



Laura Kastner, PhD

21st Century Adolescents: Strategies for Parenting Today's Teens

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Laura Kastner, PhD, is a clinical associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington and a nationally renowned expert on teen behavior and development. She writes and lectures widely on adolescence and family relationships. With Jennifer Wyatt, she co-wrote *Getting to Calm: CoolHeaded Strategies for Parenting Tweens and Teens*, *The Seven Year Stretch: How Families Work Together to Grow Through Adolescence*, and *The Launching Years: Strategies for Parenting from Senior Year to College*.

Focus: Modern teenagers, neuroscience research on the teenage brain, and implications for parenting

On the different circumstances of 21st century adolescents: Today's teens experience a lack of nearby kith and kin, reduced civic engagement, reduced elder contact, neglect, increased stress, and exposure to media. Neglect is an equal opportunity experience; face time is reduced in low-income families due to parents working multiple jobs, and in high-income families due to teens engaging in multiple activities. Today's teens are influenced and motivated by the American Dream of wealth fulfillment and the pursuit of happiness; however, being motivated by purely financial aspirations is correlated with depression and anxiety. Media detracts from face time; teens are attracted to media and other thrilling situations which produce high arousal states. In modern society, it is difficult for face time and conversation with the family to compete for a teen's attention.

On neuroscience research on the teen brain: At approximately age 13, the teenage brain goes through a pruning process of up to half of the neural branches in the neocortex, the part of the brain responsible for planning, reasoning, judgement, and impulse control. The prefrontal cortex then experiences massive growth for the next 10 years, but during this time adolescent behavior is often controlled by the emotional centers rather than the thinking and planning part of the brain.

An appropriate metaphor for teenagers: a NASCAR racecar – big engine, poor driver, faulty brake system, high octane fuel

On the implications for parenting: Expect moodiness, emotional reactivity, impulsivity, and mistakes from ALL teens. Accept that good teens from high-functioning, loving, authoritative parents still undergo biological changes that typically lead to

mistakes and disappointments. Understand that in a highly emotional situation, particularly in the presence of peers, a teenager is less capable of logical thinking and will likely respond emotionally. Parents must learn to recognize, regulate and express their own emotions and stay calm even when their teenager is intensely emotional. Often parents should postpone confrontation until both parties are calm. Kastner stressed that there are very few emergencies that require immediate talking. Parents can use the C.A.L.M. protocol: Cool down, Assess your options, Listen with empathy, Map a Plan.

On specific things parents can do: Parents should keep in mind the ultimate goal of optimizing the quality of both the parent-child relationship and the learning opportunities for the teenager. Parents should practice authoritative parenting – firm limits and boundaries in the context of warmth, empathy and effective communication. Parents can work to intentionally engineer a calm home by controlling excessive media use, supporting intellectual pursuits, insisting on regular physical exercise, keeping family dinner rituals, and keeping chores a priority. Parents can model emotional labeling and regulation by telling stories with emotional vocabulary at the dinner table.

Recommended books:

- *Stumbling on Happiness*, Daniel Gilbert
- *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt