Regional **Prevention** Services

Regional Prevention Services

Adolescent Decision-Making & Problem Solving

Regional Prevention Services (RPS) is a regionally-based system, funded by the Colorado Department of Human Services; Office of Behavioral Health and administered by OMNI Institute.

For more resources and to find out how to contact the Regional Prevention Consultant (RPC) in your region, visit www.rpscolorado.org

We have all experienced adolescence: the fight for independence from parents, the need for peer approval, the exploration of self-identity. This is often a challenging time for young people as they navigate social cliques at school, seemingly overprotective parents, and confusion from the inner self. If we are to build resiliency in our young people to overcome these challenges, our positive youth development efforts should be focused on decision-making and problem solving. There are many factors that influence the decision-making processes of adolescents including peer pressure, lack of experience, relationship building, and brain development.

Considerations:

Brain-imaging technology opened a window to better understand adolescent brain development. We now know that brains can develop into our mid-twenties and, "as we move through adolescence, the brain undergoes extensive remodeling, resembling a network and wiring upgrade".[1] The process begins at the back of the brain with basic, primal functions and slowly moves forward towards complex thinking functions. The last part of the brain to develop is the pre-frontal cortex, which is responsible for risk taking, judgment, and decision-making processes.
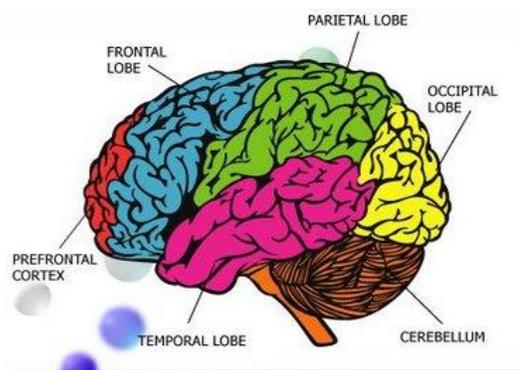
Youth as Problem Solvers

It is possible to have an optimistic frame through which we view this brain development process. Consider that, "the adaptive adolescent story casts the teen less as a rough draft than as an exquisitely sensitive, highly adaptable creature wired almost perfectly for the job of moving from the safety of home into the complicated world outside".[2] Adolescents are primed for the stark reality of decision-making, which includes ambiguity, risk taking, and flexibility. All of these characteristics are present during adolescence and can be used as an asset as opposed to a barrier in terms of decision-making processes. We have an opportunity, through effective youth development programs, to shape the adolescent brain in positive, healthy ways.

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Others Considerations:

Adolescents seek out and are stimulated by others their own age and peer approval is essential to adolescents' survival. The adolescent brain reacts to peer exclusion much as it responds to threats to physical health or food supply.[3] The built-in need for social approval by peers during adolescence can lead to a variety of challenges in the decision-making process. Researchers found that when teens played a risk-taking game *alone*, they took the same amount of risks as adults, but when in the company of their peers, they took twice as many risks.[4] These socially influenced solutions may be the most difficult challenges to overcome for adolescents given their strong desire to fit in. Beyond brain development and social factors, there are numerous other challenges around adolescent decision-making. Adolescents may:

- **See only either-or choices rather than a variety of options**
- **Lack the experience, knowledge, or feeling of control over their lives to come up with alternative choices,**
- **Focus more on the social reactions of their peers when deciding to engage in or avoid risky behaviors,**
- **Have a hard time interpreting the meaning or credibility of information when making decisions, and**
- **Be influenced by their emotions and fail to use decision-making processes. [5]**

Decision-making and problem solving research suggest that this list of challenges could make it very difficult for adolescents to practice healthy lifestyles.

From Theory to Practice:

Young people often lack opportunities to practice anything beyond simple decision-making processes in their daily lives. If youth development programs are going to have a true impact on learning and personal growth, then adults need to relinquish some power to allow adolescents to truly engage in the decision-making process. To help adolescents develop decision-making and problem solving skills:

- **Teach young people about how their emotions may influence their thinking and behavior,**
- **Encourage young people to search for new information when making decisions and helping them to avoid overestimating their knowledge and capabilities,**
- **Provide accurate information to teens about actual behaviors versus misperceptions of norms in their communities and peer groups,**
- **Utilize concrete situations and decision problems that reflect young people's interests and have relevance to their lives. This can be achieved through role playing, team problem solving, or games,**
- **Assist young people to recognize their own biases,**
- **Provide adolescents with opportunities to practice and rehearse decision-making skills in safe environments, and**
- **Help young people understand how their choices affect others. [6]**

Other ideas for building decision-making and problem solving skills include sharing personal stories about concrete experiences, journaling personal learning of information, repetition of the information and how it relates to real-life experiences, and having adult mentors be transparent about how they come to certain decisions in their lives.

[1] *Dobbs, D. (2011) Teenage Brains - Pictures, More From National Geographic Magazine*. (n.d.)., p. 3 Retrieved from http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/10/teenage-brains/dobbs-text
[2] Ibid. p. 5
[3] Ibid. p. 8
[4] Ibid.
[5] *Brockman, M. S. & Russell, S. T. Decision-making/Reasoning Factsheet*. (n.d.). p.1. Retrieved from http://cals-cf.calsnet.arizona.edu/fcs/bpy/content.cfm?content=decision_making
[6] Ibid. p.2

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