

Life Journey work ladder

Adapted for Teenagers

TEENAGE BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

IMPORTANT

This is a broad,
simplified guide. Every
child and family's
experience is unique.

Note:

Brainstorm by Dan Siegal, 2013
and Blame my Brain by Nicola
Morgan, 2013 has been integral
to the making of this Teenage Life
Journey ladder.



BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

- It's not the hormones I'm brain building! The brain development in the teenage years are 12 years to 25 years. This is where there is a period of growth and maturing of the brain. These changes and pruning to the adolescent brain are a biological drive to prepare the young person for adulthood. There are changes in the fundamental circuits of the brain that make the adolescent period different from childhood. And Teenagers need a lot of sleep to support this brain building work.
- The lower brain, amygdala (survival or reptilian brain) in teenage years is more easily activated than it is at any other developmental stage. Teenagers have a more immediate emotional response that isn't filtered by the higher (thinking or cortical) brain. Their thinking brain is more like a much younger child at this stage. And when a young person is stressed they will regress in age.
- Our pre-frontal cortex (thinking brain), which is necessary for balancing emotions/having insight and empathy, is not fully developed during this period. As a consequence the teenagers emotional responses can be impulsive and ATTACHment seeking/needing behaviours. Keeping a connection with your child is key in the teenage years..
- Stress both external and internal is present in the teenage years in many ways. Examples of stresses are exams, peer relationships, romantic relationships, social media, wider internet and puberty changes.

NOVELTY SEEKING and RISK

- Novelty seeking is crucial in adolescence, the person needs to prepare to 'step out into the world' and the increased drive for rewards in the brain encourages the adolescent to try new things. It creates a new passion for life and adventure but also an increase in risk taking and impulsivity.
- Adolescents are much more likely to anticipate a positive outcome when weighing up risk. So this means they are much more likely to focus on the chance of success and not the potentially negative consequences of their decisions. This releases the feel good hormone dopamine as a reward.
- Teenagers interpret facial expressions through their lower brain/amygdala/survival brain. While in adults it is in their higher brain. This can lead to a teenager misinterpreting another person's emotional response. And could potentially lead to arguments.
- Social engagement provides a new quality of friendships that can give essential emotional support as the young person begins the process of separation from their family. It can offer an emotional safety net but if peer groups are isolated from adults risk taking can increase.

IDENTITY

- During adolescence a new conceptual thinking and abstract reasoning develops. They are questioning, working out the world and their place in the world. It's a fluid state where the child is moving away from their parents values and developing their own. This searching for the meaning of life can create a crisis of identity, vulnerability to peer pressure and a lack of direction and purpose.

Sarah Ryan
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February 2023

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TEENAGE BRAIN DEVELOPMENT – THE POTENTIAL IMPACT FOR AN ADOPTED YOUNG PERSON.

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BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

- Dan Siegal discussed that part of the brain development occurring during this time is pruning. This occurs in the teenage brain because of the need for the brain to let go of connections in the brain that aren't needed for adult life. Pruning is a necessary process in ALL teenage brain development. However it can expose vulnerabilities for adopted teenagers because of their early trauma experiences. Stress can accelerate this pruning process.
- The amygdala is more online for teenagers during the teenage years. For adopted young people the amygdala can be more sensitive and dysregulated. This could be seen in terms of behaviours such as anger outbursts, anxiety, distracted, difficult to concentrate and hypervigilant/watchful.
- LIFE JOURNEY WORK. It's important to keep working on connecting with your young person as the parent – child relationship is the key to navigating these teenage years. Keep the informal life journey conversations open and ongoing. A good understanding of age appropriate therapeutic parenting is important at this stage to keep the communication flowing. The young person will still be making sense of their story. An adopted teenager should already be aware of their story through conversations at home, Life Story book, Memory box, Therapeutic Life Story work, photo album, letter box service/direct contact and keeping in touch with your child's foster carers. An adoptive parent should make themselves familiar with the child's later life letter if a child asks any questions the parent can answer this in an age appropriate way. So by the time the child reads their later life letter NOTHING should come as a surprise for them as the adoptive parent/s have answered questions and talked about some of the difficult themes within the book and letter. Life Journey work is a process over many years and not an event.

NOVELTY SEEKING and RISK

- The levels of dopamine are lower in the teenage brain. This is the 'feel good/reward chemical can be lower still for adopted young people. However the release of dopamine in response to a new experience is higher for teenagers. Hence risky behaviours can give a dopamine hit and alleviate those low moods. Remember a young person's behaviour maybe a communication on how they are feeling.

IDENTITY

- An adopted young person is trying to integrate aspects of both families into their emerging identities and they can find the formation of a positive identity challenging. The young person is working out who they are in the world. In terms of Life Story work any gaps, poor or vague narrative can potentially lead to a young person having a distorted sense of their story and therefore self. Good quality Life Journey work which is used and discussed openly within the family leads to a more cohesive sense of self.
- Therefore it is important that the young person's birth family is not spoken about in a derogatory way. This doesn't mean that you should shy away from the difficult aspects, but keep the information neutral, balanced and factual. For example they maybe worried that they look like their parent so they may become their parent. Validate their feelings and support your young person throughout this period. Your support is vital.

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RESOURCES TO SUPPORT FAMILIES, WORKERS AND TEENAGERS.

Other materials and publications to support the parents of adopted children.

This is just a sample of books and websites there are many more to explore.

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Life Journey Social Worker
February 2023

Books for children, adopters or adoption workers.

- Courageous Parents - Becoming a good anchor for your children/ Haim Omer
- My name is Why/ Lemm Sissay
- The Unofficial guide to Therapeutic Parenting (the teenage years)/ Sally Donovan
- Parenting adopted teenagers/Rachel Staff
- Family wanted - Stories from adopters/birth families and adoptees/Sara Holloway
- Blame my brain – The amazing teenage brain revealed/ Nicola Morgan*
- Life Story Therapy with traumatized children/Richard Rose
- Life Story work for children who are fostered or adopted/ Katie Wench and Lesley Naylor
- A-Z of Therapeutic Parenting/Sarah Naish
- Adoption at the Movies / Addison Cooper
- Attachment handbook for foster care and adoption/ Gillian Schofield and Mary Beek.
- Bruised Before Birth/Joan McNamara
- Bubble Wrapped Children/Helen Oakwater
- Building the Bonds of Attachment/ Daniel Hughes
- Nurturing Attachments, Supporting children who are fostered & Adopted/ Kim S Golding
- The Teenage Brain/Frances E Jensen
- Bravely Being Me – Brilliant Stories of Adopted People/Sam Langley-Swain
- The Power of Showing Up/Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson
- What Happened to You/ Bruce D Perry and Oprah Winfrey.
- The boy who was raised as a dog/Bruce D Perry and Maia Szalazvitz
- Brainstorm/Dan Siegal *

Useful websites and YouTube resources

- [Children and Young People Service | Connect Cymru](#)
- [Resources \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](#)
- [National Adoption Service - Home \(adoptcymru.com\)](#)
- [About us | Safe Hands Thinking Minds](#)
- [Therapeutic Life Story Work - Sharing Lives/Sharing Stories: Richard Rose – YouTube](#)
- [Dr Karen Treisman – YouTube](#)
- [Good relationships are the key to healing trauma | Karen Treisman | TEDxWarwickSalon YouTube](#)
- [Oprah Winfrey & Dr. Bruce Perry in Conversation | SXSW EDU 2021 – YouTube](#)
- [How the brain adapts to adversity | UK Trauma Council – YouTube](#)
- [Dan Siegel - "The Adolescent Brain" - YouTube](#)
- [The Repair of Early Trauma: A Bottom Up Approach - YouTube](#)
- https://youtu.be/waeRP6jzW_U Why teenagers appear rude - video