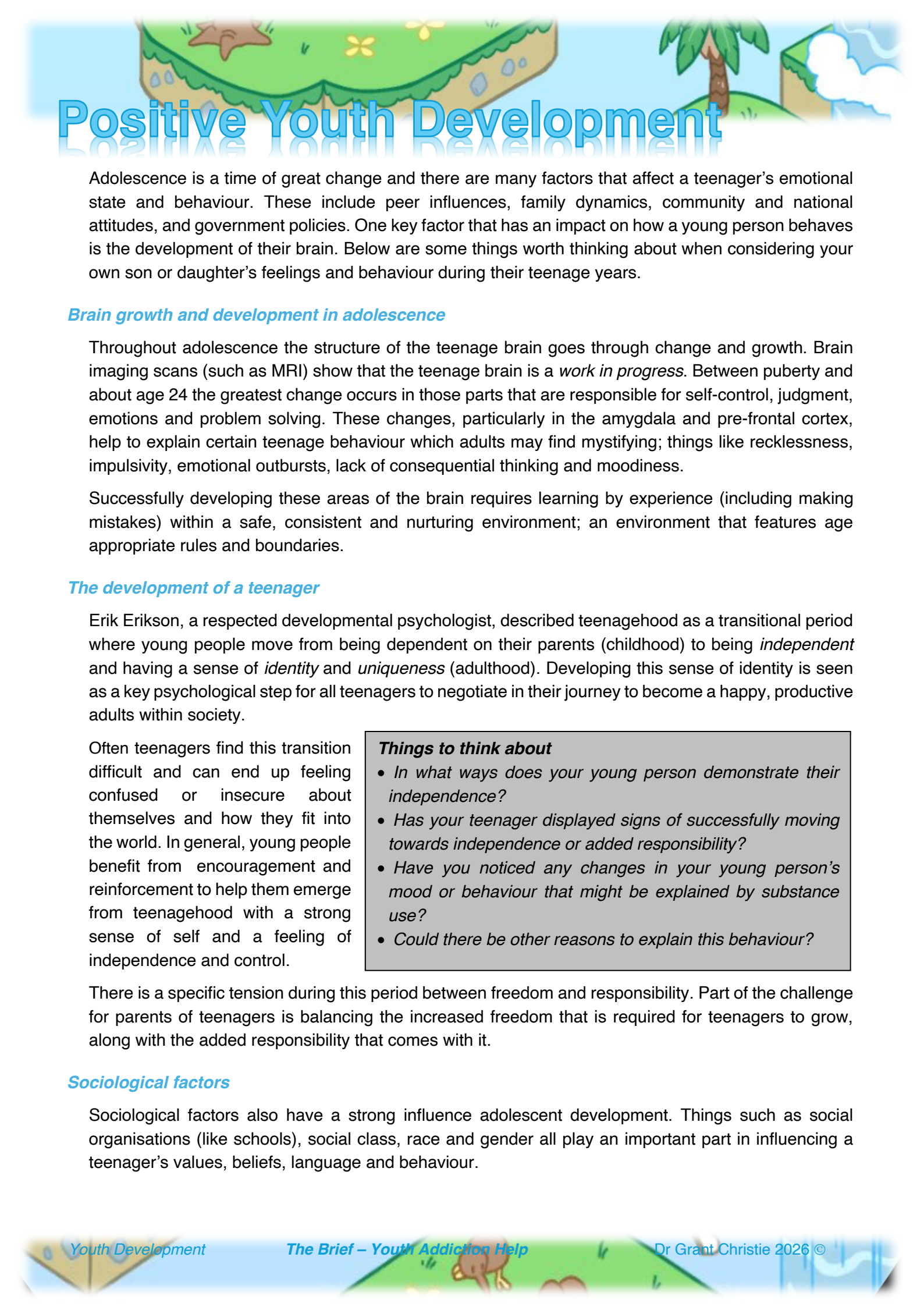




Positive Youth Development

Adolescence is a time of great change and there are many factors that affect a teenager's emotional state and behaviour. These include peer influences, family dynamics, community and national attitudes, and government policies. One key factor that has an impact on how a young person behaves is the development of their brain. Below are some things worth thinking about when considering your own son or daughter's feelings and behaviour during their teenage years.

Brain growth and development in adolescence

Throughout adolescence the structure of the teenage brain goes through change and growth. Brain imaging scans (such as MRI) show that the teenage brain is a *work in progress*. Between puberty and about age 24 the greatest change occurs in those parts that are responsible for self-control, judgment, emotions and problem solving. These changes, particularly in the amygdala and pre-frontal cortex, help to explain certain teenage behaviour which adults may find mystifying; things like recklessness, impulsivity, emotional outbursts, lack of consequential thinking and moodiness.

Successfully developing these areas of the brain requires learning by experience (including making mistakes) within a safe, consistent and nurturing environment; an environment that features age appropriate rules and boundaries.

The development of a teenager

Erik Erikson, a respected developmental psychologist, described teenagehood as a transitional period where young people move from being dependent on their parents (childhood) to being *independent* and having a sense of *identity* and *uniqueness* (adulthood). Developing this sense of identity is seen as a key psychological step for all teenagers to negotiate in their journey to become a happy, productive adults within society.

Often teenagers find this transition difficult and can end up feeling confused or insecure about themselves and how they fit into the world. In general, young people benefit from encouragement and reinforcement to help them emerge from teenagehood with a strong sense of self and a feeling of independence and control.

Things to think about

- *In what ways does your young person demonstrate their independence?*
- *Has your teenager displayed signs of successfully moving towards independence or added responsibility?*
- *Have you noticed any changes in your young person's mood or behaviour that might be explained by substance use?*
- *Could there be other reasons to explain this behaviour?*

There is a specific tension during this period between freedom and responsibility. Part of the challenge for parents of teenagers is balancing the increased freedom that is required for teenagers to grow, along with the added responsibility that comes with it.

Sociological factors

Sociological factors also have a strong influence adolescent development. Things such as social organisations (like schools), social class, race and gender all play an important part in influencing a teenager's values, beliefs, language and behaviour.



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Teenagers are flooded with messages about how they should live their lives and this occurs during a period when they are already uncertain about their own identity. Societies values, both positive and negative, are pushed heavily upon young people via social media, TV and the internet.

A recent example of this includes the heavy promotion of sports betting amongst young men via social media. Or consider the influence of New Zealand's 'binge drinking culture', where people drink with the intention of getting very drunk (rather than for social reasons). A further example is the normalisation of cannabis. These influences make it difficult for parents to provide a consistent and safe message about the place of alcohol and drug use in teenage development.

Although societal factors are often harder to change, being aware of these influences can help us understand the world our young people are living in and why they may behave in certain ways.

Substance abuse

Substance use affects a young person's brain. As a general rule, delaying and minimising a developing brain's exposure to alcohol and drugs allows the brain to develop normally. On the other hand, early and heavy exposure to drugs and alcohol increases the chances of brain development going wrong, which translates to an increased risk of mental health problems (such as depression) and increased risk of addiction problems later in life.

Cannabis is a common drug that exemplifies the long term effects substances can have on the body. The psychoactive chemical (tetrahydro-cannabinol or THC) in cannabis remain in the system for weeks and so even after the initial buzz from getting stoned or high has gone, a young person's brain may remain affected for a much longer time. Some of the effects from cannabis use in teenagers seen here at CADS are decreased motivation and energy, poorer short-term memory, concentration difficulties, low mood and irritability.

If a young person with regular heavy cannabis use, suddenly reduces or stops using, they usually experience withdrawal symptoms. Their brain, which is used to functioning in the presence of cannabis, takes time to readjust to a lower levels of cannabis in the system. This can causes effect such as irritability, cravings, mood swings and headaches. These symptoms decrease with time (a week or so) as normal brain chemistry is restored.

YOUTH 2019 SURVEY

Here are some key statistics regarding New Zealand young people and substance use:

- 23% of New Zealand secondary school pupils have used cannabis
- 4.1% use cannabis weekly or greater
- 9.1% drink at least once a week
- 22% have had a drinking binge in the last month

Further reading on the topic of brain development can be found on the brainwave website...

<https://brainwave.org.nz/research/articles/>