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TEENS EMOTIONS CONSTANTLY FLUCTUATING



As a child approaches adolescence, his or her emotions become more intense. How do we know that? It's not just from slamming doors and sometimes intense sulking at the dinner table. The limbic area of our nervous system works closely with the brainstem and the body to create emotion—and in the adolescent brain, we see that those structures exert much more influence on higher-level reasoning from upper regions of the teen brain than in children or adults.

One study, for example, put kids, adolescents, and adults into a brain scanner and showed them a picture of an emotionally expressive or neutral face. They found more intense emotional responses among adolescent, and a relatively mild response among both the kids and adults. Additionally, There's a neurotransmitter called dopamine. It connects the brainstem, the limbic area, and the cortex.

One of its jobs is to make us feel good when we get a reward.

Compared to a kid or an adult, the baseline levels of dopamine in an adolescent are lower. But the release amounts are higher—and novelty is one of the major things that can trigger dopamine release. This means new things feel really, really good to a teenager. This is brilliant. Nature has created a system that drives us to seek change and novelty, a push for the unfamiliar and even the uncertain, which is what a teen must do if they're ever going to get out of the house. But there's a downside, of course: What happens when dopamine levels drop? The teen gets bored with the same old, same old. Hence, why middle schools and high schools have got to change the way they approach the school experience.

They need to play more to the teens' innate drive for novelty.

There's something else going on in the adolescent limbic area—specifically, the orbitofrontal, amygdala, and anterior cingulate portions—which is that the brain is changing how it evaluates whether something is good or bad. In the shift from childhood to adolescence, the brain starts to focus on the positive, thrilling aspect of a choice and minimize the negative, dangerous aspects. We call this hyper-rational thinking, and it makes the adolescent more likely to drive fast, take narcotics, or engage in risky sexual behavior. That's why you are three times more likely to die or get seriously injured by a preventable cause during adolescence, despite the fact that our bodies are stronger and healthier than at any other time of life.