



Ten things you need to know about teenagers

by Nicola Morgan



Nicola Morgan's books have been a staple in our house on all things teenagers! I can't recommend her writing highly enough and am delighted that she has agreed to share her wisdom with us too. Here's an essential primer with '10 things' that all us parents need to know about teenagers. And with adolescence starting as young as 10 this is essential reading regardless of how old your kids are.

Francesca Geens, Creator, The HappySelf Journal

1) They are all different

Branding people purely by age is unfair and unhelpful. Everyone goes through any stage differently, because of varied personalities, life events, environment, the people around us and myriad differences, small and large. Teenagers are individuals but they also share a special set of adolescent brain and life changes which make them differ in certain ways from younger children or adults.

Understanding both individualities and shared teenage factors is crucial to understanding and supporting the young person you care about.

2) 'Teenage' is misleading: adolescence starts before 13

As you might have noticed! The increase in neural (brain) connections that marks the beginning of adolescent brain development starts on average at age 10/11 in girls and 11/12 in boys. Around this time, there are often behaviours which you might label as 'teenage'. They are natural and explicable. Do appreciate that a young person may feel confused, anxious or insecure but not know how to express these feelings. Note, too, that some young people don't display noticeable or sudden changes and adolescence can be smooth.

3) Adolescence is not new

Adults often say, 'I wasn't like that', as though teenagers were completely different thirty years ago. No, society was often different; the environment we live in has changed; and screens and social media have altered life profoundly; but adolescent behavioural changes have been recorded for centuries and across cultures. For example, Shakespeare said, *"I wish there were no age between ten and three and twenty ... for there is nothing in the between save getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients, stealing and fighting."*

Adolescence is a universal, biological, necessary stage of development, with a positive outcome: independence.



4) The biological aim of independence explains so much

The move from protected, dependent child to unprotected, independent adult is a separation. They're separating from the security you give them towards being able to stand on their own feet, make decisions and develop personal values.

Separation is painful, even when welcome, which explains three common problems:

- ▶ Insecurity – they're leaving your protection and facing a scary future
- ▶ Conflict – to formulate their own opinions and values, they have to push yours
- ▶ Peer pressure – see point 9 below

5) The prefrontal cortex fully develops in the 20s

The prefrontal cortex (PFC) is known as the control centre, used for controlling impulses, making sensible decisions, being empathetic, predicting likely consequences. Although all teenagers are individual, none is likely to have completed this stage while school-aged, as scientists estimate final development in the mid-late twenties.

Often their PFC works pretty well, though, and they might make better decisions than some adults. But see the next point.

6) The Limbic system is well developed

While the PFC is undeveloped, the Limbic system is highly active. This contains all the more emotional areas, where temptation, drive, reward, instinct and the stress response happen.

So, teenagers often have heightened emotions and impulses without a strong control centre to help manage them.



Actually, we are all prone to domination by the emotional Limbic system: it's just that adults have less excuse for wrong decisions or behaving impulsively!



Very many teenagers face each school day with sleep deprivation more like jet-lag than simple sleep loss.

7) Sleep is biologically different

Using phones at night is bad for sleep but this does *not* explain adolescent sleep changes, which we observed long before smart phones. Teenagers need more sleep (on average just over nine hours), and their melatonin (sleep hormone) switches on late at night (as late as or later than for adults) and off later in the morning.

8) Self-consciousness is a major issue

There are differences in how teenage brains react during social embarrassment, compared to adult brains. Adolescents can be embarrassed in situations that don't particularly bother most adults and their brain activity (during fMRI scans) suggests a stronger reaction. We adults should understand this and not casually dismiss or laugh at their discomfort. The need to fit in and be accepted by their group is biological and strong.



9) Peer pressure is wired in

Humans are necessarily social and we suffer if we don't have our 'groups'. As they leave your protection, where they relied on unconditional love, adolescents must find new groups, making new connections without unconditional love. Teenagers, even more than adults (though we, too) have to adapt to earn acceptance and friendship from those around us. That sometimes means doing what the group, not adults, will approve.

At the same time, their PFC ("I shouldn't do this") often fails to dominate the Limbic system urge ("I want to do this") and teenagers are pulled to follow the group.

10) Teenage brains are blossoming!



From around the age of 15 or 16, on average, adolescents become able to think more deeply, widely, empathetically, articulately. When reading about a character, they can have insights of empathy. When they hear something on the news, they can link it to what they learnt in history. They can ask Big Questions, have deep ideas, develop nuanced values, start to guide their own lives in ways you might not have imagined for them. Their minds are opening: it's our job to unlock all the windows and let the fresh air of the world in.

Further Reading

You'll find lots more detail in my books, especially **Blame My Brain – The amazing teenage brain revealed** and **Positively Teenage**. My books are written for teenagers but adults are allowed to read them and will find them immensely reassuring and informative. Being a parent is not always easy. Being a teenager is not always easy. I'm here to help.

About the author:

Nicola Morgan, The Teenage Brain Woman, is a multi-award-winning author and speaker whose work on young brains, psychology and mental health is loved by teenagers, secondary schools and families around the world. For someone whose last school science report said, 'Nicola has no aptitude for science subjects', she's written a lot of science-based books and gained the respect of real scientists. In the past she has been a YA novelist, English teacher and dyslexia specialist and the mother of two teenage (now grown-up) daughters. Now, when not writing and dreaming in a garden office over a valley, she keeps herself physically and mentally healthy as a passionate vegetable gardener, decent cook and determined runner.



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For all her books and lots of free advice, see www.nicolamorgan.com
Nicola also does talks, online or in person, for conferences, schools and public audiences.

