

# ADOLESCENCE UNPLUGGED

## *Supporting Today's Adolescents Through the Bumpy Ride to Adulthood*

The metaphor of a bumpy ride is very helpful when exploring adolescence. This allows for the wide variance in the journey that many parents experience when they walk beside their children as they leave childhood behind and head in the direction of adulthood. There is no "one right way" to do adolescence because every child ever born is unique and different. There are no quick fixes either — sorry. All adolescents are "at risk" during adolescence — no-one is immune from potential harm. Research shows that adolescence is a time of confusion, massive change and serious risk. It is also a time of enormous potential in the development of new skills, knowledge and abilities.

*"Expecting the adolescent to forever remain a child sets you up for disappointment, disillusionment and hurt. Accepting the fact that the child-parent relationship is over and embracing the different but potentially wonderful one that lies ahead is a giant leap toward getting along with a teenager."*

— Sheryl Feinstein, *Parenting the Teenage Brain* (2007).

## Why we are concerned about today's adolescents

- Suicide is still leading cause of death among 15-24-year-olds (35%). Also land transport accidents (22%), followed by accidental poisoning including overdoses (4.9%) and assault (2.4%). Of total adolescent deaths, 71% males. (Source: [AIHW](#)).
- [The Mission Australia Youth Survey 2020](#) demonstrates four issues of personal concern for 15-19s were coping with stress (43%), mental health (34%), body image (33%) and school or study problems (32.4%).
- The [ARACY report](#) (2018) notes 22.8% of 15-19-year-olds have a probable serious mental illness.
- Several studies show adolescent girls are experiencing greater levels of emotional distress or internalising problems – including a UK study of young adolescents that found the number of girls experiencing emotional problems jumped 55% between 2009 and 2014. Source: [Journal of Adolescent Health](#)
- Nearly 1 in 5 teen girls (16-17) surveyed would meet clinical criteria for depression and one fifth of adolescents had "very high or high levels of psychological distress" – [The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents](#) report 2015.
- Around 1 in 10 12-17-year-olds report having self-harmed "at some point", around three quarters saying they've done so in the past year. Around one quarter of teenage girls in the 16-17 year age range reported deliberately injuring themselves at some point in their lives. (Source: [The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents](#) report 2015)
- In good news, according to the Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey ([ASSAD](#)), after an overall increase in the prevalence of substance use among secondary students during the 1990s, trends in substance use in ASSAD survey data collected between 2002 and 2017 show a substantial *improvement* in the prevalence of smoking, drinking (including drinking at risky levels), and cannabis use in the adolescent population.
- However, alcohol remains a key risk factor for injury among young people, with one in five drinkers aged 16-17 reporting alcohol-related injuries and one in 10 a

regretted sexual experience linked to their drinking. (Source: [Michael Livingston, "Trends in non-drinking among Australian Adolescents", Society for the Study of Addiction, 2014](#)).

- MDMA/Ecstasy use is increasing in popularity with 1 in 20 Year 10s having tried it. And 1 in 6 Australian males and 1 in 10 females aged 16 have tried it. (Source: [ASSAD](#) via Paul Dillon, [Generation Next 2019](#)).
- In 2017, 20% of 15-19-year-olds surveyed were "extremely or very worried" about family conflict (Source: [ARACY 2018](#)).
- In 2018-19, 43,000 young people aged 15-24 presented alone to specialist homelessness agencies. Domestic violence or unstable housing are the two most common reasons given for young people presenting alone. (Source: [Australian Institute of Health & Welfare](#))
- 93% of boys and over 60% of girls have viewed pornography by 18 (mostly between 14-17) (Source: [The Alannah and Madeline Foundation, 2016](#).)
- The Australian Medical Association pointed in a [government submission](#) to their concern that: "Evidence indicates that exposure to and consumption of internet pornography is strongly associated with risky behaviour among adolescents."
- The Youth Unemployment Rate in Australia remains stubbornly high at just over 11% (compared to the national rate of 5.3%). There are also new challenges to further study. (Source: [Foundation for Young Australians](#))
- About 73% of university graduates were employed four months after graduation in 2018 — the best result since 2014. But 10 years ago, just prior to the global financial crisis, that number was 85%. And only 57% felt their qualification was important for their current employment. (Source: [ABC News](#))

## Today's Adolescents

Today's adolescents are experiencing more change, more rapidly than any previous generation. They are potentially living in a more risky, stressful world than ever seen before.

### Main drivers in adolescence

- Seeking autonomy
- Immature brain driving a mature looking body
- Identity searching
- Separation from parents
- Needing to belong
- Forming relationships.

There has always been a generation gap between parents and their adolescents, however, since the new millennium it has become even more of a chasm!

*"A study of resilient and optimistic teenagers noted they belonged to a group of friends, particularly those in high school. More than 90% of the young people reported that being connected to peers was the second most important protective factor during crises and applied to most young people."*

– Lyn Worsley, *The Resilience Doughnut: The Secret of Strong Kids*, (2006).

**Adolescents are still at risk of their immature brain structure until the early-mid 20s.**

## What's going on up there in the adolescent brain?

- Overproduction of dendrites and synaptic connections.
- Pruning — use it or lose it!
- Myelination — the process of insulating the neurons and synaptic connections.
- Adolescents are relying on their amygdala rather than the pre-frontal lobe — **flight, freeze or fight** responses are more likely.
- Emotional illiteracy is the norm for many, including intense mood swings and confusion.
- Window of sensitivity.
- Hot cognition.

**The world now appears as if through a cracked windscreen.**

**Adolescents need more sleep than pre-pubescents or adults.**

### Danger signs of teens at risk

- Isolation from family and friends.
- Sudden changes in schoolwork, job performance or athletic activities.
- Drastic mood swings.
- Lack of interest in outside school activities.
- Family conflict.
- Living in a community with high crime and easy availability of alcohol and drugs.
- Delinquent friends.
- Academic failure.
- Change in eating and sleeping habits.
- Cutting or hurting themselves.

**All** adolescents need lots of support and encouragement to navigate the bumpy road — the journey from childhood to adulthood.

### Parents can support adolescents by using caring, empowering communication

- Use words of suggestion not direction
- Avoid shame-based language
- Encourage thinking and making choices
- Lighten up!
- Remember they are temporarily brain impaired
- Choose right time to talk and use door openers
- Avoid using don't — try "next time"
- Ensure they are listening
- Never argue with an adolescent
- Co-parent your teen's friends and vice versa

*“The key is for the adolescent and the adult-who-once-was-an-adolescent to recognise those important brain changes and learn to navigate these years constructively and collaboratively in order to keep communication open between them, to optimise life for everyone and to avoid tragic endings or risky behaviours. The challenge is not easy but it at least should be made clear.”*

– Daniel Siegel, *Brainstorm* (2013).

**“Lighthouses” are essential for adolescents to make it to the end of the journey — healthy and on track to realise their full potential.**

## How do “lighthouses” support adolescents on the bumpy ride?

They will:

1. Have knowledge and understanding of adolescence.
2. Have the courage to care.
3. Be trustworthy and respectful.
4. Give hope and encouragement.
5. Build connectedness through genuine acceptance.
6. Encourage mastery and teach life skills.
7. Help adolescents manage “big, ugly emotional states”.
8. Practise caring, empowering communication.
9. Give guidance when asked.
- 10.10. Strengthen the spirit — including laughter and lightness.

**They shine a light on the invisible sign around an adolescent’s neck that says**

**“Make me feel I matter”**

**Adolescence is the best time to tap into a person’s potential.**

**Keep in mind the emotional barometer – especially the tipping point!**

Doing things you enjoy, which are respectful of yourself and others, **creates positive brain chemicals – ie empties the emotional barometer.** Here are some that work:

- Athletic success & sport — team and individual
- Artistic & creative expression — drama, dance, music, art
- Deep relaxation & stillness — calming audios, quiet time at beach
- Pets that love unconditionally!
- Safe, honest human connection — deep human connectedness, family, friendship
- Significant immersion in nature — walking, surfing, fishing, walking the dog
- Acts of service — helping others
- Discovering new purpose & meaning — starting something new such as gratitude journal, fitness program.

**For more, visit the [Raising Adolescents Parent Help](#) section at [maggiedent.com](http://maggiedent.com)**