

# Adolescent Development: Opportunities and Challenges for Mentors

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# Agenda

- Overview of Adolescent Brain Development
- The Potential Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's)
- Challenges to Engagement and Relationship-building (Dan)
- Questions



# The Brain is a Social Organ

- The brain develops and changes in interaction with other brains!
- The organization of the developing brain occurs in the context of a relationship with another self, another brain.
- This relational context can be growth facilitating or growth inhibiting.



# A Little Neuroscience...

- The size of the brain is fully developed by age ten
- Adolescence involves an internal transformation and reorganization of the brain's "wiring"
- Adolescence is a time of developmental plasticity or malleability which means that the brain is altered or molded by experience-both passive and active
- The Paradox of Adolescence: A Period of Opportunity and Vulnerability



# The Three R's of Adolescent Brain Development

- Three brain systems most involved in maturation during adolescence
  - The Reward System
  - The Relationship System
  - The Regulatory System
    - The reward system regulates the experience of pleasure, rewards & punishment
    - The relationship system regulates how we process information about interpersonal relationships
    - The regulatory system regulates the ability to exercise self-control
- *These are the brain systems most responsive to stimulation during adolescence and they are the ones most easily harmed.*



# The Reward System

## Revving the Engine

- Puberty triggers a dramatic increase in the concentration of dopamine receptors; dopamine is involved in the experience of reward and the motivation to get more of it.
- Adolescents more sensitive to rewards than adults: Nothing will ever feel as good as it did when we were teenagers
- More sensitivity to alcohol, nicotine, and cocaine
- Social rewards such as praise, attention, sensitivity to others' opinions
- Involved in sensation seeking and the willingness to engage in risky behaviors
- Potential rewards of recklessness or risky behaviors



# The Relationship System: “The Social Brain”

- Adolescents pay more attention to other people’s expressions, thoughts, feelings, and opinions
- Adolescents get a dopamine hit from being with friends
  - Sensitivity to status and rejection, susceptibility to peer pressure, and more interest in gossip
  - Rejection during adolescence resembles physical pain
  - Fixation of emotions can limit perception of potentially important information elsewhere in the environment
    - May miss the message and hear only the emotion



# The Regulatory System

## Putting on the brakes

- The capacity for self-regulation is perhaps the most important contributor to achievement, mental health, and social success.
  - Self-regulation involves the ability to exercise control over what we think (including focus), what we feel, and what we do.
    - Delay gratification/frustration tolerance
    - Self-control
    - Self-regulation is at the heart of determination, perseverance, or “grit”





# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

- Prior to your 18th birthday:
- Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? or Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?  
No\_\_\_If Yes, enter 1 \_\_
- Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? or Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?  
No\_\_\_If Yes, enter 1 \_\_
- Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever... Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?  
No\_\_\_If Yes, enter 1 \_\_
- Did you often or very often feel that ... No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?  
No\_\_\_If Yes, enter 1 \_\_
- Did you often or very often feel that ... You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?  
No\_\_\_If Yes, enter 1 \_\_
- Were your parents ever separated or divorced?  
No\_\_\_If Yes, enter 1 \_\_
- Was your mother or stepmother:  
Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? or Sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? or Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?  
No\_\_\_If Yes, enter 1 \_\_
- Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?  
No\_\_\_If Yes, enter 1 \_\_
- Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide? No\_\_\_If Yes, enter 1 \_\_
- Did a household member go to prison?  
No\_\_\_If Yes, enter 1 \_\_



# Impact

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood. Small “t” trauma or developmental trauma.
- ACEs can include violence, abuse, and growing up in a family with mental health or substance use problems
- Toxic stress from ACEs can change brain development and affect how the body responds to stress. ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood.
- Can undermine basic trust in others and the world-at-large. Leading to self-protective measures to reduce risk of vulnerability and future hurt.
- Research on resilience demonstrates the critical importance of caring, supportive relationships.



# Challenges to Relationships

- Motivation and preparation
- Cultural differences/ Intersectionality effects
- Reciprocity, boundaries, and authenticity
- Role conflict and role strain
  - Student, employee, parent, role model, etc...



# Recommendations

- Recognizing stigma
  - “Us vs Them” disconnection
- Building rapport
  - Importance of listening
- Approaching limitations
  - Reframing obstacles
  - Empowerment
  - Resilience



# Questions



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