

Dear Reader,

There have been many exciting developments in the field of adolescent development recently. We have chosen to highlight one here—the cognitive development of the adolescent and how it affects decision-making. I was privileged to hear Dr. Jae Giedd of the National Institute of Mental Health, whose research is cited in the article, speak at a conference last year, and his remarks were very compelling. This exciting research has many implications for the way we approach risk behavior education and prevention efforts among teens. I hope you find it as interesting as I did.

In the last few months, there has been a lot of media attention focused on adolescent sexual activity, specifically oral sex, largely brought to the forefront due to the locker room incident at Milton Academy in January. We at Healthy Futures have had questions from concerned parents and teachers about how to help teens understand the legal issues around sex. There seems to be a lot of confusion among both adults and teens about what the laws are. To help clarify things, we have added lessons into most of our classroom programs specifically addressing the legality of sex, and have a brief article in this issue of our newsletter summarizing the relevant laws for teens.

In this issue we are also highlighting the Lowell office of Healthy Futures. Ken and Rhea Gordon are an amazing team, and have been dedicated to improving the lives of teens in their community for many years. We are excited to have them as partners!

Sincerely,

Rebecca M. Ray, MPH

Healthy Futures Program Director

Maturation of the Teen Brain: Implications for parents, mentors, and society

How do we decide when a young person has developed adult judgment? Auto rental companies do not rent to drivers under age 25. The risk of damage and destruction of property is too great for the companies to expose the vehicles to younger immature drivers. So, what is maturity and how and when does it happen? Maturity is completeness of growth and development. There are three components to this process: physical, mental, and what might be called cognitive. Each of these has its own separate timetable of completion. Physical and mental maturity are fairly obvious to an outside observer, and can be measured—physical by weight and height, and mental, by memory and technical or artistic work. Both of these are usually complete by the end of the teen years. Cognitive maturity is less well-understood and, until recently, its time of completion has been undetermined. As you will see, though, in this paper, understanding of adolescent cognitive development has huge implications for all of society, and recent breakthroughs in neuroscience will forever change our understanding of adolescents and the role adults play in their lives. It is important to differentiate the terms “adolescent” and “teenager” from each other. The adolescent years are the period of time during which a person grows from puberty to cognitive maturity. This period extends well past the teen years. In fact, most college students are still adolescents. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the data proving that—of physical, mental, and cognitive maturity—it is cognitive maturity that develops last, usually not reaching completion until the mid-twenties.

Physically most people become mature as teenagers, some startlingly so. LeBron James, of the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team, straight out of high school, can run circles around some highly experienced NBA players.

Mentally, teenagers achieve great maturity of intelligence—their ability to calculate, memorize, and create is sometimes startling. The movie “Amadeus,” about Mozart, graphically illustrated this. Despite his youthful mental prowess, because his cognitive maturity lagged behind, Mozart’s capacity for making decisions that required judgment was strikingly immature. The primary message of recent groundbreaking neuroscience is that cognitive maturity develops last, after physical and mental maturity, for all adolescents. This research shows that cognitive maturity occurs in the mid-twenties, and includes the following:

- Mature judgment
- Seeing into the future
- Seeing how behavior can affect future
- Associating cause and effect
- Moral intelligence
- Abstract thinking
- Seeing what is not obvious
- Planning and decision-making
- Rational behavior and decision-making
- Understanding rules of social conduct

Most individuals have never thought about when these abilities develop or where they originate. Ancient writings often say they come from the heart—clearly separating them from just the ability to think. Perhaps, in concept, they were not far off. Neuroscientists, led by Jay Giedd, MD, Chief of Brain Imaging at the National Institute of Mental Health, are showing us that these capacities primarily reside within the pre-frontal cortex of the frontal lobes of the brain. MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) is a technology

continued on page 3

Educator Spotlight...



James Déstiné
Healthy Futures Educator

HF: Why do you work in the field of abstinence education?

James: The choice to be abstinent was one that I made as a teen. I wanted to make an impact in the lives of young people by communicating that they, too, can make this choice. Learning how to better talk to kids about sex will also prepare me for talking to my own children about the topic.

HF: Why do you think the abstinence message is so important?

James: It's a message that teens are not hearing enough. Instead they are constantly hearing messages encouraging them to have sex. I want to empower young people with the message of abstinence.

HF: Are there any students that stand out to you?

James: One 8th grade girl stands out to me. She was particularly touched when I told my personal story. After she heard me tell how I had decided not to have sex until I was married, she stared at me intently through out the rest of the week. At the end of our time she wrote on her student evaluation, "James, I choose abstinence, too!"

HF: What keeps you going, when you hear about the number of teens who are not practicing abstinence?

James: I got into teaching because I wanted to make a difference by teaching young people about the choices that would be most beneficial to them. Just because we know that some teens might try drugs or alcohol, doesn't mean we should stop telling them about how these substances can be hurtful to them. I know that some teens will not choose abstinence, but that doesn't mean I should stop telling them that abstinence is the healthiest choice they can make before entering a faithful, lifelong relationship.

Healthy Futures Lowell

Building relationships has always been very important for Ken and Rhea Gordon of Healthy Futures Lowell. For over 13 years, they have lived and worked in Lowell and seen first hand the many needs present in their community.

Through the relationships they had with young people in neighborhoods around Lowell, Ken and Rhea clearly identified the need for a program that would address the social, economic and academic problems that were afflicting their community. Ten years ago, Rhea and Ken launched an after-school program that worked with at-risk youth. As they began to teach sessions on preventing gang violence and substance abuse, they saw that preventing teen pregnancy was something that had to seriously be addressed as well. There was not only a need to teach young people to say "no" to violence, drugs and alcohol, but also to sexual activity outside of a faithful, lifelong relationship. Very soon, teaching sexual abstinence became an integral part of their after-school curriculum.



Desiring to make their abstinence education program available to more youth, the Gordons partnered with Healthy Futures in Boston to create Healthy Futures Lowell, which brought an abstinence-focused sexual health program into the Lowell Public Schools. After meeting with the school board, Healthy Futures Lowell was given an invitation to bring their program into all of the middle schools in the city.

Initially, they started with just eighth grade students. However, after seeing the Healthy Futures program in action, middle school teachers expressed the need for their students to hear this message at an earlier age. In response, Healthy Futures hired and trained two educators to focus primarily on a sixth grade program, which will be available beginning in the fall of 2005. The sixth grade educators grew up in the community and have been peer leaders in the Gordons' after-school program, and are thus familiar with the issues facing young people in their neighborhood.

Healthy Futures Lowell has had much success in a short time. To date, the program has been in 12 schools, conducted 64 classes and will have seen more than 1500 students by the end of June. We look forward to seeing Healthy Futures Lowell expand into sixth grade classrooms and eventually high schools as they bring the message of abstinence to the Greater Lowell community.

"This class was very helpful to me and my decisions."

*Robinson Middle School student,
Lowell*

continued from page 1

that uses strong magnets to take pictures of body parts. New MRI studies of the developing brains of normal adolescents clearly show that the physical development of the pre-frontal cortex is not complete until the mid-twenties. Before recent research revealed this startling new information, adolescent specialists had assumed that adolescents acted the way they do because of raging “hormones,” heredity, bad or good environmental factors, or a host of other reasons, all hopelessly commingled into a stew of influences that could probably never be understood. It is not that these other factors don’t influence adolescents; they do. The issue is that underlying all of this—the overriding influence—is an incompletely developed pre-frontal cortex that limits the ability of adolescents to independently make mature decisions.

Adolescents’ ability to make totally mature judgment calls based on abstract thinking, i.e., seeing how current behavior affects future outcomes, is limited. Therefore, their

failures in this area are not necessarily moral. Quite literally, they do not have the brain cell connections to “do” judgment calculations. This means that, if parents, mentors, and the rest of society fails to give adolescents guidance (and, if necessary, discipline), if we fail to help them make the best decisions for themselves and for society, we abandon them to guidance by their own brains—brains which are incompletely developed and that are incapable of the truly mature judgment. Surprisingly, incomplete cognitive development of the brain lasts well through college years and, therefore, has enormous implications for the responsibility of parents and university administrators to that group. We fail young persons when we give them “just the facts” and say “you decide” without guiding them to and supporting them in making the best decisions. We fail them when we expect them to control their impulses

and avoid risk behaviors, when we abandon them at critical decision-points to their own minds—minds with a limited capacity for abstract thinking.

In considering how his research has shaped the way he parents his own children, Dr. Jay Giedd says it has made him comfortable with the fact that giving guidance to his children, even through their college years, is not “butting in.” He points out that trial and error and mistakes and successes are all a part of the process of brain molding that is supposed to happen. Parents need to understand this and take it into consideration as their adolescents mature, intervening to help prevent “irreversible” mistakes whenever possible. Parents and mentors and all of society have a responsibility to adolescents. This new information allows adults to comfortably help our children develop wisdom, avoid dangerous risk behaviors, and have the brightest futures.

** This article was modified from “Maturation of the teen brain: Implications for parents, mentors and society”, an article in the Medical Institute’s Integrated Sexual Health Today publication. For more information, contact The Medical Institute at www.medinstitute.org. Used by permission.*

Coming soon... A Healthy Futures Summer Peer Education Program!

Interested teens must be:

- From Dorchester or surrounding communities (or able to travel to Dorchester regularly)
- Going into 9th or 10th grade
- Committed to sexual abstinence or willing to make that commitment
- Interested in drama (past drama experience is a plus)

The goal of the program is to equip teens to know and share about the risks of sexual activity outside of a faithful, lifelong relationship and the benefits of waiting to have sex. The program consists of sexual health and drama training, and culminates in a performance of dramatic sketches about relationship choices developed during the summer program.

A **stipend of \$300** will be awarded to each teen that successfully completes the requirements of the summer program. Also, those completing the program may be offered a part-time job as a peer educator for the school year to continue their training and present in various community settings.

For more information, contact Steven McIntosh, Peer Education Coordinator by phone at 617-929-1037 or by email at steven@healthy-futures.org.

What your school should know about SEX and the LAW

- Sexual touching (breasts, buttocks, etc.) with someone under 14 is against the law even if both people agree.
- Sexual intercourse (including oral sex) with someone under age 16 is against the law, even if both people agree. This law is called statutory rape.
For example, if a 16-year-old has sexual intercourse with a 13-year-old, the 16-year-old has broken the law. Even if the 13-year-old agrees.
- Internet: It is against the law to email someone repeatedly against their wishes and cause them emotional distress. It is also against the law to threaten to rape or hurt someone physically over the Internet.

To obtain more information, contact the Norfolk District Attorney’s office at www.norfolkda.com or 617-769-6100 and request their brochure, “Answers to Questions You Didn’t Want to Ask”.

Coming this summer...

A Summer Peer Education Program!

*The program helps not only with abstinence
but with everything around you.*

*It teaches responsibility and
getting through life's changes.*

I think this program would help anyone.

It's just that good.

– Darren (Peer Educator, 2004-2005)

Read more inside!

