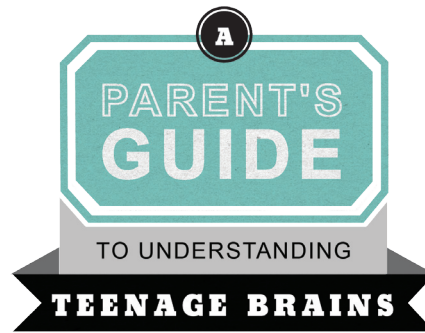


10 ACTION IDEAS TO ENGAGE YOUR TEENAGER'S BRAIN

- 1. Clarify your hopes and goals.** This suggestion doesn't really fit the title, since it doesn't directly involve your teenager's brain. But if you're not clear about what you're hoping to accomplish with your parenting, you're likely to make decisions from the hip and from emotional responses. It's that old adage: If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time.
- 2. Flex your teenager's "speculation muscle."** Remember, it's not actually a muscle; speculation, instead, is an aspect of abstract thinking, which is new to teenagers. Teenagers have the capacity for speculation, but they're not very good at it because they haven't used it much. Asking "what if" and "why" questions will build up strength in this ability, which helps your teenager in a bunch of other critical-thinking areas.
- 3. Ask for clarification and descriptions of emotions.** Emotions are abstract, and understanding the new breadth and depth of emotions is a major challenge for teenagers in early and middle adolescence. When they're expressing an emotion (either with words or actions), try to get them to articulate what it is that they're feeling. Embody a come-alongside stance in this process, so you position yourself as a co-conspirator or fellow investigator, rather than an interrogator or judge.
- 4. Normalize their experience.** When your daughter expresses frustration over her feelings, or your son sighs heavily in exasperation over his inability to solve a problem that's vexing him, offer a calm word of encouragement, helping your teenager understand that this transition into a new super-charged brain is normal and good. Don't say this in a dismissive way; instead, use empathy and compassion.

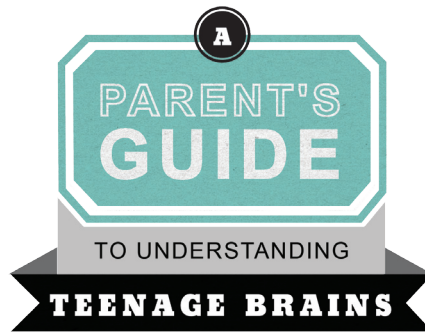


5. **Have a family meeting about boundaries.** Explain that you *want* your teenager to have freedom, but that you're limiting freedom to some extent so they can experience success with a certain amount of freedom, and so they can prove that they're ready for more. Far too often, those boundaries aren't clearly articulated in many families. So have a collaborative conversation about boundaries in a variety of area (homework, curfew, media choices, friendships, dating, and so on).

6. **Create space for faith articulation.** Teenagers *need* to separate themselves from their parents' beliefs. That can be messy, of course, but the articulation of "what I believe" is massively important. Provide nonjudgmental spaces for that process by inviting rumination and questions, and by being honest about your own journey.

7. **Host doubts.** This is such a counterintuitive idea for most parents, but your teenager's expression of doubt is a good—even essential—aspect of faith development. If you freak out or jump to condemnation (or fear) when doubts are hinted at or expressed, you'll forfeit the opportunity to be a part of the conversation. Instead, host an occasional "doubt dinner" or something similar, where each family member takes turns expressing questions and doubts. Don't try to solve them all in that moment; just get them expressed.

8. **Frontal lobe explanation.** There's more and more in print and media today about the underdevelopment of teenagers' frontal lobes, and what that means in terms of limitations in decision making, impulse control, prioritization, and other brain skills. As a result, teenagers might hear about this stuff in a dismissive way (a way that makes them feel they are incapable). Explain what you've learned in this book about those realities, but also mention that there's no scientific proof that teenage brains are that way by God's design.



9. **Don't infantilize.** “Infantilization” is the set of beliefs and actions involved with treating teenagers and young adults as children. There's been a *sharp increase* of infantilization in our culture over the last decade, and a growing expectation that “good parents” will treat their teenagers this way. Don't buy into it. Instead, treat your teenagers as apprentice adults. Explain this to your son or daughter, and ask them to help you.

10. **Have conversations with other parents.** This action step doesn't directly involve your teenager, just like the first one didn't. But parenting teenagers is *hard work*. You need peers—other parents who share your values—who can be a sounding board and sympathetic ear. Form a little dinner group with six or eight other parents, and meet once a month to discuss aspects of this book and the others in this series. Pray with each other, brainstorm solutions to challenges, and support each other in your efforts to raise adults!