

Priming the Teenage Brain for Compassion

Adolescent development isn't all hormones and drama. As Daniel Siegal explains, it's a time when teens begin to foster greater compassion and kindness.

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The adolescent period is absolutely amazing. People often give it a negative approach, saying it's a time when adolescents are going to lose their mind, or it's just immature, or raging hormones drive you crazy. These are not only wrong, but [they're myths](#) that mislead us and actually disempower us. Whether we're adults or adolescents, they actually give us the wrong

message and they make it so there's nothing we can do

So what is actually the truth? The truth is that instead of raging hormones what's happening is we have remodelling in the brain in ways we never could have predicted. We now understand two big things are happening in the brain. Things you as an adult can [support adolescents](#) in developing well, and if you're an adolescent, you actually can use this to help your brain grow in an optimal way.

Two Big Changes in the Adolescent Brain

What are those two things? Imagine that in childhood you're growing like a tree, and establishing all these branches and all these leaves are growing. That means connections among the basic cell, the neuron, called synapses are being established, and you're soaking in the knowledge of the world and that's beautiful. The tree is just growing, growing, growing

But then what happens and surprised everyone is the brain begins to prune itself. You start carving away some of those leaves and the smallest branches, even some of the larger branches. And the reason for the pruning is to specialized the brain.

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While the [child is developing](#) in ways that are really generalized, learning everything they can about everything they can, an adolescent is going to begin to [find their passion](#), to actually find things they like, things they really love doing, and to drive their development in that way. Pruning is actually a use it or lose it principle that if you don't use something you're going to lose

it. So if you like sports or like dance or like music, do those things so you continue to establish those circuits

The second thing that happens in the remodelling adolescent brain is myelin formation. Myelin is a healthy sheath that allows connective neurons to communicate with each other in a much more effective way, it's a hundred times faster the signal that's sent down a neuron and after it fires off it's 30 times shorter the resting period that happens. Thirty times 100 is 3000, so when you put down myelin you made your neurons communicate 3000 times more effectively. That's a great thing

Now the great thing too is you as an adolescent can use the [focus of your attention](#) to be aware of your emotions, aware of other people, to be engaging in activities, doing things with your thoughts that actually reinforce the parts of your brain you want to hold onto.

Train the Brain for Compassion

The good news about the remodelling story is a field called neuro-plasticity, how the brain's response to experience shows us that you do with your mind can change the activity and therefore the structure of your brain

If the ultimate goal of the brain remodelling is to make an integrated brain—to differentiate areas, and myelinate them—when you increase differentiation and linkage, you make the brain more integrative, and an integrated brain is the pathway to well-being. When integration is made visible, it's kindness and compassion.

So what we see through adolescent development is that our relationships become built on connections that are deep and filled with honouring each other's vulnerability and supporting connections that are compassionate, filled with a sense of caring about other people and wanting to help them. This is the kind of world that we can build as we move through life and support each other in our development.

This video was originally posted on Random Acts of Kindness. [View the original video.](#)