me involved in their lives (that's a smoke screen, by the way, and part of teenagers' developmental need to differentiate themselves from us as parents). They seem to want more independence than I would have assumed they were ready for. They (Liesl and Max are their names, and I'll be telling stories about them throughout this book) frustrate my attempts at staying engaged, and regularly push my buttons.

Add to that: We live in a culture where the ideas of what it means to be a good parent have shifted dramatically. We're constantly told to treat our teenagers like children, that they're not ready to be responsible (not capable, even). We're told that we're irresponsible parents if we allow our children to take hold of meaningful responsibility or to experience the consequences of poor choices.

Bottom line: Parenting teenagers is *really difficult!*

There are a host of variables involved in great parenting. We can't address all of them in the scope of this pocket-sized book. But I promise, the glimpse you'll gain into the development and function of your teenager's brain will help you!

## **The Biggest Change in Teenagers**

Of course, you know your son or daughter is changing. After all, we know that the teenage years are years of transformation from childhood to adulthood. They're like a strange river crossing, where children set off from one bank in a dinghy of innocence and confidence, and—after an often choppy and close-to-capsizing fording—step onto the opposite bank resembling something close to an adult.

But most parents focus on the externals: physical growth, body change, sexual development, voice changes. That's the obvious stuff, and it's happening right before our eyes. My 14-year-old son recently returned from a two-week class trip, and my wife and I simultaneously said, when he was walking toward us at the airport, "He looks older!"

Those physical changes are a big deal, and I wouldn't minimize them for a second. Those changes are visible to everyone, but they're *mostly* visible to the teenager

experiencing them. They live with their physical changes every day and see their whole bodies in a way no one else does. Teenagers have a tormented combination of hope and fear when it comes to their physical development. They've been told, nonstop, what their bodies are *supposed* to look like, and they live on a razor-sharp continuum of "My body's not right" and "Things are starting to change."

In fact, my contention has always been that you can't find a single teenager, anywhere, who doesn't think at some point (often for extended periods of time—even years) that they're *turning out wrong*. They think they're too short or too tall, too thin or too fat, too behind the developmental curve or too ahead of it. They want the developmental bits they haven't yet achieved, and are often awkward and uncomfortable with those same developmental bits once they've got them.

Yeah, the physical changes are a really big deal. And we could write books about that (in fact, some of this is covered in three of the other books in this series: *A Parent's Guide to Understanding Teenage Guys*, *A Parent's Guide to Understanding Teenage Girls*, and *A Parent's Guide to Understanding Sex and Dating*). But I do not believe that the physical changes are the most important changes of adolescence.

I believe the most significant change in teenagers is what takes place in their brains. That might seem a little crazy to you, but let me explain myself. The brain change (which is, if we want to get technical, also a physical change) reorients every aspect of life for teenagers, preparing them for adulthood.

Looking at cognitive change by itself is a big enough deal (we'll cover this extensively in the following pages). But the reason I believe that brain change is the biggest change in teenagers is because it's the linchpin for all the other changes that shape the teenage experience, including emotional change, relational change, independence, and spiritual change.

And there's no question about it, the changes in your teenager's brain are the primary source for conflict with parents. You won't often experience tension with your teen about their growth in height! But no doubt you will experience plenty of friction in areas like conflicting expectations, rules, responsibilities, emotional outbursts, self-expression, media choices, clothing and style choices, friend selection, boundaries, priorities, and a host of other issues that are *directly* tied to brain development.

Yup, it's time to get to know your teenager's brain.

## **Teenage Brains Are Not the Same as Yours**

Don't worry; I'm never going to get too technical in this book. There are three reasons for that:

1. There's not space in a 12,000-word book for much detail.
2. You would likely not be very interested in the technical, medical details.
3. I'm not the guy to write that kind of book. I'm a practitioner, both as a youth worker and a parent. (Remember that old TV commercial where the actor said, "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV," as if that was supposed to help us trust his medical input? Maybe I should say, "I'm not a neurologist, but I pretend to be one in youth ministry.")

I have, however, read a bunch on this subject. And I've had long conversations with brain docs. I've digested and reflected, looked at brain scans, and watched for years how the things I was learning about teenage brains did or didn't line up with what I was reading.

And more than anything else there is to know about teenage brains, there's this: Their brains are not yet adult brains.

It's interesting, though, that this is a mixed bag of limitations and opportunities. For example, teenage brains are still significantly underdeveloped in a couple of critical areas (we'll talk about this in Chapter 5), which adds great challenge to a teenager's ability to exercise wisdom, make reasoned choices, control impulses, and interpret emotions.

But while teenagers have certain limitations, due to their still-developing brains, they also possess a host of abilities we adults are slowly losing. It's funny to me (I'll have to ask God about this at some heavenly moment) that while teenagers have natural limits on decision-making and other important brain functions, they are at the peak of brain function in a bunch of areas I wish (as a 49-year-old) I was stronger in! For example, pattern recognition, brain speed, and memory of details all grow exponentially during the young and middle teen years, peaking between (depending on the exact function) 16 and 22 years old.

Some researchers have recently begun suggesting that the "limitations" of the teenage brain are actually benefits. The suggestion, in a nutshell, is that you and I are stodgy.



I mean, no researcher says that, of course. But they're saying that teenagers' natural risk-taking behavior and lack of inhibitions and "good" decision-making is what allows them to discover the boundaries in the world. They're able to step over the line in a way we normally wouldn't, which helps them discover where the line actually exists.

This isn't just about moral issues or classic risk-taking behaviors such as drinking, drugs, and sex. Let's consider a neutral case study:

Devin is a 15-year-old guy who isn't overly outgoing, but he has a few good friends. He's not a particularly popular kid, but has been genuinely content with the small constellation of peers who he hangs out with. Along comes an opportunity, strange as it seems to Devin, to hang out with an edgy mixed-gender group of teenagers who Devin perceives to *have* something (coolness, swagger, maturity, whatever) that he wants but doesn't possess. The problem becomes clear, however, that for Devin to associate with this new group of potential friends, he'll be forced to leave his old friends behind. Devin takes the risk without a second thought, turning his back on his old friends. And when the new friendship group doesn't turn out to be what he'd hoped it would, Devin is left friendless for a period of time.

But while this experience might be a horrible experience for Devin, it was a fantastic learning experience. Devin has learned (we hope he learned—at least he had the opportunity to learn) boatloads of information about loyalty, relational risk, perceived coolness, and betrayal. You and I would likely not have taken the risk, which would have been the better choice in this case, but we have already learned those lessons.

I see the creativity of God all over this, by the way. I know that while I can learn and grow in lots of ways, the most significant learning and growth in my life usually comes from situations that involved risk and failure (even at my ripe middle-age). But I'm less prone to risk (and therefore, failure) than I was when I was in my teenage years, which naturally means I'm learning less. Do you see the connection? How cool that God dreamed up teenage brains to be naturally risk-taking!