

‘What Were You Thinking’ is a podcast parents need to hear

by [Amy Joyce](#)



With this podcast, Dina Temple-Raston offers us a glimmer of understanding as to why good parenting doesn't always result in good kids who make the right choices. (Getty Images/iStock)

For more than a year, Dina Temple-Raston, a counterterrorism correspondent for NPR, has been looking at something else that can be terrifying: the teenage brain.

In her new podcast, [out now via Audible](#), Temple-Raston interviews and focuses on teens who have made some life-altering choices with bad consequences, and their parents. She goes beyond the stories and delves into the teenage brain and how it affected the teens' decisions.

[What teens wish their parents knew about social media]

“The brain needs time to experience things and tailor itself to be an adult brain. If you look at adolescence in that way, not only does it give teens a positive way of looking at this point in life, it shows parents there are things you can actually do,” Temple-Raston says. “And that was the point of this series.”

In the initial episode, Temple-Raston was the first to get an interview with [Abdullahi Yusuf](#), a high school football player in Minnesota-turned-ISIS recruit. “I’ve been looking at radicalization for some time. In the old Al Qaeda days, radicalization happened to people in their late 20s and 30s. But with ISIS, they’re recruiting teens,” she found. It occurred to her that their decision to join ISIS isn’t really an “ideological decision. It’s an adolescent one. I was getting anxious about the fact that you were finding people who just turned 18 getting 20-year sentences for buying a plane ticket.”

Throughout the episode, the listener starts to warm to Yusuf, who is smart and funny, as he explains what led to his astonishing choice to join ISIS. Temple-Raston speaks with members of his family, who were shocked and horrified by his actions. And she talks to the psychologists and counselors now overseeing his rehabilitation out of prison, working to help him choose more wisely.

Of course good parenting matters. But there’s a reason we hear “But I did everything right!” from moms and dads whose children make bad decisions. With this podcast, Temple-Raston offers us a glimmer of understanding as to why good parenting doesn’t always result in good kids who make the right choices.

There’s so much new research on the adolescent brain, perhaps in part because MRIs are much less expensive to perform. “Most people say [teens do these things] because of the prefrontal cortex and hormones and they’re done,” Temple-Raston said, but it’s more than that. MRIs are showing

variations among seemingly healthy teen brains, and scientists are starting to link these findings to teen actions. “I think parents either think they’re bad parents, or it’s a phase. I wanted to sort of say ‘Hey, maybe it’s not you.’ And then go somewhere to say there are solutions.”

Among other compelling interviews, Temple-Raston spends time with Sue Klebold, the mother of Dylan, who was one of the Columbine High School shooters, in an episode about school shootings. “She’s the kind of mom everyone wanted to hang out with. They were so engaged with Dylan. They had dinners together, did projects together. But he was becoming quiet and she didn’t want to invade his space.”

Just like in everyday life, where parents judge other parents, often without a full understanding of their situation, Temple-Raston found herself surprised at most every interview. “In every episode, there were assumptions I had. And in every case, it was something different than I thought it was.”

She hopes that the podcast will help parents understand that there are things they can do to address their teen’s behavior, even (or perhaps especially) if those actions are driven by brain differences.

For example, in listening to the episode about hacking, parents can learn to help kids use those computer skills in a more positive way. And an episode about suicide makes it clear that there’s a real gap between having depression and committing suicide. In fact, there appears to be more of a link between suicide and bipolar disease, where more than 50 percent of people diagnosed will attempt suicide.

“I want to get to the things that parents always wondered about,” Temple-Raston said. “It also might be a conversation you didn’t exactly know how to have with your kid, but this lets you do that.”

The episodes:

1. **Band of Brothers.** Abdullahi Yusuf opens up about how, in his search for identity, he began to radicalize. And scientists explain why Yusuf's brain may have been hard-wired to make these decisions.
2. **Being Worthy.** Ryan Green explains why he started hacking as a teen and what prompted him to hijack 77,000 computers at once. The episode explores how the adolescent's brain is hungry for dopamine, the chemical that makes people feel good and drives teens to take risks.
3. **After Riley.** A seemingly happy 15-year-old kills herself in an area of Colorado where suicides are sharply increasing. The show interviews her friends and family and looks into the issue of depression and bipolar disorder.
4. **Virtually Addicted.** A teen is addicted to (and recovering from) gaming. Neuroscientists explain how brain structure may make teens extremely susceptible to addiction. But (good news) it also makes them more apt to rewire.
5. **You Are Not Alone.** A teen finds solace in an online group of victims of bullying. This led to his poring over sites dedicated to school shootings. We hear how bullying can change the adolescent brain and can lead to violence. Sue Klebold, mother of one of the Columbine shooters, is interviewed.
6. **It Isn't Spirituality, It's Neuroscience.** Programs are popping up that aim to help teens make better choices. This includes classes on mindfulness.

“These weren't my children, but it made me look at other children in a very empathetic way,” Temple-Raston said of her work on this series. Perhaps it will help parents do the same — for their own children and others.

Follow [On Parenting on Facebook](#) for more essays, news and updates. You can [sign up here](#) for our weekly newsletter. Join our [discussion group here](#) to talk about parenting and balancing a career.

More reading:

[A dad tries to explain sex to his son and discovers the meaning of life](#)

[Four habits that will create resilient kids](#)

[Schoolyard conflicts may impact a child's health later](#)