



TALKING POINTS

The message I convey to teens and adults is an overwhelmingly positive one. I urge them to take care of themselves and their friends, laugh and have fun, recognize that other kids look up to them and will follow where they lead (good or bad), recognize that they have individual power and must use it responsibly, recognize that their brain development is in their hands, recognize that drugs are a threat to their brain development, recognize that they are beautiful kids full of boundless potential, recognize that their parents love them and are truly doing the best they can to help keep them safe, and recognize that our future is in their precious hands.

Here are some specific points that I convey:

- 1) The teen brain is changing so rapidly that each and every experience a teen has is going to leave an imprint on them. Many of the changes that occur in the brain serve as natural, biological wedges to help our kids transition out of the nest and into the larger world. Indeed, this is the whole purpose of adolescence as a stage of development. Our teens are built to take risks and explore, to spend time with friends and conflict with authority, and to find their own paths. As adults, our responsibility is to create environments in which they are safe yet can thrive and reach their full potential.
- 2) Teens have a considerable amount of control over their own brain development. If they make good choices, they will benefit from those choices for the rest of their lives. If they make poor choices (like drinking excessively), the data suggest they could pay for those choices for the rest of their lives. They are in the driver's seat of their own brain development. As such, they should make decisions based not just on the rules of society, but on what is best for them. Huffing gasoline is not illegal as far as I know. It is not healthy either. Simply following the rules leaves open the option for huffing gasoline. Taking responsibility for the healthy development of one's own brain would preclude such behavior. The focus on responsible decision-making not only places the teen in the driver's seat and helps them make decisions based on what is best for them, it helps them make the transition from kids dependent on parents to independent, free-thinking, healthy members of society. That is the purpose of adolescence.
- 3) Power does not, should not, flow *only* from the top down. In other words, living a prosperous life is not the same thing as simply following the rules. How many truly great Americans made changes by simply following the rules? Power begins at the center of an individual and flows outward. Each of us has the power to make people smile, make people cry, build a better future, build a worse future, etc. We all need to take responsibility for our behaviors and take pride in our accomplishments. If we want change then we have to make it. If we like the way things are then we have to reinforce it. Quite simply, recognizing that one has power and must use it wisely is a key developmental hurdle for adolescents. Soon they will have to function independently. How can they do this without recognizing that they are responsible for the own decisions and the quality of the world in which they live? I want our kids to enter young adulthood energized and optimistic, not unhealthy and aimless.
- 4) The future can, and hopefully will be, far brighter than we can possibly imagine. We know so much more about adolescence than we did just a few years ago. If teens make healthy decisions, and we construct healthy environments in which they can thrive, then the whole country will prosper. Quite simply, that is all that I want for our children.