The Emerging Adult Brain

Counseling and Psychological Services
Department of Student Health
Purpose

To provide a basic understanding of the emerging adult brain and how you can support healthy development while your student navigates University life.
Agenda

• What changes are taking place in the brain?
• What do these changes mean?
• How can we as educators and you as parents help support healthy development?
Brain Development

- Brain continues to develop well past childhood
- The brain is changing every day
- Neurons that fire together wire together
2 Growth Spurts

18 months

18 years

The Thinking Brain

Prefrontal Cortex

Executive Functions

- Organization
  - Attention
  - Planning
  - Problem Solving

- Regulation
  - Task initiation
  - Self-control
  - Emotion regulation
  - Decision-making
The Emotional Brain

The Limbic System

- Risk-taking (aka exploration)
- Social awareness
- Emotional intensity
- Reward-seeking/Motivation
- Memory

Warning #1:

Steinberg’s 3 Phases of Adolescent Development

• Phase One: Starting the Engines
  — Puberty to ~14-17

• Phase Two: Developing a Better Braking System
  — ~15-20

• Phase Three: Putting a Skilled Driver Behind the Wheel
  — Early 20s
Warning #2:

- The beginning of adolescence is **biologically** defined and the end is **socially** defined.
Nature wants children to be children before they are men. If we deliberately depart from this order, we shall get premature fruits which are neither right nor well flavored and which soon decay. ... Childhood has ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling, peculiar to itself; nothing can be more foolish than to substitute our ways for them.

Jean Jacques Rousseau
Myths about the adolescent brain

• Raging hormones make you act like you have lost your mind

• Adolescents need to “grow up” and act more like adults

• Emerging adults need to move from dependence to independence
Facts about the adolescent brain

• Increases in hormonal activity in specific areas of the brain
• Young adults are not yet fully ready to launch
• Emerging adults have to learn to separate and relate
  – From dependence to *interdependence*
Four Features of Adolescence

1. Novelty seeking
2. Social Engagement
3. Emotional Intensity
4. Creative Expression

4 Things They Need to Do

• Seek out New Experiences
  – Builds resilience through openness to change
  – Prompts risk taking and impulsivity

• Engage Socially
  – Builds supportive and reciprocal networks with others
  – Prompts rejection of kind of “oppressive” parent-child relationships

• Experience Emotional Intensity
  – Increases energy, motivation, exuberance, ability to do a lot
  – Is scary because can prompt impulsivity, moodiness, poor emotion regulation

• Explore their Creativity
  – Allows them to think anything is possible and I can be the change!
  – Vulnerability to negative influences, lack of values clarity, inability to choose a path
This is Powerful
And scary

What is this like for them?

- The way they remember, think, reason, focus, make decisions and relate to others is changing
  - That can be confusing
- Everything they are expected to do is more complex
  - That can be anxiety provoking
- The things they could rely on in the past are not there for them in the same way
  - That can be frustrating
How We Help at UVA

- Novelty & Social Engagement
  - Clubs, Multicultural Orgs, Greek Life, Leadership, Res Life, Student Activities, Etc.

- Emotional Intensity
  - See above plus...Process Groups at CAPS, Volunteering, Mentoring.

- Creative Exploration
  - Arts, Outdoors
How You Can Help

*Your job is to be there to be left.*
– Anna Freud
How You Can Help: Novelty Seeking

Encourage them to try new things
How You Can Help: Social Engagement

Allow them to develop their own social life
How You Can Help: Increased Emotional Intensity

Encourage taking risks and seeking out support away from home
How You Can Help: Creative Exploration
Additional Tips

• Students are aware of mental health issues but worried about burdening you. Listen, ask and try not to take it personally.

• Although you’re keeping a distance, you are also still the ultimate safety net.

• This is also a transition for you. Learn a new skill, take a trip, explore a hobby, hang out with friends…

• Try not to compare your child to others. We’ve been doing this since they were born, but rarely is the comparison fair because they are all different.
"The loving mother teaches her child to walk alone. She is far enough from him so that she cannot actually support him, but she holds out her arms to him. She imitates his movements, and if he totters, she swiftly bends as if to seize him, so that the child might believe that he is not walking alone…...and yet she does more. Her face beckons like a reward, an encouragement. Thus the child walks alone with his eyes fixed on his mother’s face, not on the difficulties in his way. He supports himself by the arms that do no hold him and constantly strives toward the refuge in his mother’s embrace, little suspecting that in the very same moment that he is emphasizing his need of her, he is proving that he can do without her, because he is walking alone”

– Kierkegaard, 1846
To Learn More

**The Mysterious Workings of the Adolescent Brain**
Ted Talk – Sarah Jayne Blakemore

**Insight into the Teenage Brain**
Tedx Talk - Adriana Galvan