



We need to be in the business of sparking minds and igniting passions in young people. Adolescents are ready to solve the big questions of life. We need to be discussing and debating big philosophical and social issues with them.

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experience-poor. For adolescents, learning needs to be social and to involve movement. Stimulating adolescents' brains through problem-solving, music, 'hands-on' history, drama, theatresports, camps and sport can be extremely beneficial.

For families, facilitating 'hands-on' learning involves getting kids out and about exploring different aspects of life, and planning family holidays and outings, so that teenagers can acquaint themselves with a wide range of life experiences. Adolescents need to learn the life skills and street smarts to cope in a variety of situations and these can't be learned from books. This means thinking about the social situations that we want our teenagers to experience, putting in just enough safeguards so that our anxiety doesn't fly through the roof, and then handing over responsibility. Giving teenagers responsibilities helps them to develop judgement.

However, it's also important not to overload teenagers with activities. We know that if teenagers work at a part-time job more than 10 hours a week during their final two years of secondary school their marks suffer. Using that rule of thumb, adolescents shouldn't have more than 10 hours a week of extracurricular activities. Parents can help preserve the sanity of their family life by ensuring that there is one weeknight when everyone is at home and the pressure is off.

One of the things that differentiates great schools for teenagers from good schools is the way in which they teach science. In some schools, science remains stuck in the world of bunsen burners and the periodic table. In great schools, science comes alive for all adolescents by linking it directly to the study of life. Science becomes exciting when it is linked to forensics, space travel, bioethics and sustainability.

And while parents can't all be expected to be scientifically minded, wise parents will model an enthusiasm for learning new things.

Adolescence is a prime time for learning how to solve problems. Problem-solving helps to myelinate adolescents' frontal lobes, and combining problem-solving with mathematics has great advantages. Unfortunately, early adolescence is a time when too many young people become 'maths-phobic'. It seems that there are two reasons why this occurs: because mathematics is seen as irrelevant to life, and because of the 'streaming' of mathematics classes. Schools that add social, real-world mathematics (budgeting, business entrepreneurial skills and career planning) get a real surge in participation in this area. But for some reason, mathematics is an area in which many schools feel the need to offer an accelerated stream. This not only increases anxiety in many students, but the concept of streaming is not one that is supported by research findings.

Research indicates that when we accelerate the study of mathematics for all adolescents, not only do the highly capable students improve dramatically, but so do the mathematically less-able students. However, as the

situation currently stands, too many young people are getting a strong message from schools that mathematics is not for them by being streamed out of these acceleration programs. The lesson for schools here is to have high expectations of all students.

Teenagers thrive when parents and teachers have high expectations of them, believe in them and support them in gaining a sense of success. For parents, this means going on a treasure hunt for their adolescent's skills, abilities and competencies, and thinking about ways to develop them further. Success is contagious. Once you get a whiff of it, you are likely to feel you can achieve more.

We hear a lot about the different personality and learning styles of young people these days, but it is rather less fashionable to talk about the development of character. Yet, it is during adolescence when many elements of character are laid down. It is when you are a teenager that you start a lifetime voyage of working out who you are. These aren't vague ideas, values or concepts, but rather the guiding principles of how young people will live their lives.

Parents and teachers can plan for teenagers to gain experiences that build character. At the risk of starting a veritable bun fight over which aspects of character are the most important, I want to suggest a few that both families and schools can help to develop in adolescents.

The first of these is curiosity and a love of learning. We need to be in the business of sparking minds and igniting passions in young people. Adolescents are ready to solve the big questions of life. We need to be discussing and debating big philosophical and social issues with them.

The next aspect of character to be developed is courage. Being prepared to stand up for what's right, even when others disagree with you, is the basis of integrity. It is also a powerful way of involving teenagers in intervening to stop bullying.

Another aspect of character is the way in which we interact with the community at large in ways that demonstrate loving kindness. Underpinning this is the concept that the world's main religions agree upon: treat other people as you would like to be treated. By involving teenagers in acts of helping others, schools and parents build in them a sense of compassion and the ability to contribute to a better world.

Related to this is the ability to be kind to oneself. In the times of hardship and unhappiness that adolescents almost inevitably face at some stage, it is critical to know how to be kind to themselves. Parents can help their teenagers understand that life is rarely, if ever, completely happy. Learning to persist in the face of adversity and to be kind to oneself, as well as seeking out help if needed, are enormously useful skills.

Having a range of friends is one of the powerful promoters of resilience. A young person doesn't need to be the most sociable, outgoing person on the block, but having a few social options so that if they fall out with one bunch of friends they can hang out with another, is really helpful.

We also want teenagers to develop character as leaders and citizens by taking on roles that create positive change in schools, clubs and communities. Wise schools extend opportunities for leadership from a select few who 'lead' the rest, to a range of leadership experiences in which all students can participate in some way.

While this is not intended to be an exhaustive list, another part of character to be developed is that of judgement. Involving adolescents in experiences in which they are required to demonstrate self-control, prudence and humility develops their brain functioning, especially in the limbic system and the frontal lobes.

Adolescence is also a time when two important neurochemicals decrease in the brain. Serotonin is a natural antidepressant and it decreases for a time during adolescence. Dopamine is associated with motivation and attention and it also declines for a while during adolescence. This means that teenagers are often grumpy and feel as if their get-up-and-go has got up and gone.

To some extent, the antidote to this is the sense of belonging that we can give young people. The sense of belonging that teenagers have to both their families and their schools is powerfully protective. The best schools recognise this and build structures so that adolescents have ongoing and meaningful relationships with pertinent teachers and other staff. One way in which parents can know if their child's school has these structures in place is to ask themselves if they are clear about who to contact if they have concerns about their child.

Parents can also build belonging in teenagers by reminding them that they are loved. In fact, during adolescence, I recommend saturation of this message – so much so that when parents say to their kids, 'Guess what?' their teenagers will reply with, 'Yeah, you love me. I've heard it.' ■

Andrew Fuller is a clinical psychologist and family therapist based in Melbourne.

In A Nutshell

- The activities and experiences of teenagers affect the structure of their brains – use it or lose it.
- Parents and teachers can steer adolescents towards better outcomes by slowing down their world from time to time and providing pause points for discussion, debate and reflection.
- For adolescents, learning needs to be social and to involve movement.
- Teenagers thrive when parents and teachers have high expectations of them.
- Adolescence is a prime time for engaging in problem-solving and discussing the big social and philosophical issues.
- By involving teenagers in acts of helping others, schools and parents build in them a sense of compassion and the ability to contribute to a better world.
- Wise schools offer a range of leadership opportunities in which all students can participate in some way.