

Justice, Parenting, and the Teenage Brain

Are we speaking a language that our kids understand?

by: Davis Montour and Dale Dione-Dell

Are you a parent? If you are, then you're probably familiar with the feeling that trying to talk to your child can be like talking to a wall, especially if your child is a teen. How many times have you asked your child why they did something, and they answer, "I don't know." Have you ever considered that maybe your child's brain development may be playing a role?

We often treat our children as small adults, and expect they should understand what we're saying, and follow the rules we set for them. But if their brains are only in the development stages, why do we expect them to be able to comprehend everything we tell them? We often forget that kids aren't on an adult level, yet we talk to them as if they are, and we expect them to follow along. Basically, we aren't speaking a language they can understand.

There are many schools of thought on child development and plenty of debate over exactly how children learn and develop. Just use the internet, go to Wikipedia, type in a search for "Child Development", and you'll see what I mean. Most researchers agree that the normal human brain is fully developed somewhere around a person's early 20's. Kids learn best by doing and some research indicates that if teenagers don't learn and practice effective coping skills during this time, they may have difficulty ever getting them. This may explain why some teens get through adolescence differently than others, depending on how justice or discipline is dished out.

What I'm getting at here is that we all seem to spend great amounts of effort and time trying to get kids to follow rules, but we as adults don't always take their ability to understand what we're trying to say into account. A lot of the time, kids might not fully understand the impact of their actions when they do something wrong, and this gets dismissed as "kids being kids". If they aren't able to make that connection in their minds, why would punishing them for something they don't understand be the best way to deal with them? When kids make mistakes, it can be seen as an opportunity for learning. We just need to take the time to teach.

So when it comes to Justice, whether it's at home, school, or wherever, it's important to consider where the child is at in terms of their ability to understand. Why yell at them, or suspend them from school, when talking to them in a way they can understand would make more sense to them, and create less stress for the parent? In a way, it's a matter of using the right tool for the job.

That's not to say a child's development is an excuse for any form of negative behavior. Children should learn to be accountable. But we as adults need to question the methods we use to teach our children these types of things, and question the systems we use to do this as well, such as young offender courts, school disciplinary policies, and even our own parenting techniques.

In the end, in any situation that involves teaching children, it's time we take a closer look at what we're trying to accomplish. Where our children are developmentally will have a major impact on their ability to understand what we're trying to teach them, so we need to be mindful about what we say and how we say it. After all, children

eventually turn into adults, and sooner or later, they'll be the ones who are in charge of our community. The more we consider what we teach our youth now, the better the future can be.

For more information, please call the Sken:nen A'onsonton/Alternative Dispute Resolution program located at the Court of Kahnawake at 450-638-5647, to speak to Dale Dione-Dell ext. 224, or Davis Montour ext 231.