

Organizational Coaching May Help Your Teen

By Lisa Lenhart, Ph.D., and Dorothy Lange, M.S.

Adolescence is a time of rapid physical, emotional and cognitive development—a challenging time for the adolescent himself, as well as for his parents. Adolescents begin to move towards independence in all areas of life and assume more of the roles and responsibilities of adults. This occurs despite the fact that many adolescents are not yet prepared emotionally or cognitively for these responsibilities because their brains are continuing to develop and mature. Although younger children may often resist assistance, the adolescent is much more likely to resist asking for, and accepting, help, given their focus on developing independence.

This is also the stage of development in which a strong focus is on the expansion of abstract thinking and reasoning skills, although the adolescent also experiences more

inconsistent control over behaviors and emotions due to hormonal changes and brain growth. Given these paradoxes, it is not surprising that many adolescents vacillate between appearing to be more mature than their age at times and less mature at other times. When they are asked to take responsibility for certain aspects of their lives, at times

they will be very adept at meeting these goals, and other times they will appear to be overwhelmed by the demands being placed on them. Parents need to help adolescents navigate this minefield of development so their children move beyond this stage into healthy and successful adulthood.

WHAT'S WITH THE BRAIN?

Recent research at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has discovered that there is rapid growth in the gray matter in the frontal lobe just prior to the onset of puberty, which then sets the stage for development of more advanced executive functioning skills, such as planning, problem solving and controlling impulses. Thus, this age is ripe for interventions targeting such executive functioning skills. In fact, adolescence is the time of greatest change within the parts of the brain that are associated with executive functioning skills. As adolescence progresses, there is a thinning in the frontal lobe gray matter, suggesting this is one of the prime times to develop the neuronal connections that will allow an individual to be most successful

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in life.

Dr. Jay Giedd of NIMH has noted that this is the time when adolescents are hard-wiring their brains for adulthood. Therefore, it is extremely important for them to be aware of how they are impacting their own brain development, as this will have lifelong consequences. The tricky part is providing guidance to the adolescent, who is seeking independence in the face of an onslaught of hormones and emotions, on how to spend time developing skills that promote more reasoned and logical thinking when there is such a strong pull for enjoyment and experimentation with freedom.

ORGANIZATIONAL COACHING

So, how does a parent help a child navigate the complex stage of adolescence? Recognizing the multiple factors (biological, hormonal, social) influencing a child's life can help parents remain more attuned to the multiple needs. Once a child understands that the experiences during adolescence have such a large impact on the rest of her life, it might be easier to help her be more open to activities or opportunities that will have a positive impact on brain development. One activity that can influence the mind in a positive way is organizational coaching, which can help set neuronal connections in place that will allow for greater executive functioning skills over the course of her lifetime.

What is organizational coaching, and how can it help your teenager deal more effectively with the demands of home, school and extracur-

ricular activities, as well as take advantage of this period of rapid development? Coaching is a personalized service tailored to the particular needs of each individual. During this period of development, when executive skills can be lost or misplaced amidst the hormones and social life, the coach can pinpoint specific areas of difficulty and help develop an intervention plan. Given their demanding schedules and conflicting interests, the most pressing concern for teenagers is often prioritizing and managing time. It cannot be assumed that they have the executive skills required to deal with these concerns on their own, particularly during one of their less mature periods. Rather, external support in the form of a coach may be needed to help them develop and implement an effective plan of attack for all time periods within this developmental stage.

THE FIRST STEP

The first important step can be the adolescent's acknowledgment that there is a problem or recognition that the development of such skills can be very helpful in daily life. She may see her grades slipping, or forget important soccer practices. This is a time when parents can discuss the value of external supports and the benefits of a coaching program. If she responds positively, an initial consultation can be scheduled with a coach who understands and works with adolescents. Often a coach will begin with a questionnaire or other form of information gathering to identify the executive skills that are most problematic at the time. Once the coach and adoles-

cent have isolated the primary areas of concern, they work together to develop a strategic plan that will address these concerns and help reach identified goals.

It is important that the developed plan incorporates strategies and schedules that are comfortable to the adolescent. When implementing time management and organizational strategies, for example, teenagers may be most comfortable using the technology that is an integral part of their lives. Rather than reminders on sticky notes, they may prefer programming a reminder into their computer, iPod or cell phone. However, some students will favor the sticky notes, so it is important to emphasize that everyone is different and needs to find what works best for her. The scheduling and duration of coaching sessions is also individualized. Some adolescents may benefit from weekly sessions over an extended period of time, while others will find that a few sessions can be effective in pinpointing problems and achieving their goals.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

It is also important to brainstorm with the teenager about potential obstacles that might prevent her from reaching her goals and ways to overcome these obstacles. For example, she may have the goal of completing all her nightly assignments by 11, but she is being interrupted by phone calls or instant messages. Once she

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identifies this obstacle, with the help of her coach, she can be proactive and plan strategies to deal with likely interruptions.

Recognizing that adolescence is a time of rapid development accompanied by many new challenges, it is easy to see that coaching support can be beneficial, not only for immediate concerns but also for lifelong executive functioning skills.

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