

# Real tools for real challenges: strategies to enhance adult-youth relationships



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# objectives for today



adolescence as a developmental process



adolescent brain development as a major phase



positive influential role of adults



feel better prepared to support adolescents

# popular myths about adolescents

## myths

- ❑ teens think they are invincible
- ❑ teens only listen to friends
- ❑ adolescents live to push your buttons
- ❑ good self-esteem keeps teens away from risky behavior

## reality

- ❑ teens assess certain risks better than adults do
- ❑ adults matter
- ❑ teens often view conflict as expressing themselves
- ❑ sometimes risky behavior brings status and teens with high self-esteem are more likely to participate



## developmental perspective

teens are not incomplete: they are exactly where they are supposed to be

# time of opportunity

Adolescence can be a time of opportunity, when we appreciate what is really happening with adolescents.





# out of sync is completely normal

Healthy development can occur unevenly



SARA



MICHAEL



TOMAS



LESLIE



MARIA



TYLER





# adults and settings matter—a lot

development doesn't  
happen in a vacuum,  
or by itself





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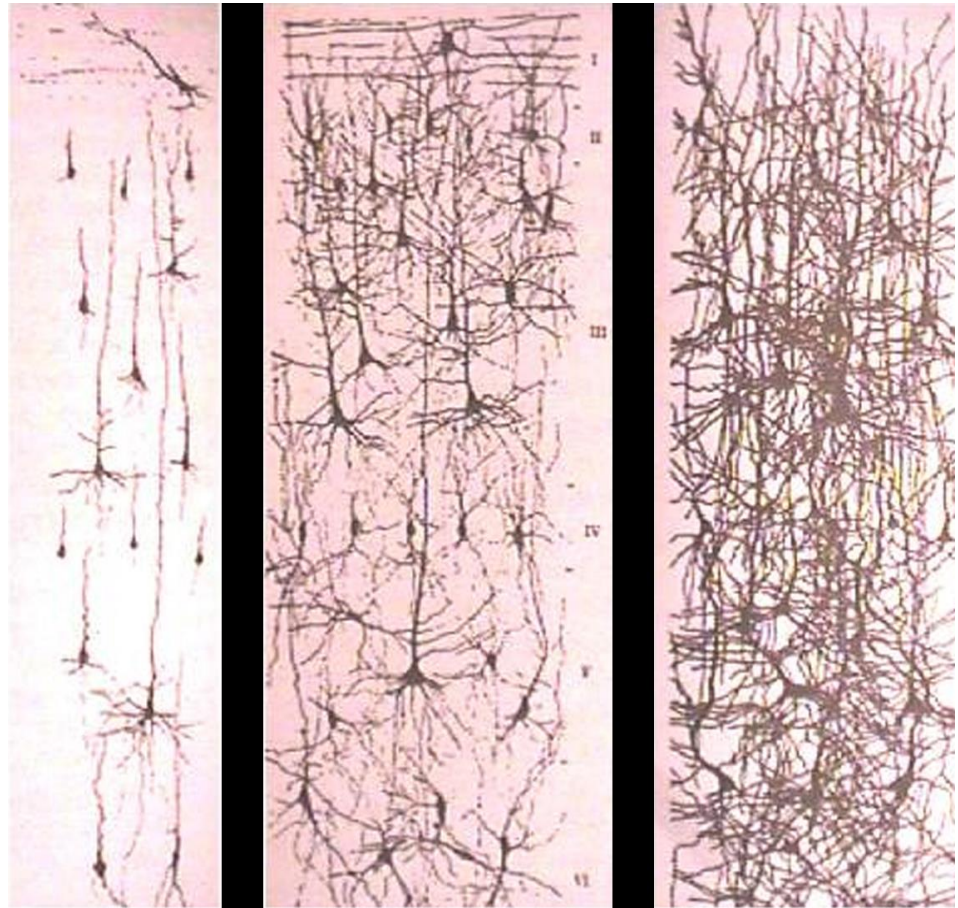
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brain development

# brain development early in life

gray  
matter



Birth

3 months

2 years



“We now know through science that the first three years of life is the most critical time period when the brain develops at a greater rate than any time during the course of a person’s life... but by age 10 your brain is cooked and there’s nothing much you can do.”

- Rob Reiner, National Governor’s Association Speech,  
February 1997



# the second period : adolescence

Giedd et al., 1999

- longitudinal study of 145 children/adolescents
- two waves of gray matter over-production
  - ▣ conception to 18 months
  - ▣ adolescence
- each wave of over-production followed by a period of “pruning” and myelination

# gray vs. white brain matter

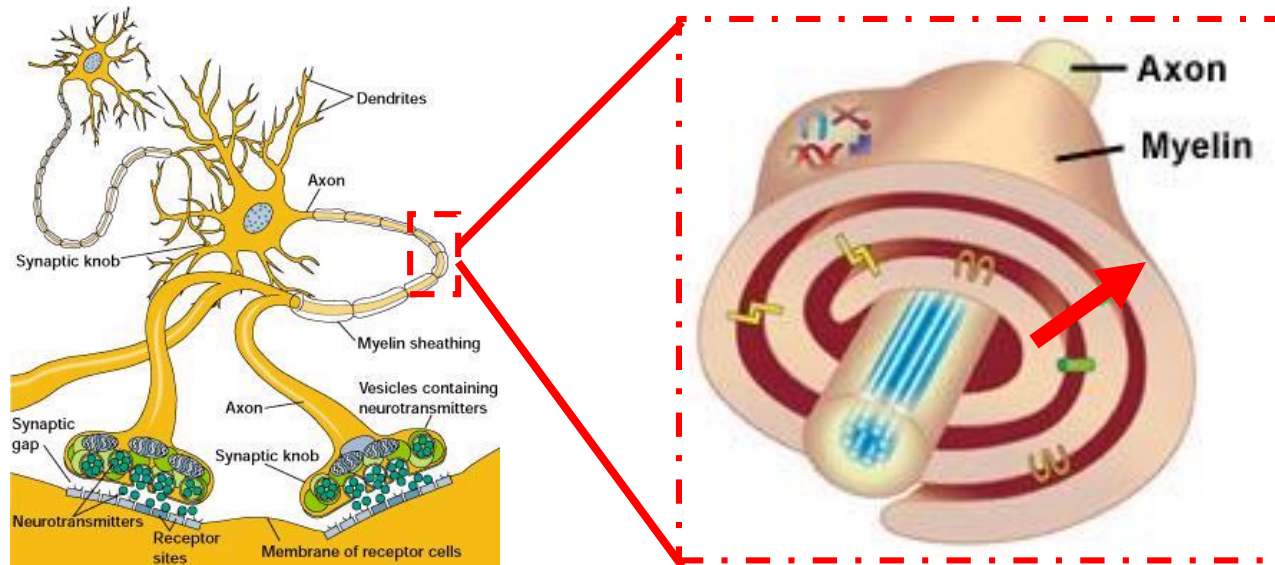
## gray matter

- neurons' cell bodies and dendrites
- “thinking” portion of the brain

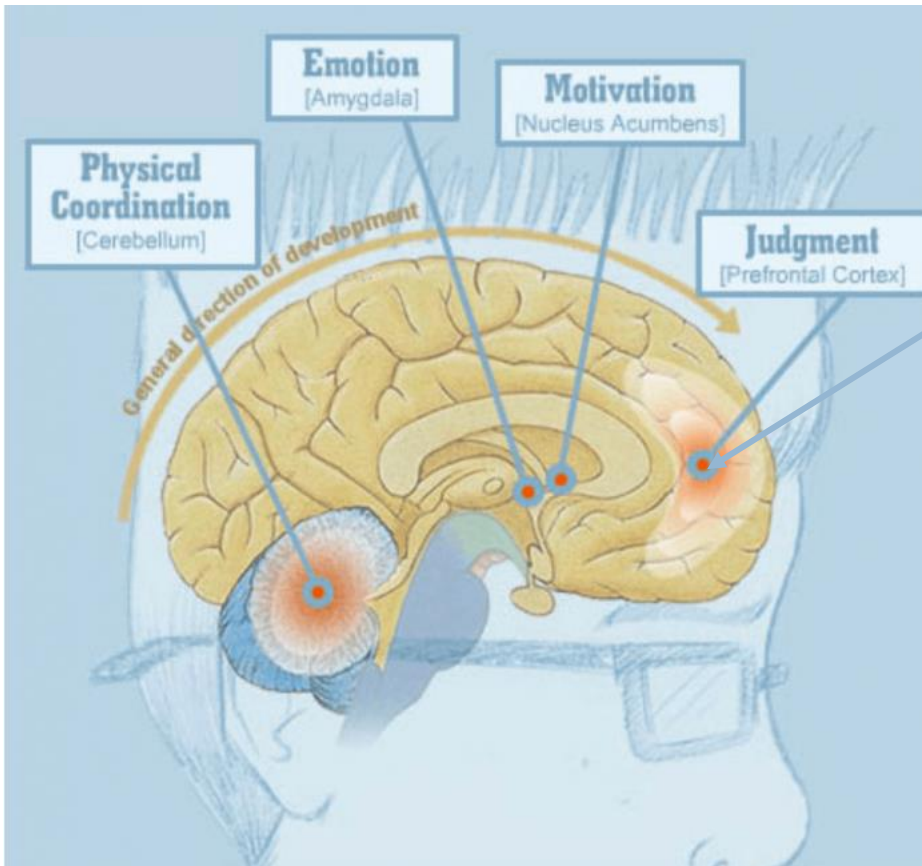
## white matter

- insulation for neurons = myelin
- enhances efficiency

# gray vs. white brain matter



# the adolescent brain



responsible for advanced reasoning:

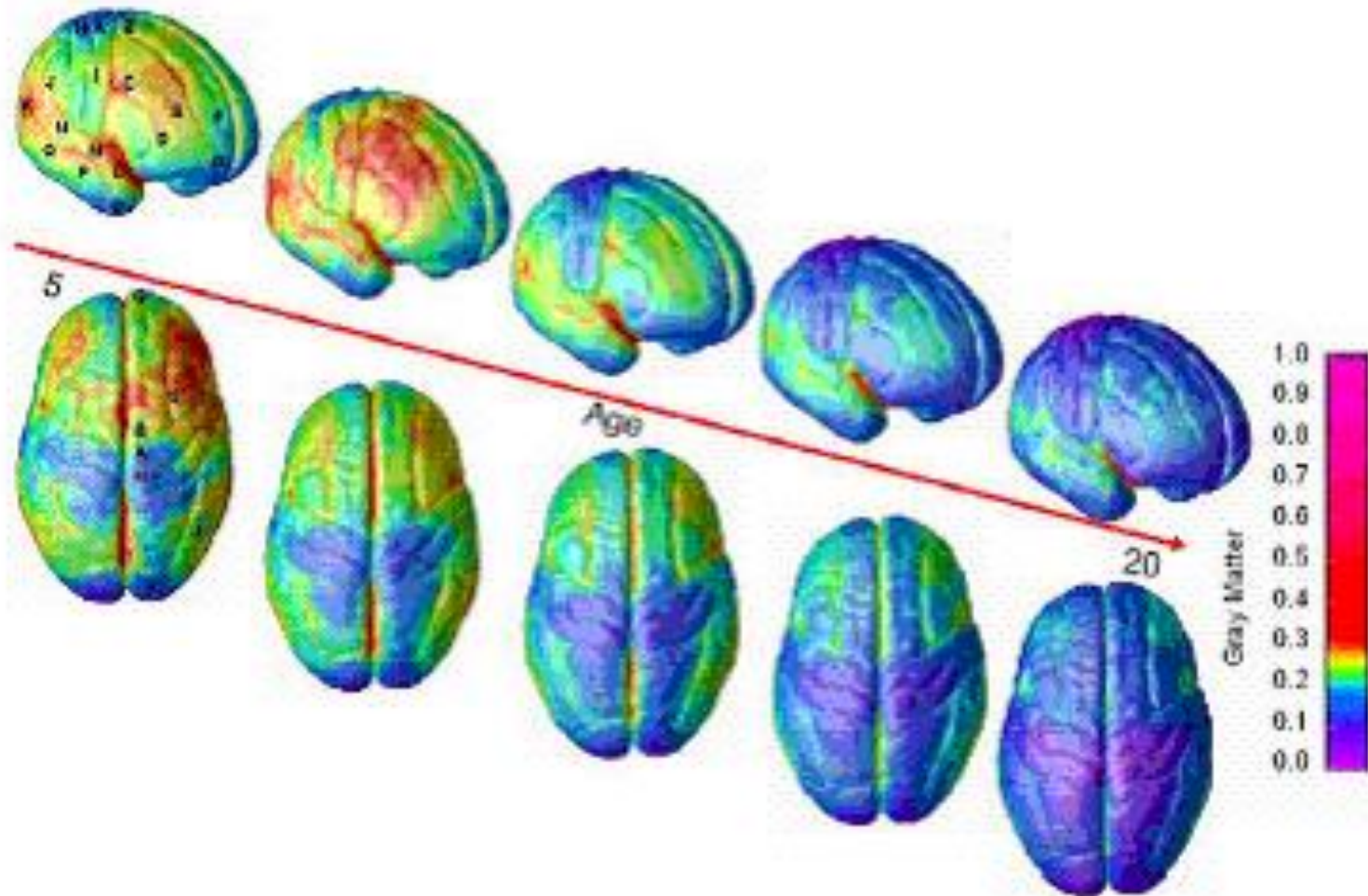
cause and effect

planning

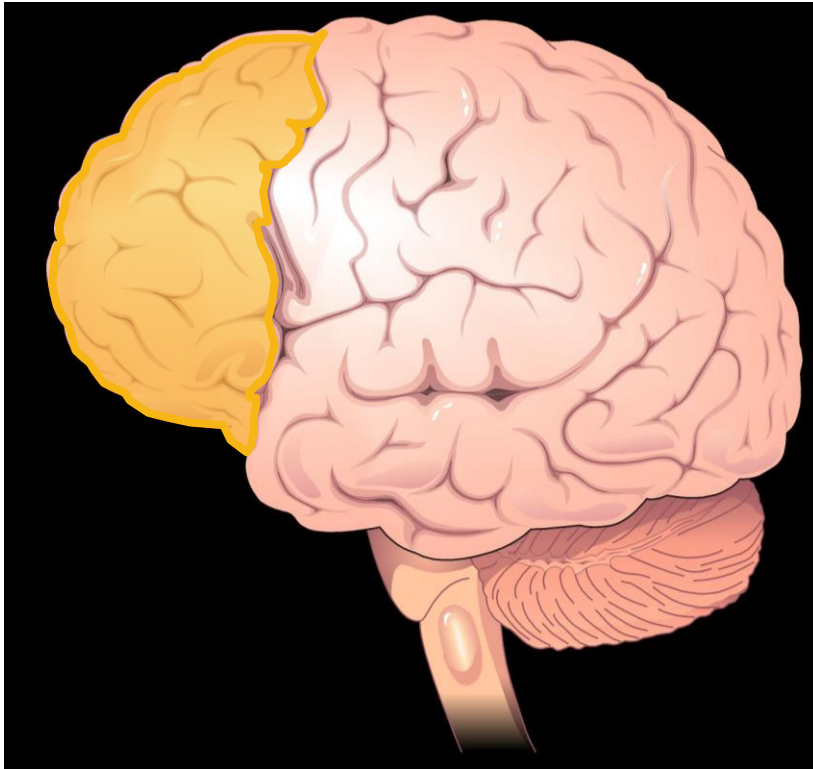
managing impulses



# the adolescent brain



# prefrontal cortex



- responsible for advanced reasoning:
  - ▣ cause and effect
  - ▣ planning
  - ▣ managing impulses

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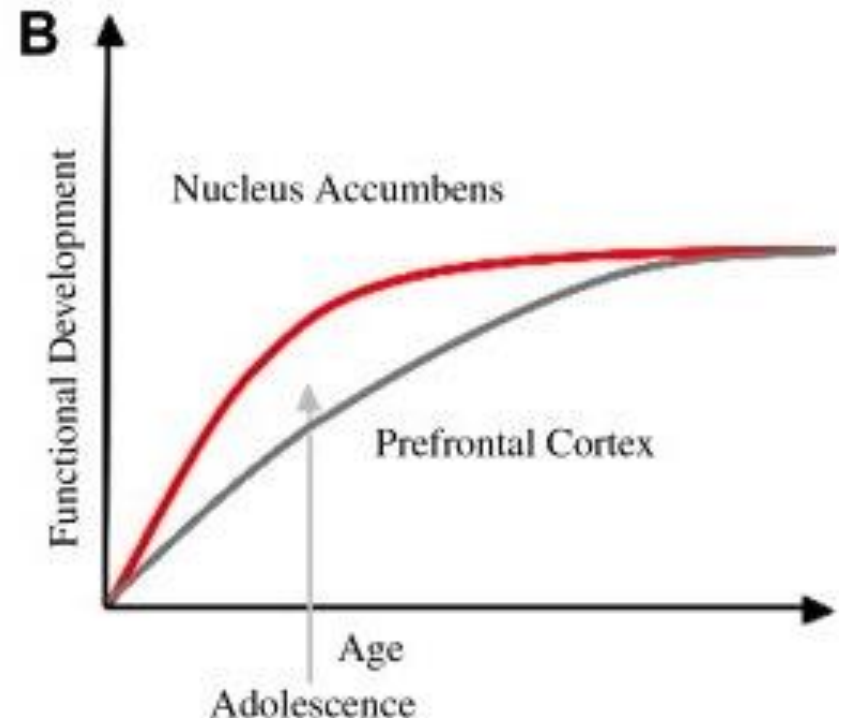
risk taking

why do teens take risks?



# Risk Taking in Adolescence

- Brain regions developing at different rates
- Limbic system in early adolescence
- Frontal lobes later
  - ▣ More areas involved in processing emotions
  - ▣ Self-control develops



# What did you do?



- Think about the teenage you...
  - ▣ Think of one risk you took without thinking twice that you would never dream of taking today.

# what do we know about teen risk-taking?



- risk-taking is necessary to transition to adulthood
- adolescents are capable of assessing risk (they do feel vulnerable)

# what do we know about teen risk-taking?

- ❑ adolescents get greater rewards from risk than do adults
  - ▣ emotional rewards
  - ▣ peer status
- ❑ social context—peers, adults, media diet—  
affect how teens act  
(hot vs. cold cognition)



# risk taking: what adults can do

- tactics such as Scared Straight, Just Say No and the Silver Ring Thing (and abstinence-only programs) don't work
- engage youth in critical thinking about a situation's consequences
  - ▣ allows them to practice critical thinking skills
- reduce opportunities for risky behaviors through policies
  - ▣ graduated driver's licenses
  - ▣ developmentally appropriate dating rules



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# cognitive development

what adults can do

# understanding cognitive development

- strengthened advanced reasoning skills
  - ▣ what if?
- abstract thinking skills
  - ▣ faith, love, trust, beliefs
- meta-cognition
  - ▣ thinking about thinking

# “I don’t think that’s fair”

- Teens are quick to point out inconsistencies between adults’ words and actions.
- Teens view conflicts from different perspectives
  - ▣ Is a clean room a personal choice or a reflection of morals?




# How To Make Mom's Head Explode

ZITS

BY JERRY SCOTT AND JIM BORGMAN







There are specific strategies for responding to cognitive developmental changes that adults can practice and become better at.

# RRR

- Relax
  - ▣ Breathe
- Reflect
  - ▣ Take a moment to reflect on the situation
    - What are we upset about?
- Respond, not react
  - ▣ Am I being respectful?
  - ▣ Can I address the current issue?

MARIA



# what adults can do



- Ask open-ended questions.
- Highlight the role of emotions in decision-making processes.
- Focus on strengths youth bring to the decision-making process.
- Get youth actively practicing decision making

# what adults can do



- ❑ Be patient when teens “test drive” their newly acquired reasoning skills.
- ❑ Never correct or put down an adolescent’s logic.
- ❑ Don’t take it to heart when teens criticize adult opinions and behaviors.





social and emotional development

what adults can do

# what is social and emotional competence?



- emotional competence: the ability to perceive, assess and manage one's own emotions
- social competence: the capacity to be sensitive and effective in relating to other people.

# social & emotional competence

- self-awareness
- social awareness
- self-management
- peer relationships



# self-awareness

- what do I feel?
  - ▣ learning to recognize and name emotions
  - ▣ going deeper means a teen may discover he feels **anxious** about a test or she feels **sad** when a love interest kicks her to the curb
  - ▣ identifying the source of a feels leads to constructive ways to resolve problems

# social awareness

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- what do other people feel?
  - ▣ also known as developing empathy
  - ▣ Understanding the thoughts and feelings of others and appreciating the value of human differences are the cornerstones of social awareness.



# social awareness is tough for teens

- adolescent brains actually read emotions differently than adult brains



# social awareness: ways adults can help

- tell teens exactly how you are feeling
- for example, an adult can say “I’m not mad at you, just tired and crabby.”



# emotional self-management

- adolescents experience intense emotions with puberty
  - ▣ *The surge of testosterone in both boys & girls at puberty literally swells the amygdala, an area of the brain dealing with social acceptance, responses to reward, and emotions*
- intensity can be enjoyable

# emotional self-management

- Self-management is monitoring and regulating one's emotions.
- In young people, it involves using their developing reasoning and abstract thinking skills.
- These skills allow someone to step back, examine emotions, & consider how emotions bear on longer-term goals.



# emotional/social growth & decisions

- teens make more decisions — & more complicated decisions — than their parents & grandparents faced
- decisions are often made in complex environments that trigger conflicting feelings & desires



# peer relationships

## friends are not a threat to adult authority

- ❑ adults remain central throughout adolescence
- ❑ youth depend on adults for affection, identification, values, and decision-making skills





# dating: the positives

- dating leads to emotional growth
- through dating teens experience extremes of happiness, excitement, disappointment & despair
- both boys & girls value emotional intimacy in romantic relationships



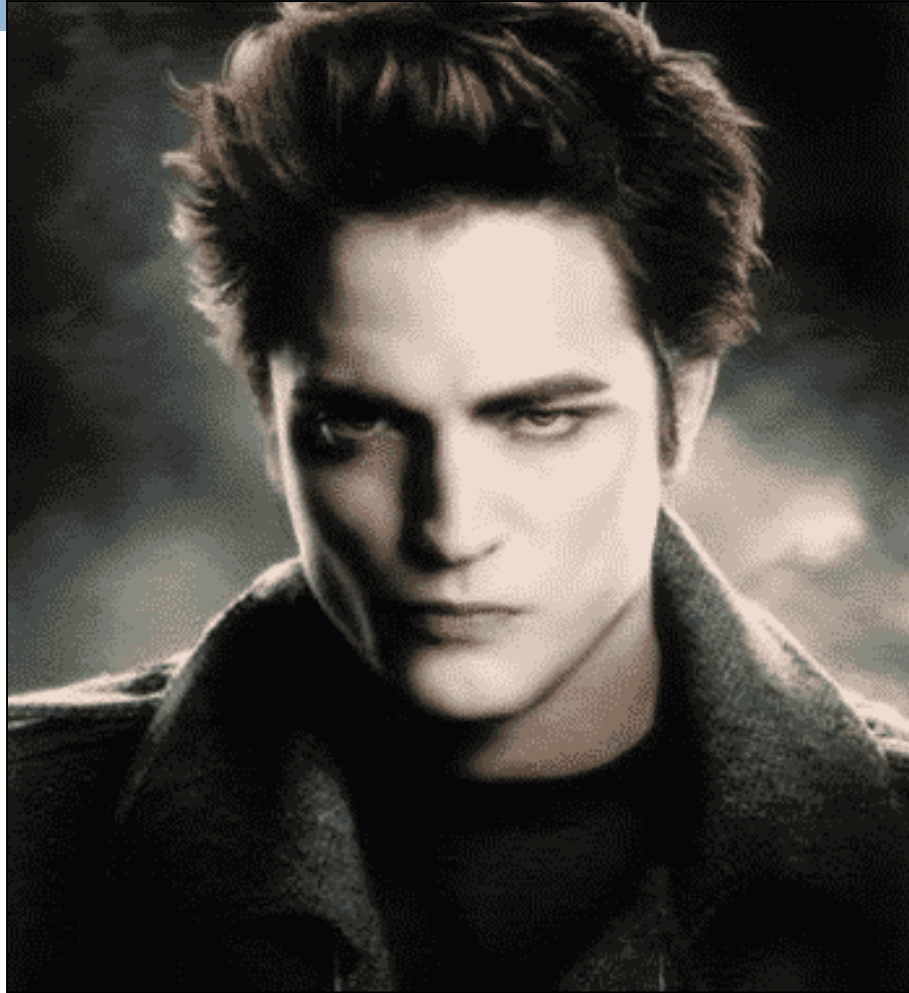
# dating: the consequences of inexperience

Most teens don't understand what a healthy relationship is, often mistaking the controlling behaviors that characterize abuse for signs of love



In a study by Dr. Liz Miller (UC Davis), 100% of middle school students said possessiveness and jealousy are part of true love

# Where might those messages come from?



# bullying: debunking the myth

- the typical portrait of a bully is someone consumed with self-loathing & insecurity
  
- research indicates the opposite is true:
  - ▣ bullies can have high self-esteem
  - ▣ bullies can be confident, enjoy elevated social status among their peers
  - ▣ bullies often mirror behavior at home – taught to aggress first

# taking the bark out of bullies



- speak up after a teen tells you about being bullied at school or elsewhere
- advocate for anti-bullying policies in your school & community
- observe your own behavior & avoid using physical violence, harsh criticism & vendettas

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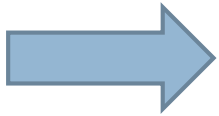
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# essential messages



- Even if interactions with teens are brief, we have the potential to foster cognitive, social & emotional development
- This leads to healthy development

# essential messages

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- Help young people:
  - ▣ Name their emotions
  - ▣ Interpret the feelings of their teachers, peers, parents
  - ▣ Think about consequences alternatives

# essential messages

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- How we interact is as important as what we say/do
  - ▣ Respect for individuality (no shame or ridicule)
  - ▣ Supportive
  - ▣ Clear & fair expectations
  - ▣ Opportunity to demonstrate competence & build skills

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WHERE TO FIND ME

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