



The teenage years are hard for everyone. Physical changes in your child create a lot of ups and downs. Yet as a parent, you don't have to feel helpless. Let Gary Chapman help you guide your child through this challenging yet rewarding new stage of life.

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## Chapter 1

# I Wish I'd Known . . . That Teens Are Developing the Ability to Think Logically

One mother said, “Why does my teenage son question everything I say? It’s like something happened in his brain. He’s never been like this before. It’s like his whole personality has changed.”

This mother unknowingly answered her own question. “It’s like something happened in his brain.” She is right. The teenage brain is going through a remodeling process. Don’t expect your teenager to continue to be a child. Adolescence is all about change. We know that

their bodies are changing because we can observe they are getting taller. We know they are changing sexually because pubic hair is beginning to form. The young teenage girl will soon begin her menstrual cycle if she hasn't already, and the young man will soon begin shaving his face. However, we are not always aware that they are changing mentally because we can't observe the brain. Research indicates that adolescence is a period of radical neurological change. One of those changes is that they are developing the ability to think logically.

Notice I say "developing" the ability to think logically. It doesn't happen overnight. Adolescence is a passageway between childhood and adulthood. In the early stages of development, the teen may dip back into childhood behavior and accept everything you say as fact, and two days later they may question everything you say. Because the teenage brain is impressionable, that is, greatly influenced by their environment, the parental role becomes extremely important in the teenage years. This is not the time to check out, but a time to walk with them through this ongoing renovation of the brain while they develop logical thought.

Another significant change in the teenage brain has to do with the emotional center of the brain. The teenager's emotional highs are extremely high, and the emotional lows are extremely low. This is because the emotional control center of the brain is also undergoing renovation. Your teen may be exceedingly happy in the morning and deeply sad in the evening of the same day. It all depends on what they encounter during the day. Remember, the teenage brain is hugely affected by the teen's environment.

As parents, you are a part of the teen's environment. The way you respond to their emotional state and their intellectual questions will determine whether you are a positive or negative influence on

their developing brain. All of these changes are to be expected in the adolescent years. I wish I had known all of this before our children became teenagers. In this chapter and in each of the following chapters, I want to share some of the things I learned from my own experience, and some of the insights I've gained from parents who have come to me for counseling through the years.

### **STAYING ENGAGED**

My first suggestion is to stay engaged. All research indicates that if parents will stay positively engaged with their teenagers, they will have a greater influence than will his or her peers. In the early days with my busy schedule I tended to respond quickly and without thought to my teens. If they questioned something that I thought we all had believed for some time, my response was something like, "You know better than that." Not a positive response. I was putting a cap on their questioning minds. They would walk away, and I had missed an opportunity to help them develop rational and logical thinking. Stay engaged, but the engagement must be positive.

Positive engagement begins with listening to the questions your teen is asking. As parents we are all busy but few things are more important than when our teen is asking questions. If you happen to be involved with something that you cannot stop immediately, then say, "That's an excellent question. Ask me again in ten minutes when I finish what I am doing because I want to give my full attention to what you are asking." Teens will accept that slight delay because they understand that you are interested in their question.

Don't assume that the first question your teen asks is the real question they want to ask. If they say to you, "Why can't I go to the party?" they may well be asking, "Have you thought this through,

or are you simply making an arbitrary decision?” They want to know the reasons that led you to this conclusion. They may not be satisfied with your reasons, but they want to know that this was a thoughtful decision. And for the record, “Because I said so” is not a thoughtful response.

Don't expect your teen to always agree with the reasons you give. Remember, they are looking at the world from their limited perspective. You are still the parent. You have a position of authority over the teenager. You are older, and hopefully wiser, than your teen. Don't allow your teen's behavior to cause you to make a decision that you will later regret. If you “give in” to the request of your teenager because you want to avoid hysterical behavior, you will set a precedent. The teen will reason that if they can simply be obnoxious enough, they will get their way. That is not a behavioral pattern that will serve them well in adulthood.

Effective listening means that you will give your teenager your undivided attention when they are asking questions. Turn off the TV. Put your work aside. Put down your phone. Look them in the eyes and communicate silently that they are the most important person in your life at this moment. Once they have asked the question, you verbally affirm their question. “Good question. What brought that to your mind?” In that sentence you have affirmed their freedom to ask questions and you have also asked for more insight as to what led them to ask the question. That is important in knowing how you should respond.

## **EXPLORING A REAL-LIFE ISSUE**

For example, one of the areas that most parents are deeply concerned about is the whole issue of alcohol and drug use in the

teenage years. Research is clear that most adult alcoholics and drug abusers started the practice of drinking alcohol when they were teenagers. We don't want our teenagers to walk that road. But how do we help our teenager come to the same conclusion when their peers are encouraging them to drink and/or smoke marijuana? "If I catch you drinking or smoking marijuana, you will lose all of your privileges for the next three years" is not likely to keep your teen off of drugs and alcohol. However, utilizing your own experience, research, and exposure to real-life experience may well help your teen to make a logical decision about drugs and alcohol. Perhaps you had a relative who was an alcoholic. Be honest with your teen.

By real-life experience, I mean exposing your teen to the realities of what happens to teenagers when they become involved in alcohol and drugs. One of the best things I did with my son was to take him with me one Saturday a month to visit the juvenile detention center to play Ping-Pong with the young men who were incarcerated. After playing, we would engage in conversation with some of the young men and they would tell my son their story. I didn't have to say a word. They were proclaiming loudly the consequences of drug and alcohol abuse. On the drive home I would say to my son, "It's really sad, isn't it? Some of those guys are your age. It's so sad that they have made such poor decisions so early in life." He would readily agree, and sometimes make his own comments such as, "I hope I won't let anyone talk me into doing that." I would sometimes show him a news item about a teenager who had been killed in a car accident while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. I would say, "Derek, you might like to read this article. It's very sad, but it shows you what happens to some of the young people who drive while under the influence of drugs and alcohol."

If you are a parent who abused alcohol and drugs and you are now in the process of dealing with your addiction, you might consider taking your teenage son to your Alcoholics Anonymous group and let him hear the stories of other men, and also let him see some of your own struggle. He need not repeat your addictive pattern. As a matter of fact, the more knowledge he has of the struggle it has been for you, the more likely he is to make a wise decision about his own use of alcohol.

One young adult said to me, “The reason I decided as a teen not to drink alcohol or try drugs was because my father was an alcoholic. When I was twelve years old, he had an accident while driving under the influence, and a young mother in the other car was killed. After that, he enrolled in AA and was able to stay sober the rest of his life. But he never was able to shake the memory that his drinking had caused two young children to grow up without their mother. He fought bouts of depression the rest of his life. I knew that was not a road I wanted to travel.”

In summary, I am saying that you can expect your teenager to ask “why” questions about almost any topic. They may even come across as being very argumentative, but you do not have to mirror their behavior. You can take their question seriously and have thoughtful answers. And when you do, you are helping them develop rational and logical thought. You are cooperating in a positive way with the neurological changes that are taking place in the brain of your teenager.

## **GOING DEEPER**

If you want to help your teenager develop an ability to make wise decisions and think logically, one step you can take is to become more informed on your child’s changes during adolescence. The more you grow in understanding these developmental



challenges, the more compassion you will experience toward your children. When you show empathy and a willingness to learn, you demonstrate for your teen a picture of real maturity.

Below are a few resources that could be helpful in allowing you to step into your child's shoes.

***Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain***

—by Daniel J. Siegel, MD

This book is a fascinating and accessible explanation of the changes occurring in the teenage brain, specifically related to novelty seeking, social engagement, increased emotional intensity, and creative exploration. While these changes bring risks and negative possibilities, Dr. Siegel helps his readers understand both the downsides and upsides of adolescence.

**CPYU.org**

The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, run by Dr. Walt Mueller, helps parents understand and connect with their preteens and teenagers. CPYU offers regularly updated “Youth Culture News,” podcasts, articles, seminars, and other resources on adolescent development and culture.

***Driven to Distraction: Recognizing and Coping with Attention***

***Deficit Disorder***—by Edward M. Hallowell, MD,

and John J. Ratey, MD

Your teenagers are being raised in a world full of distractions. Even if your child does not experience ADD or ADHD, this book offers practical help for anyone who has trouble focusing, which is still the case for many undiagnosed teenagers.

## **IAmSecond.com**

Stories impact teenagers more than bullet points. This website offers a wealth of video testimonies from actors, athletes, musicians, business leaders, addicts, survivors, and average joes. Their honest confessions address difficult topics like addiction, identity, and injustice. You likely will have an easier time getting your child to watch a ten-minute video than making them read an essay on addictions.

### ***Coming Clean: A Story of Faith*—by Seth Haines**

The reality is that many teenagers are already wrestling with powerful addictions and haunting regrets. This raw and powerful memoir tells an honest story of healing from a recovering alcoholic. No matter what you or your teenager's escape is—social media, drugs, shopping, people-pleasing, food, alcohol, sex, you fill in the blank—Seth Haines's story offers hope for wholeness and a path for coming clean.

### ***Help My Unbelief: Why Doubt Is Not the Enemy of Faith***

**—by Barnabas Piper**

Part of learning to think logically is learning to wrestle with faith and doubt. Teens need a safe space to ask questions and grapple with unbelief. This book will help you guide your children through those difficult conversations through the personal story of writer and pastor Barnabas Piper, himself the son of pastor and author John Piper.

***Doubtless: Because Faith Is Hard*—by Shelby Abbott**

Being publicly skeptical about anything has become a cultural badge of honor in this digital age. Shelby Abbott humbly addresses the next generation's doubts with empathy and understanding. *Doubtless* is a book you could confidently read alongside your teenager.

## THINK ABOUT IT

1. Reflect on your own teenage years. How did your parents respond when you disagreed with them? Were their responses helpful or harmful?
2. In what ways would you like to be different from your parents in responding to your teenagers?
3. In what ways would you like to emulate your parents' pattern of responding to your developing the ability to think logically?
4. If you already have teenagers, how would you evaluate the way you have responded when your teenager questions your judgment?
5. When you have exerted parental authority, have you done so in a firm but kind manner, or have you responded with harshness and anger?
6. What would you like to change about your past method of responding to your teenager?
7. If your children are not yet teenagers, what have you learned from this chapter that you think will be helpful to you when they begin to exhibit evidence that their brain is going through renovation, and they are beginning to think more logically and ask more questions?

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