

Teenagers, Violence, and Culpability

Are eighteen-year olds able to reason and behave like mature adults? If we consider them mature adults, why are they so often unreasonable, impulsive, foolish risk-takers, angry, rebellious, and violent? Furthermore, why are so many mature adults (individuals above the age of 21) responding violently when there is conflict? Could there be a link between violent adult behavior to teenage delinquency or family dysfunction, or parental incompetence in understanding the complexity of the teenager's mind and its vulnerability? I define the teenage years to be from ages 13 to 20. Isn't it ironical that the age of sexual consent is 16, but the law suggests that the "more important decision" of voting can only be done after the 18th birthday? Here is another irony. While the age of sexual consent is 16, an age when a sexual encounter can destroy one's life, the legal drinking age is 18. Are any of these age-appropriate times for making such life-changing choices that not only impact a family but the nation on a whole? My answer is no.

Generally, conflicts can be solved through fair negotiation, respect, and affective listening. However, these skills were never really taught and learned in childhood. Hence, as adults, not being equipped with rational behaviors and value judgments, they find it easier to resort to what they know best, violence. It may be verbal, emotional, or physical violence.

Being violent in any form always has a root cause. It does not occur in a vacuum. It is evident that violence by children or adults is an individual's response to what one perceives to be a personal attack on one's character or at times, safety. The violent method used (when one feels he or she is being attacked) first depends on how the person feels about himself. Self-worth is the fundamental crucible for violence prevention. This is true, but there is something more.

AGE OF MATURITY

What is most important in understanding violence prevention in teenagers is the 2004 research on brain development during the teenage years, family dysfunction, and age of culpability. It is true that the first five years of life is when character is formed. It is also true that living in a dysfunctional family has a great influence on one's view of self or response to life in general. What I found most revealing is that the 2004 research is suggesting that the age of majority (the legal age of adulthood) should not be 18 but 21. This is why mental health professionals sometimes refer to those 18 to 20 years as emerging adults not full adults.

New technology is allowing scientists to utilize advances in magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to study the brain in ways they were not able to do before. Researchers at Harvard Medical School, the National Institute of Mental Health, UCLA and others are collaborating to "map" the development of the brain from childhood to adulthood and examine its implications. The results so far are astonishing. The article from the Juvenile Justice Center (USA) entitled, "Adolescence, Brain Development and Legal Culpability" states:

"The scientists, to their surprise, discovered that the teenage brain undergoes an intense overproduction of gray matter (the brain tissue that does the "thinking"). Then a period of "pruning" takes over, during which the brain discards gray matter at a rapid rate." This process is similar to pruning a tree: Cutting back branches stimulates health and growth. This continues into the early 20s."

Dr. Elizabeth Sowell, a member of UCLA research team states: “The frontal lobe where this change occurs undergoes far more changes during adolescence than any other stage of life. It is also the last part of the brain to develop, which means that even as they become fully capable in other areas, adolescents cannot reason as well as adults: “[m]aturation, particularly in the frontal lobes, has been shown to correlate with measures of cognitive reasoning.”

The article goes on to say: “The evidence now is strong that the brain does not cease to mature until the early 20s in those relevant parts that govern impulsivity, judgment, planning for the future, foresight of consequences, and other characteristics that make people morally culpable. . . . Indeed, age 21 or 22 would be closer to the ‘biological’ age of maturity.”

How interesting! What does that mean? Is this research getting teenagers off the hook for responsible behavior? No. It only helps us understand the “nature of the beast” and the great importance of effective parenting. It may also mean that we should lift the age of drinking and sexual consent. Maybe we should stop calling teenagers adults. Think about it. I will discuss more on this topic next week. **Barrington Brennen is a marriage and family therapist. Send your questions and comments to P.O. Box N-896, Nassau, The Bahamas; or email question@soencouragement.org; or visit www.soencouragement.org; or call 1-242-323 8772.**