Twenty-five years ago, most people believed adolescent behavior could be totally explained by "raging hormones." It was also assumed that teenagers could think like adults. Advances in brain imagery have provided scientists with the technology to see into the adolescent brain. Brain research has provided some powerful information and better tools with which to parent, teach, and mentor adolescents. This growing body of scientific knowledge about how the adolescent brain works has shed new light on how adolescents think and what emotions drive their behavior. This new information can be used to develop structured programs within which young people can learn to master important life skills.

In my work, I have chosen to focus on developing a structured program to assist adolescents in learning good decision-making skills. This program trains a young person's brain, through repetition. It uses self-correcting tools. They learn from their own mistakes. I have been delighted and amazed at the results. It works best with adolescents who are at least 14 years of age. Their brains seem to have become a little more stable by that age. The huge amount of pruning that takes place in the brain, when puberty starts, has lessened somewhat. Adolescents who are 14 years old usually experience more confidence in their brain. It seems to be working for them again, at least some of the time.

Adolescents learn to make good decisions when they understand which ones get them more of what they want, and which ones result in more of what they don't want.

They also need to understand how their brain works. During adolescence, the brain is “under construction.” This article will discuss three different types of situations adolescents have to deal with. Recent information about how an adolescent brain works is explained for each type of situation. Finally, sample questions are provided that can help guide an adolescent to make good decisions in a variety of situations that are typical of adolescent life.
WHAT ADOLESCENTS WANT AND DON’T WANT

Adolescents want:
1. More fun
2. More independence
3. More time with friends
4. More control over their daily lives

Adolescents don’t want:
1. Arguments with parents
2. Conflicts with peers
3. Social drama
4. Loss of privileges
5. Adults telling them what to do
Any parent, who is willing to commit time and patience, can successfully use this structured program to help their adolescent develop better decision-making skills. It helps adolescents gain what all adolescents want - more fun and more independence. Parents will gain what all parents want - more faith and trust in their adolescent’s ability to make good decisions.

This structured approach teaches adolescents about the workings of their own brain. It assists adolescents in learning to make good decisions by asking simple, carefully worded questions. They come to their own conclusions about what would be the best decision to make in a particular situation. The focus always remains on the adolescent and on his or her learning. Any mistake is an opportunity to learn how to handle a situation better the next time. It’s not an opportunity for an adult to lecture or criticize. Most adolescents will shut down when they feel criticized by an adult, especially a parent. That moment’s opportunity to learn from a mistake will be gone. In this program, parents gently direct their adolescent’s learning process by:

- explaining how the adolescent brain works
- asking questions
- offering support
- praising a good decision
- recognizing mature thinking
- empathizing with a tough situation they had to deal with
- providing “snap shot” information about how parents think and feel

SITUATION #1: An adolescent needs to know that the first job the brain performs is to let a person know when they are in danger. (Dead person, no brain.) Explain that at any given second, 80% of what their brain is doing is processing information it’s getting from their senses. If they see, hear, or smell something that puts their physical or emotional safety at risk, their brain will tell them they are in danger. Discuss the types of situations that could put adolescents at risk if they decide to stay in that situation: seeing a fight, seeing a friend smoking pot or drinking alcohol; hearing a friend talk about shoplifting when in a store together, hearing plans for a weekend party that will include drugs and/or alcohol, or hearing gossip; smelling alcohol, marijuana or cigarettes, etc.

Ask, “What could happen to you if you didn’t leave these kinds of situations?” Adolescents will usually say, “I could get in trouble or I could get talked into doing something.”
Adolescents need to understand that during this period of their brain’s development they are at high-risk for choosing to ignore the warning of “danger.” Explain the adolescent brain actually seeks adventure and thrills and doesn’t think about consequences in the midst of an exciting situation. By 14 years of age, it is important for adolescents to understand that they must take charge of their own safety in unsafe situations. There is only one acceptable decision to make when an adolescent’s brain says, “Danger” and that is to LEAVE THE SITUATION, immediately. Otherwise, they risk getting pulled into the “excitement” of a situation.

Discuss simple ways to leave an unsafe situation at school, at a friend’s house, in a friend’s car, in a shopping mall, or while on the telephone. During non-school situations, an adolescent needs to know that a parent or another trusted adult will come get them, any time, day or night, when the adolescent calls and says, “I need to come home.” This safety plan is called the “No Questions Asked” plan. Its only purpose is to keep a young person safe. Adolescents must know they won’t be asked a bunch of questions, or else they won’t call. It’s hard for adolescents to leave their friends, especially when it means coming home and being bored. It’s really important to empathize with how tough it can be to make that decision. Any time adolescents decide to leave friends, because of what they are doing or talking about doing, they need to be praised for making a wise decision in a tough situation.

Listening to gossip, spreading gossip, and “talking trash” about someone isn’t a situation most adolescents would identify as being “dangerous.” Yet, when asked, “What often happens if you spread gossip?” or “What can happen if all you do is listen to gossip or ‘trash talk’?” adolescents quickly recognize that at least one person will be mad at them. Ask, “What else might happen?” and adolescents will say someone might want to fight them or they could lose a friendship. Ask, “Could spreading rumors or ‘talking trash’ about someone become an unsafe situation?” Their own experiences, or friends’, have already shown them how quickly rumors and “trash talk” can lead to social problems and sometimes aggressive situations.

Ask, “Do you want to get caught up in the social ‘drama’ of rumors or ‘trash talk’?” Almost every adolescent will answer “No” to that question. Then ask, “So what are your choices?” Many adolescents think their only choice is to physically leave the situation.
Ask, “What do you think would happen if you just changed the subject? What if you asked the person ‘talking trash’ a question like, ‘What are your plans for the weekend?’ or ‘How’d you do on that history test?’”

When given the opportunity to talk about themselves, most people will. Discussing human behavior with adolescents gives them information so they can identify more choices. Usually adolescent social relationships are driven by their emotions. Knowing another choice is available, an adolescent doesn’t have to feel their only choice is to physically walk away from a friend. “Walking away” from gossip or “trash talk” could simply mean deciding to change the topic of the conversation. No “drama” and no one is mad at them.

SITUATION #2: Adolescents need to know their brain often misunderstands other people’s emotions and misinterprets another person’s facial expressions, tone of voice, and/or body language. They also need to understand why it happens. Using pictures of facial expressions, a research project compared how adolescents and adults interpreted emotions. They were shown the same pictures. Each picture expressed a different emotion. Adults identified a wide variety of emotions from the facial expressions. Adolescents, however, almost always misinterpreted facial expressions of disappointment, worry, sadness, anxiety, etc. Unless the face was smiling, adolescents had a hard time identifying any emotion other than anger. During this project, an important discovery was made. MRI images were taken to determine where in the brain adolescents and adults processed emotions in facial expressions. In the adolescents, it was the fight/flight part of their brain that interpreted the emotions. Adults used a totally different part of the brain that develops very late in adolescence. The fight/flight response within the brain is a rather primitive level of thinking. It gives a quick read of a situation. It tells a person to start fighting or to start running. Adolescents actually have to be taught how to interpret facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. (5) Discussing previous misunderstandings adolescents may have experienced with friends or parents will help them understand what these brain research results mean to them.

Misunderstandings with a friend: Ask any adolescent, “Have you and a friend ever gotten into a huge argument and it turned out to be just a big misunderstanding?” Every adolescent is all too familiar with this situation. Sometimes they have lost a friendship; other times they’ve been able to talk things out. Regardless of whether the entire argument was over a simple misunderstanding, adolescents experience a lot of stress when they have an argument with a friend.
Ask, “Now that you know your brain will often misinterpret your friends’ emotions, what could you do to avoid an argument?” Most adolescents are very invested in keeping their friendships positive, and without conflict. They will quickly come to the conclusion that they need to walk away when an argument starts. Adolescents experience friendships as their “life-line” and want to keep a good connection with their friends.

Adolescents have difficulty understanding that verbal comments may not always be what they appear to be on the surface. Here’s an anonymous quote to discuss with your adolescent: “Rudeness is a weak person’s imitation of strength.”

Misunderstandings with a parent: Ask, “Have you ever come home, right on time, after being gone for 4-6 hours, and your parent said, ‘It would have been nice if you’d called me.’?” Adolescents can clearly remember a time when they came home, on time, and their parent seemed upset with them, for no obvious reason. The fun they’d just enjoyed with friends felt like it was sucked right out of them. Gone, no more happy thoughts and feelings. This is a very confusing and upsetting situation for an adolescent.

Now, it's time to focus on how the brain of a parent works. This saying summarizes it for an adolescent: “An informed parent is a HAPPY parent, an uninformed parent is a WORRIED parent, and a WORRIED parent is an ANGRY parent.” Parents worry about all the awful things that could happen even when their adolescent has been following rules. Adolescents can understand their parents know more about situations they haven't experienced yet, but it doesn't help them understand their parent's worry. Adolescents think if they're not doing anything wrong or dangerous, their parents have no reason to worry. That’s how adolescents think. Thinking about all the horrible things that could happen to their child when they’re away from home comes with the territory of being a parent. That’s how parents think. When parents and adolescents understand the differences in their thinking, it helps reduce the misunderstandings.

Adolescents really don’t want to lose the good feelings they enjoy after having fun with friends. Ask, “Since the “worried parent/angry parent” is a reality you have to deal with, what are your choices? Most adolescents identify two choices: “I can keep my parent informed by checking in or I can just have fun with my friends, forget about my parents, and come home on time.”
Many adolescents will initially resist the idea of checking in. They think checking in means their parents don’t trust them. Parents can make a few simple statements at this point. “I know it doesn’t make much sense to you to check in with me when you’re not doing anything wrong. But, it would mean a lot to me if you did. I would know you are safe and I wouldn’t worry as much.” Most adolescents will eventually decide, “If checking in keeps my parent HAPPY, I can do that.” Their thinking goes something like this, “I know if I keep my parent HAPPY, I’ll get to do more things when I ask. I’ll probably look more responsible too.” When adolescents are dealing with an angry parent, they know they usually won’t get what they want, and they may get a whole lot of what they don’t want.

SITUATION #3: Adolescents need to hear the “bad news” about what’s happening in the adolescent brain. Brain research involves taking images of the human brain. These “pictures” identify what parts of the brain are using “brain energy” when performing different kinds of mental tasks. There are big differences in the images of the pre-frontal cortex in adolescent brains, compared with adult brains. The job of the pre-frontal cortex can be explained simply - it is the ability to think about consequences and to plan ahead. Adolescents need to understand that their pre-frontal cortex is still developing. It explains why adolescents don’t think like adults. It also explains why adolescents don’t have the greatest “braking power” in situations that provide them with choices and opportunities for excitement: to do something really adventurous or thrilling, to speak their opinion to someone in authority, or to lash back at someone who has just been rude to them. Adolescents know this about themselves. It’s important for them to understand why. Tell them the “good news” too. Around 16 years of age they can count on their brain to start developing better “braking power.” Brain construction is finally completed somewhere in their mid-20’s. (See article What Makes Teens Tick?)

It would be nice if adolescents could develop a little more "braking power" now, instead of having to wait until their 20’s. Every adolescent can identify with thinking, "Oops, I wish I had thought a little more before I did that." Now share more “good news.” Let adolescents know they can train their brains to "make up for" some of their weak "braking power." This is when adolescents begin to really listen. They would love to learn how to
avoid the trouble and loss of privileges they experience when they don’t slow
down and apply the “brakes,” don’t think through the possible consequences
of their actions, and go “Oops” after it’s too late. Explain that training their
brain means they will need to learn how to use the four steps involved in the
skill of good decision-making.

Before discussing the details involved in decision-making, it’s important that adolescents comprehend just
how many decisions they make throughout a day. Ask, “How many decisions do you think you make from the
time you get up in the morning until you go to bed at night?” Many young people have never thought about
this before. They are often shocked to realize that they make hundreds. The list of situations and the possible
choices they’re faced with each day is endless.

Ask, “Could you tell me some of the little choices you have to think about throughout your day?” A typical answer will include some of these examples: whether to get up on time, what to wear, to eat breakfast or not, to listen to
the teacher or talk to friends in class, to be on time for class, to complete
work in class, to do homework, to study for a quiz or test, to do chores, to
spend time before bed talking with friends on the phone or on the computer,
to watch TV or play a video game, to argue with a parent, to yell at a sibling,
to get to bed early enough to be rested for the next day, etc.

After listening to the list, ask, “Are you in control of all those little decisions
you make throughout your day?” Again, there is often a surprised look when
they realize they are in charge.

Ask, “What kind of a day do you have if you wake up late?” or “How does the
rest of your day go if you have an argument with a friend at lunch?” or “If you
don’t do your homework, how does it effect your next day at school?”

The purpose of these questions is to help adolescents grasp the importance
of paying attention to the quality of the small decisions they make throughout
their day. They are usually very tuned into how a negative experience at one
point in their day often effects how they feel for the rest of their day. Adolescents live in the “NOW” moment. Considering the impact of one small
decision on the rest of their day is not how adolescents think. Thinking about
future consequences is the job of the pre-frontal cortex. It’s not fully
developed yet. Adolescent brains can be trained to think more about the “big
picture.” However, adolescents must be convinced they’ll get more of what
they want in return for the effort they have to make to train their brains.
What do adolescents want? They want more fun, more time with friends, more control over their daily lives, more independence. It’s important to ask all three of the following questions. These questions focus an adolescent’s attention on getting what they want.

1. “What’s your stress level at the end of a day, when you’ve made a whole bunch of good decisions all day?”

2. “Will you be in any trouble, or lose any privileges, if your little decisions throughout the day were good ones?”

3. “When you make good decisions, are you able to have more fun with your friends?”

Adults need to empathize with just how many situations adolescents have to learn how to manage. Say something like, “I never realized just how much you have to do to successfully get through a single day. You have to take care of your body by eating foods that are good for you, get enough exercise, and get enough sleep. You have to manage your time and learn how to be organized so you don’t forget or lose something important. You have to learn how to deal with teachers, parents, siblings and get along with your peers. That’s a lot to learn so you can have a ‘good day.’ No wonder you’re so tired sometimes. It’s exhausting to have to decide what’s the right choice in all those situations. And things can get even more difficult when you have to deal with a situation that seems to come at you ‘out of the blue’.”

Ask, “Can you think of some situations you have to deal with at home or at school that seem to come at you ‘out of the blue’?” Sometimes adolescents have trouble with this question and may need some help. They frequently give the example of being offered drugs or alcohol and not much more.

If that happens, ask some of these questions: “What about arriving for a class and discovering you have a substitute teacher you’ve had trouble with before?” or “Your friend is having a bad day and taking it out on you?” or “Getting home from school and dealing with a tired and grumpy parent?” or “A sibling who’s being really annoying?”

It’s important that adolescents recognize the differences between the situations they have control over and the ones they don’t. Equally important is helping adolescents understand they do have control over the decisions they make in both types of situations.
Review the importance of successfully managing all those little choices they are confronted with throughout their day. Ask, "Remember all those little decisions you have to make everyday?" Now ask, "What kinds of decisions do people usually make when they're all stressed out?" Adolescents understand that feeling stressed out usually leads to making poor decisions.

Ask, "Do you think you deal with those 'out of the blue' situations better when you're not stressed out?" The answer is obviously "Yes." All of these questions need to be asked. Their own answers help them understand they make better decisions when they’re stable emotionally and not stressed out.

Now it’s appropriate to introduce the idea that all decision-making has four steps. A parent could say, "I'm going to teach you the four steps in making any decision. Then we'll talk about how you and I, together, can help you learn to make good decisions every day. You already make a lot of good ones. But, you want more privileges and more freedom. I think we can work together so you can have more of what you want."

THE FOUR STEPS IN DECISION-MAKING

**Step 1  THE SITUATION:** A situation has an invisible “stop sign.” Stop, think, then act. Adolescents have to recognize a situation that requires their attention. If they don’t recognize a “stop sign,” they’ll “blow through the stop sign,” and later regret they didn’t think before deciding to act or re-act. Discuss how to identify those kinds of situations that require “putting on the brakes.” It can be very helpful to discuss some recent situations the adolescent experienced that required “putting on the brakes,” but that choice wasn’t recognized until it was too late.

**Step 2  THINK:** Adolescents need to think about all the possible choices they have in a specific situation. Then they need to consider the possible consequences of each choice.

**Step 3  THEIR DECISION:** After thinking about all their choices and the possible consequences of each choice, they need to decide what to do.

**Step 4  EVALUATE THEIR DECISION:** This step is designed to help adolescents learn from their mistakes. Some decisions are just fine. Others will be “okay,” but not great. “Okay” decisions probably would have turned out better if the adolescent had spent more time thinking through the consequences. Perhaps the adolescent just didn’t have enough knowledge at the time to make a better decision. Then, there are some decisions that will just “stink”
LEARNING THE SKILL: To practice learning the skill, adolescents start keeping a daily “decision journal.” Every night, before going to bed, they spend time reviewing all the decisions they made during their day. This review helps them evaluate just how well they handled their day. Some days nothing beyond their control happens. It’s just a normal day. After reviewing their day, they pick one decision they made that day, and make some notes to help them remember.

REPORTING THEIR DECISIONS: Finally, parents, or some other adult, listen as adolescents share what they recorded in their “decision journal.” It may be necessary to ask questions if a “picture” of the situation isn’t clear, or no details of the pro’s and con’s of different choices are discussed, or there is no evaluation of their decision. Sometimes adolescents only write down what they did, like a diary, instead of a decision they made. If these things happen, adults can ask questions like these:

“Can you tell me more about the situation?”
“What were your choices?”
“What was your thinking?”
“What was your decision?”
“How do you think your decision turned out?”

Usually asking these kinds of questions helps adolescents better understand the four steps in decision-making.

It is very important that adults remain non-judgmental. Upon hearing a decision that was okay, but not great, or one that really stunk, asking a series of simple, carefully worded questions keeps the discussion emotionally neutral. The goal is always to help adolescents learn from a mistake. Here are some questions that keep the discussion going, without judgment or criticism, and help adolescents evaluate a decision they’ve made:

1. What do you think you could have done differently?
2. What do you wish you had done differently?
3. What did you need to consider that you didn’t think about?
4. How do you think your decision turned out? Or Are you pleased with how things turned out?
5. If the adolescent isn’t pleased with the outcome, ask questions 1, 2, or 3 to help the adolescent learn how to evaluate the decision that was made.
Sometimes an adult will think the outcome of a decision was only “so-so” or maybe “awful,” but the adolescent is okay with it. When that happens, ask the adolescent to explain the thinking that led to the decision. Listening closely to the explanation can be quite telling. The explanation provides a very clear picture of what is important to that adolescent.

When adolescents evaluate a decision as a good one, and it clearly was, say an enthusiastic "wise thinking" or "great decision." Positive recognition is a welcome vote of confidence in their ability. It often results in adolescents taking the whole program more seriously. When adolescents report correcting a poor decision, all by themselves, praise that as well. Every time an adolescent takes charge of learning from a mistake and doing something better the next time, it is one less time an adult had to get involved. If adolescents don't report a self-correction, ask. The sense of confidence adolescents gain by taking control and making a change, based on their own self-evaluation (step #4), is one more step towards increased maturity and greater independence.

A parent can do this structured program with their adolescent. It will require sitting down with your adolescent at least once a week to review the “decision journal.” This practice is not only helpful to the adolescent, but it also provides important information to parents. Parents will get a pretty clear picture of the maturity level of their young person’s thinking. The weekly discussions can help guide a parent’s decision to say “Yes” or “No” when their adolescent asks, “Can I . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . ?”

When adolescents are having a lot of trouble appropriately handling routine situations (doing chores, accepting "NO" for an answer, following instructions, or doing homework), they need to understand why they aren’t getting more of what they want. They need to gain some understanding of how parents react to certain decisions their adolescent makes. Parents can introduce the subject by saying, “I know you want to hear me say "Yes" more often. I think I can help you understand how making some different kinds of decisions will result in you hearing more "Yes" answers when you ask to do something. I’m going to ask you to use your imagination.”

Explain, “Imagine that inside all parents are two imaginary buckets.”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good Feelings Bucket</th>
<th>Bad Feelings Bucket</th>
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<td>“One is called the ‘good feelings’ bucket, the other, the ‘bad feelings’ bucket.”</td>
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Choose a routine situation that your adolescent often handles by making a poor decision. For example, if your adolescent usually starts arguing when hearing a "No" answer, then ask, "If you start arguing with me when you hear a "No," what bucket do you feed?" If your adolescent doesn’t do chores or homework without being reminded, or nagged, ask, "If you did your chores (or homework) without being asked or me nagging you, what bucket would you feed?" If your adolescent doesn’t do what he or she is asked, without being told many, many times, then ask, "What bucket would you feed if you did what you were asked to do right away?" The answers to these questions are obvious to any adolescent (or younger child). Again, by asking questions, young people are being led to come to their own understanding of the consequences of their two choices.

And to really drive home the impact of feeding the "bad feelings" bucket, ask, "How many arguments with me would you eliminate if you accepted 'No' as my answer (or did your chores without being asked) (or did your homework without having to be nagged) (or did what you were asked to do right away)?" Adolescents will usually answer a lot of arguments would simply be eliminated.

Tell your adolescent, "I can’t guarantee you’ll always get a ‘Yes’ if you feed my ‘good feelings’ bucket. I can guarantee you, if my ‘bad feelings’ bucket is over-flowing, you’ll probably hear a lot of ‘No’ answers when you want to do something." Then say, "Less stress, happier parent, you get to do more."

Parents can return to the “good feelings-bad feelings” bucket imagery again and again by asking, “What bucket are you filling now?” This simple question quietly reminds adolescents they can decide on a different choice that will get them more of what they want.

This structured program has many benefits. Because adolescents have to re-visit the four required steps with every decision, over time, their ability to recognize a situation that requires “putting on the brakes” increases. They begin to recognize more choices, and to consider more of the consequences with each of their choices. Their self-evaluation skills sharpen. Signs of improvement in a young person’s ability to make good decisions can be quite dramatic. Parents are delighted as they watch mature decision-making skills blossom in their adolescent. They spend a lot less time feeling disappointed by their adolescent’s decisions and enjoy much more time feeling proud as a parent.

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