



TEEN CLINIC CORNER: THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN

We've all heard it before: "How was your day at school?" This simple question can and most likely will elicit an impassioned, dramatic response from a 14-year-old high school freshman. Perhaps their Algebra teacher is out to get them. Maybe their group of friends didn't invite them to the party this weekend and they're feeling heartbroken and betrayed. Or, maybe, they tripped in gym class in front of their crush causing life, as they know it, to feel effectively over. You might be familiar with this teen, who comes in for a routine check-up with a flat affect, not very excited to answer your questions. Most of us can look back at our own experience as adolescents, shrug, and chalk up our overzealous responses to mundane things caused by raging teenage hormones. Sure, hormones play a big part in emotions, specifically during adolescence. However, did you know that the melodrama of the teenage experience is actually much more complex than just changing hormones? Welcome to your quick guide on the adolescent brain! We'll include some practical tips on how you can make sure a teen's experience at Variety Care is patient-first, successful, and beneficial.

Our ideas about those "raging hormones" aren't completely incorrect, but they don't paint the full picture of what's going on in the adolescent brain.

Most experts agree that the brain isn't fully developed until a young adult's mid-twenties! The Harvard Health Blog's article "The Adolescent Brain: Beyond Raging Hormones" from 2005 provides us with some specifics: the connection from the part of the brain responsible for problem-solving and judgement (the prefrontal cortex) to the part of the brain responsible for emotions (the limbic system) is among some of the later connections made. What does this mean for teens? Self-regulation is oftentimes much more difficult during the adolescent years! On top of brain changes, teens are often dealing with social pressures from friends, nervousness about their future, navigating their own path of not-quite independence while simultaneously trying to manage their grades, build a resume for careers or college, and help their family at home. Try to keep this in mind when an adolescent is acting in a way that might be seen as unhelpful.

Now that we understand a little bit more about the way the adolescent brain works, what can we, as VC employees, do to make sure teenagers have a patient-first experience? Try to be as patient as possible, smile, use a reassuring voice and be aware of how your facial expressions might cause adolescents to shut down. Adolescents are often very linear in their thinking,

meaning they might assume you are trying to snoop in their business or judging their experience, when you're just trying to make sure they get the best possible care. To combat this, try giving the reasons you're asking questions. Assure teens that you're asking for information so that you can give them the best quality of care, not because you're trying to get in their business. Use open-ended questions and motivational interviewing skills—affirming, reflective listening, and summarizing back what they've said to you. Here's an example of an open-ended question with an explanation as to why you're asking in teen-friendly terms:

"Could you tell me when the last time you had sex without a condom or using birth control? I'm asking not to judge, but just so I can see if there are any specific medications, like Emergency Contraception or PrEP, I can provide based on your experiences. Do you feel comfortable talking about this right now?"

With just a little extra effort, we can ensure the teen patients at Variety Care receive quality, patient-first care that helps them maintain their health and well-being.