

## Haringey Educational Psychology Service

### Tips on understanding teenagers

It can be an especially difficult time at the moment for teenagers. Here is some information that might help you understand the teenage brain better and some practical tips on how to improve relationships



We now know that it is not just hormonal changes which determine changes in behaviour, during adolescence the structure of the brain changes dramatically. So how is the teenage brain different?:

- **Risk taking:** contrary to popular belief, teens do understand risks but their decisions depend on the context of these, especially whether peers are present
- **Sense of self:** this goes through a huge transformation, there is a high value on others' judgements and therefore teens can be very self-conscious
- **Strong peer influence:** this can be more significant than family influence for many
- **Emotional understanding is still developing:** teens are developing the ability to integrate perspectives and intentions of others and interpret emotions accurately
- **Very influenced by immediate rewards:** teens are very sensitive to dopamine which is released in response to rewards. This can lead to poor decisions.
- **Social justice is very important:** values and being socially conscious motivates teens
- **Passion and creativity:** novel and original thinking is at its best during the teenage years
- **Planning:** this part of the brain is not fully developed

So, what can we do? Draw on this knowledge of the teenage brain and reflect on whether we have realistic expectations:

- Risk taking – support them to take safe, manageable risks (e.g. fashion, not drugs)
- Rewards and punishment – focus more on rewards, evidence shows this works better
- Social justice, values – these are big influencers in their decisions, use these to motivate
- Encourage creativity – this is a unique time of brain development
- Be aware that teens may need support with planning and organisation
- Try to ensure moderate screen time and adequate sleep
- Help their emotional development through empathic responses ('emotion coaching')
  - Labelling the emotion, respect it and reflect back "I can see you feel angry, I would also feel pretty angry if that happened to me"
  - Don't ask why. "Why are you so angry?" They usually won't know
  - Set boundaries of behaviour, problem solve, scaffold and empower when the young person is calm