

How the Adolescent Brain Shapes Behavior



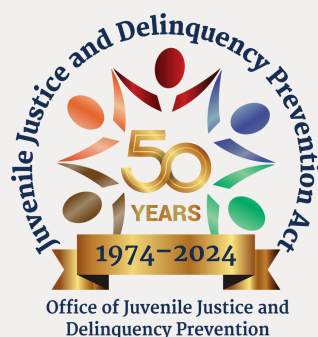
The Developing Adolescent Brain

The brain continues to mature into a person's mid-20s, especially the prefrontal cortex, which governs decision-making, impulse control, and planning. Youth are more prone to impulsive actions and misinterpreting emotions due to the faster development of emotional centers relative to the slower growth of cognitive control.



Why Teens Take More Risks

Adolescents often engage in risky behaviors, not because they don't understand the risks but because their brains are more sensitive to rewards. The heightened activity in reward-processing areas and underdeveloped impulse control make them prioritize immediate rewards over long-term consequences.



Teens, Peers, and the Influences Around Them

Adolescents are strongly influenced by their environments and peer groups, with the presence of peers often increasing the likelihood of risky behaviors. Interventions that strengthen family support and create safe, positive environments can reduce delinquency and promote healthier development.



The Hidden Cost of Trauma on Teens

Adolescents are more susceptible to developing mental health conditions during this crucial phase of brain development. Exposure to stress, trauma, or substance abuse can disrupt brain pathways, leading to long-term negative outcomes and altered development.



Supreme Court's Recognition

The U.S. Supreme Court reshaped youth justice through landmark decisions that highlighted key differences in brain development and decision-making between youth and adults. Key cases include:

Roper v. Simmons (2005) recognized youths' diminished culpability, emphasizing their lack of maturity, susceptibility to peer pressure, and greater potential for rehabilitation than adults.

Graham v. Florida (2010) built on Roper, recognizing that developmental immaturity makes youth more vulnerable to negative influences, often leading to reckless behavior they may not fully understand.

Miller v. Alabama (2012) required sentencing courts to account for a youth's age, developmental stage, and potential for rehabilitation acknowledging that brain development continues into early adulthood.

Additional resources

[Click Link Below](#)

The MacArthur Foundation's
Research Network on Adolescent
Development and Juvenile Justice

The National Academies,
Reforming Juvenile Justice: A
Developmental Approach

Follow along this fall as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the JJDP Act and observe Youth Justice Month by releasing a series of infographics! Check out [Justicepolicy.org](https://justicepolicy.org) to see what you've missed!