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Pardon my Pre-Frontal Cortex

By: Titus Benton

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I may be one of the few Middle School ministers in the country who enjoys watching Charlie Rose on television. Allow me to explain this unique attraction to those of you who are actually cool:

Charlie Rose is a talk show host, but not of the Letterman or Leno variety. He does serious interviews, and while I find them entertaining, they are more edutainment than pure fun and frivolity. He's pretty plain—his interviews happen primarily over a solid wood table with black backgrounds. This bland decor is meant to put the conversation at the forefront, which he successfully does. There aren't any intelligent lights. There aren't many frills. There are no video clips, games, or commercials. There's just discussion and debate, questioning and queries. Its good stuff, if I do say so myself. Charlie Rose would be a terrible youth minister, but he's a great interviewer. If you don't believe me, watch him for yourself.

Over the past several months, Charlie has been doing a series of interviews on the brain. They have covered just about everything—biological make-up, hidden mysteries, and emotional qualities of the brain. In one of these interviews, the focus was on the intricacies of the pre-frontal cortex.

You've probably heard that the pre-frontal cortex is a busy place. It is responsible for several things. If you don't believe me, check out Wikipedia. They never lie. Here's some stuff the PFC does:

- Planning complex thinking strategies
- Expressing personality
- Making decisions

- Seeing to correct social behaviors
- Thinking in line with held goals
- Differentiating between good and bad
- Differentiating between risk and reward
- Suppressing of urges

Wow. That's the kind of stuff that sends my wife scurrying for bed when 11:30 arrives and Charlie's theme song comes on the television. As a youth worker of Middle Schoolers, you don't have to like Charlie Rose, but you'd better listen up to this brain stuff. It has a *huge* impact on how we minister to students.

The truth is, our students don't have developed pre-frontal cortexes (or is it cortexi?). They are eleven, twelve, thirteen years old. With incomplete development in this region of the brain, some crazy stuff can happen—stuff that seems odd, risky, or downright sinful to those of us with well-developed noggins.

Recently our students went to Jr. High camp. I didn't get to spend the entire week with our group, but the volunteers that went came back with some curious reports. How is it that a student can act like a complete madman in one instant, and contribute to a serious spiritual conversation the next? One newer volunteer was amazed at the way that a student could act his age one second and then appear to be a true disciple of Christ ten minutes later.

Blame it on the prefrontal cortex.

You've been to camp before. You know the drill.

One year when I was travelling to a bunch of different camps, I saw the same kid fall asleep during a sermon, mack on a girl once he woke up, and then come forward at the end of the service to give his life to Christ. It was befuddling to me, but I didn't know about the prefrontal cortex back then. Now I do, and it makes perfect sense.

One year when I was the dean of a week of camp, a bunch of boys figured out that you could use a disposable camera as a taser. No kidding. All you have to do is take the little casing off, leave a certain wire exposed, and push the flash button on the front. They spent a lot of time developing their individual weapons, and then set about the business of shocking each other into submission. One student foolishly backed a friend into the shower region before tasing him. I am not making this up. Nobody got seriously injured, but volunteers who heard about it were absolutely freaking out.

"I wish those boys had fully developed prefrontal cortexes," I mused, almost to myself. The volunteers just looked at me funny.

The truth is, the immaturity that we almost always assume is spiritual immaturity is actually physical immaturity. When we come down on a kid because they did something foolish, seemingly without thinking, they don't see it as us holding them accountable to a higher standard. They don't even recognize that they did anything wrong. The synapses aren't connecting. The

chemicals aren't flowing. The cortex is not developing. They act like kids because—well, they *are* kids.

We don't have time to get into why kids today act like morons when kids the same age 200 years ago were running farms and graduating from schooling and acting like grown ups. Perhaps it's the lengthening of adolescence brought on by lowered expectations by adults who would rather baby sit than challenge. Perhaps there are actually physical realities that we can't see and don't realize are going on which we need to sit up and take notice of.

If our students make bad choices, say bad words, don't control their tempers, seem to have split personalities, don't talk about absolute truth the way the apostle Paul does, or have a hard time exercising self-control, that doesn't necessarily mean they are little demons, don't love Jesus, are destined for eternity in hell, or are insubordinate, disobedient little heathens.

It just means that they have the brain of a child and the body of an adult, and the former doesn't always keep up with the latter in a symmetrical way. You can blame it on the prefrontal cortex.

We must also keep in mind (no pun intended) that this supposed obstacle is also a great opportunity. Who better to challenge with the dangerous gospel than a kid whose brain chemistry predisposes them to the thrill of taking risks? Who better to infuse with the power of the Holy Spirit than a young person whose personality is still being shaped? Who better to shape in their understanding of good and bad, truth and lies, right and wrong, than a student whose brain is actually making connections and physical determinations on those topics every second of every day? Who better to confront with the most important decision of their life—following Jesus—than kids who are learning about what it means to make a decision?

What an honor to work among a group of people who are learning to think, not set in their ways. What a privilege to direct students who are open to direction instead of unmovable in their opinions. What a blessing to be able to help students take risks, and walk alongside them as they discover the rewards that come from following Jesus.

So the next time you have a kid fart in the middle of your sermon, tase a friend in the shower at camp, or otherwise do something ridiculous, causing you to wonder about their sanity, spiritual depth, and overall potential as a human being, remember this:

The prefrontal cortex may be your enemy at times, but it is also your friend.