

ADOLESCENCE UNPLUGGED

Supporting Today's Adolescents Through the Bumpy Ride to Adulthood

The metaphor of a bumpy ride is very helpful when exploring adolescence. This allows for the wide variance in the journey that many parents experience when they walk beside their children as they leave childhood behind and head in the direction of adulthood. There is no "one right way" to do adolescence because every child ever born is unique and different. There are no quick fixes either — sorry. All adolescents are "at risk" during adolescence — no-one is immune from potential harm.

Research shows that adolescence is a time of confusion, massive change and serious risk. It is also a time of enormous potential in the development of new skills, knowledge and abilities.

"Expecting the adolescent to forever remain a child sets you up for disappointment, disillusionment and hurt. Accepting the fact that the child-parent relationship is over and embracing the different but potentially wonderful one that lies ahead is a giant leap toward getting along with a teenager."

— Sheryl Feinstein, *Parenting the Teenage Brain* (2007).

Why we are concerned about today's adolescents

- Suicide rate decreasing, still leading cause of death among 15-24-year olds (26%). Also land transport accidents (25%), accidental poisoning including overdoses (5%), assault (3%). 28% of fatal assault victims female. Of total deaths, 68% males. (Source: [AIHW](#)).
- Mental illness is increasing among teens with anxiety disorders most common (affecting 1 in 5 females and 1 in 10 males aged 16-24). (Source: [Headspace](#))
- Nearly 1 in 5 teen girls (16-17) surveyed would meet clinical criteria for depression and one fifth of adolescents had "very high or high levels of psychological distress", according to [The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents](#) report 2015.
- [The Mission Australia Youth Survey 2016](#) demonstrates three issues of personal concern for 15-19s were coping with stress, school or study problems and body image.
- In 2013-2014, there were more than 33,000 hospitalisation admissions for intentional self-harm across Australia. Stats suggest less than 13% of young people who self-harm come to clinical attention. (source: [Headspace](#)).
- 1 in 10 12-17-year-olds report having self-harmed at some point, around three quarters saying they've done so in the past year. (Source: [The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents](#) report 2015)
- Fewer 12-17-year-olds are drinking alcohol AND markedly more of them are abstaining. (They are also delaying their uptake of smoking and illicit drug use until their older — 16% of 12-17 year-olds have used illicit drugs). (Source: [Michael Livingston, "Trends in non-drinking among Australian Adolescents", Society for the Study of Addiction, 2014](#))

- Alcohol remains a key risk factor for injury among young people, with one in five drinkers aged 16-17 reporting alcohol-related injuries and one in 10 a regretted sexual experience linked to their drinking. (Source: Livingston)
- 23% of 11-24-year-olds surveyed were “very concerned” about family conflict (Source: [ARACY –Report Card-Wellbeing of Young Australians 2013](#)).
- 43,165 young people aged 15-24 approached specialist homelessness agencies between 2015-16. This number has decreased since 2011-12. Domestic violence or unstable housing are the two most common reasons given for young people presenting alone. (Source: [Australian Institute of Health & Welfare](#))
- Increased sexualisation of both boys and girls and confusing world of social media. Teen pregnancy rates are higher than OECD average.
- 32% of young people do not complete Year 12. The Youth Unemployment Rate in Australia increased to 13.2% in September 2014 from 12.8% in August of 2014. There are also new challenges to further study.
- Between 2008 and 2014, the proportion of new university graduates in full-time employment dropped from 56.4 per cent to 41.7 per cent. (Source: [ABC News](#))

Today's Adolescents

Today's adolescents are experiencing more change, more rapidly than any previous generation. They are potentially living in a more risky, stressful world than ever seen before.

Main drivers in adolescence

- Seeking autonomy
- Identity searching
- Needing to belong
- Immature brain driving a mature looking body
- Separation from parents
- Forming relationships.

There has always been a generation gap between parents and their adolescents, however, since the new millennium it has become even more of a chasm!

A study of resilient and optimistic teenagers noted they belonged to a group of friends, particularly those in high school. More than 90% of the young people reported that being connected to peers was the second most important protective factor during crises and applied to most young people.

– Lyn Worsley, *The Resilience Doughnut: The Secret of Strong Kids*, (2006).

Adolescents are still at risk of their immature brain structure until the early-mid 20s.

What's going on up there in the adolescent brain?

- Overproduction of dendrites and synaptic connections.
- Pruning — use it or lose it!
- Myelination — the process of insulating the neurons and synaptic connections.
- Adolescents are relying on their amygdala rather than the pre-frontal lobe — **flight, freeze or fight** responses are more likely.
- Emotional illiteracy is the norm for many, including intense mood swings and confusion.
- Window of sensitivity.
- Hot cognition.

The world now appears as if through a cracked windscreen.

Adolescents need more sleep than pre-pubescents or adults.

Danger signs of teens at risk

- Isolation from family and friends.
- Sudden changes in schoolwork, job performance or athletic activities.
- Drastic mood swings.
- Lack of interest in outside school activities.
- Family conflict.
- Living in a community with high crime and easy availability of alcohol and drugs.
- Delinquent friends.
- Academic failure.
- Change in eating and sleeping habits.
- Cutting or hurting themselves.

All adolescents need lots of support and encouragement to navigate the bumpy road — the journey from childhood to adulthood.

Parents can support adolescents by using caring, empowering communication

- Use words of suggestion not direction
- Avoid shame-based language
- Encourage thinking and making choices
- Lighten up!
- Remember they are temporarily brain impaired
- Choose right time to talk and use door openers
- Avoid using don't — try "next time"
- Ensure they are listening
- Never argue with an adolescent
- Co-parent your teen's friends and vice versa

"The key is for the adolescent and the adult-who-once-was-an-adolescent to recognise those important brain changes and learn to navigate these years constructively and collaboratively in order to keep communication open between them, to optimise life for everyone and to avoid tragic endings or risky behaviours. The challenge is not easy but it at least should be made clear."

– Daniel Siegel, *Brainstorm* (2013).

"Lighthouses" are essential for adolescents to make it to the end of the journey — healthy and on track to realise their full potential.

How do "lighthouses" support adolescents on the bumpy ride?

They will:

1. Have knowledge and understanding of adolescence.
2. Have the courage to care.
3. Be trustworthy and respectful.
4. Give hope and encouragement.
5. Build connectedness through genuine acceptance.
6. Encourage mastery and teach life skills.
7. Help adolescents manage "big, ugly emotional states".
8. Practise caring, empowering communication.
9. Give guidance when asked.
- 10.10. Strengthen the spirit — including laughter and lightness.

They shine a light on the invisible sign around an adolescent's neck that says
"Make me feel I matter"

Adolescence is the best time to tap into a person's potential.

Keep in mind the emotional barometer – especially the tipping point!

Doing things you enjoy, which are respectful of yourself and others, [creates positive brain chemicals – ie empties the emotional barometer](#). Here are some that work:

Athletic success & sport — team and individual

Artistic & creative expression — drama, dance, music, art

Deep relaxation & stillness — calming audios, quiet time at beach

Pets that love unconditionally!

Safe, honest human connection — deep human connectedness, family, friendship

Significant immersion in nature — walking, surfing, fishing, walking the dog

Acts of service — helping others

Discovering new purpose & meaning — starting something new such as gratitude journal, fitness program.