

The Developing Brain

Let's give all young people the opportunity to reach their potential

The brain is built like a house, constructed over time. While people are born with the blueprint for a developed brain, experiences and relationships determine how well the brain gets built.

A healthy brain is key to the ability to learn, handle stress, and build positive relationships. Together we can build a better foundation for stronger brains.



THE BLUEPRINT

All young people were born with a blueprint and a specific timeline for construction. The way the brain is constructed allows for plenty of room for growth. By design young people have flexible curious brains that make them able to learn a lot, but this design also makes them vulnerable to risky situations.

A young person's reward center develops by about age 13 and is stimulated by exciting and risky experiences.

The part of the brain controlling judgment and reason doesn't fully develop until age 25.

Young people are also very sensitive to stress. Because the frontal lobe is not developed, they can't access reason to control their emotions and manage their stress.



Young people are looking for new experiences but do not yet have the ability to fully understand all the consequences of their actions. This explains why they have a hard time making healthy decisions.

SUBSTANCE USE DISRUPTS CONSTRUCTION

Just like bad weather and broken materials can make a building less sturdy, alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs can impact how well the brain is built.

Alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs, create permanent changes in the brain's reward center. The earlier a young person starts using these substances the more vulnerable they are to addiction.

Alcohol makes safe decision-making more difficult for young people because it blocks the part of the brain that controls judgment, which is still developing.

Prescription drugs work with the brain to treat medical problems when taken correctly. Taking more than prescribed or in the wrong way can lead to addiction.



Marijuana may be used by young people to help decrease stress and anxiety, however early use decreases the body's natural ability to calm and relax.

BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION

Strong, supportive relationships with an adult- such as grandparents, aunts, coaches, or neighbors- provide a young person with much needed support for ensuring sturdy brain architecture and the ability to make good decisions.

Talk less, ask more:

When you are interacting with your young person, try to do less of the talking. Ask questions to discover more about what they value. Strong connections are developed when you learn about what truly matters to, and what motivates, your young person.

Remember the importance of friends:

When we tell a young people they can't go to a place where alcohol and drugs might be available, we may be taking away what they value most right now- hanging out with their friends. Work with your young person on phrases to use when refusing drugs and alcohol and practice the phrases with them.

Coping mechanisms:

Young people experience stress but don't yet have the skills to manage it in a healthy way. Comfort them through stressful situations. Then, when your young person is ready, work with them on ways to calm themselves in the next stressful moment and ways to prevent stressful situations from becoming overwhelming in the future.



As connections grow with a young person, and relationships become more meaningful, you are building a more solid, sturdy foundation for brain architecture.