



# PARENTS USE YOUR POWER

November 2014

## PowerTalk for Families

Decision Making Affects Our Goals  
Click here to use this month's [PowerTalk activity](#) with your child to practice making decisions that will move him/her closer to their goals.

**NEXT MONTH:**  
Effective  
Communication



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## Understanding Adolescent Brain Development Can Maximize your Child's Decision Making



All of our decisions have consequences. Consequences can be positive or negative. Parents always want to help their children make decisions that will have positive consequences. Unfortunately, parents can become frustrated when it seems like their adolescents are making decisions that are impulsive and bound to end with negative consequences. "Why would you do that?" or "What were you thinking?" are the cries of many exasperated parents.

When children are young, parents often read child development books to better understand and maximize the developmental stages their children are experiencing. In the same way, it is important to learn about the developing brain to better understand and maximize the stages their adolescents are experiencing.

Scientists studying the brain development of adolescents have given us a biological explanation for these impulsive decisions that often frustrate parents. Scientists have found that the **amygdala** (the area of the brain responsible for instinctive reactions like fear and aggression), develops quite early. The **frontal cortex** (the area of the brain that controls reasoning and self-control) develops much later—often not until the mid-20's. Therefore, the process that an adolescent uses to make decisions is very different than the process that their parents would use. This difference is based on biological brain development, not your child's desire to drive you crazy.

Adolescents are making many of their decisions based on instinctive reactions and since the part of their brain that controls reasoning isn't fully developed, they often don't "think through" the consequences before they react. Based on this stage of brain development, adolescents are more likely to act on impulse, misread or misinterpret social cues and emotions, get into accidents, be involved in fights and engage in dangerous or risky behavior. They are also less likely to think before they act, pause to consider negative consequences or change their behavior to avoid those negative consequences.

This doesn't mean that young people can't make decisions with positive consequences. It also doesn't mean that they shouldn't face the negative consequences of decisions they make. However, awareness of these biological differences can help parents better understand the behavior of their adolescents and guide them toward healthier decisions.

Here are some tips to help you guide your child through this exciting developmental stage:

### Parenting Power Tips:

- Talk to your preteen about choices. Young people sometimes think they don't have a choice in the outcome of decisions they make. Help them to see possible alternatives that may lead to more positive consequences
- Help your child to identify and compare the consequences of all of the available choices. Discuss how the consequences would affect their goals. Explain (without lecturing) the consequences of different choices
- Allow your child to make decisions and face the natural consequences of those decisions. Spend time review the decision and related consequences. Were those the consequences that he/she expected? If not, what could they have done differently to achieve the desired consequences? Remember, your child may make different choices and have different expectations than you. As long as they are safe, allow them to explore those choices and the resulting consequences.
- Follow up with your child to see if things worked out the way they planned. What did he/she learn about the process? Sometimes the value of an experience is in the lesson that is learned from the consequences we experience.
- Don't forget to praise your child when he/she is making choices that result in positive consequences. Encouragement is a great way to reinforce positive behavior.

A project of 360 Youth Services, Naperville School District #203, Indian Prairie School District #204, Naperville Police Department, KidsMatter, Aurora Police Department and District 203 & 204 parents. Funded in part by Illinois Department of Human Services.