

Teen brain less developed; emotion can spur mistakes

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In the past five years, scientists have discovered the teenage brain is far less developed than previously believed, raising questions about whether states should re-examine where they draw the line between adolescents and adults.

Brain researchers, using MRI technology, have found the frontal lobe of the brain, which controls planning, impulsiveness and the ability to anticipate consequences and react accordingly, doesn't fully develop until the early 20s. That means kids may be less capable than adults of appreciating consequences and weighing options, and may rely more on the emotional parts of the brain when making decisions.

"Kids are different from adults," said Laurence Steinberg, a psychology professor at Temple University and director of the MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice. "That's why we don't let them vote or buy alcohol or drive a car until they're 16."

Yet kids who are too immature to serve on a jury, marry or even watch certain movies are treated as adults when they commit crimes.

"It's revenge," said Carol Kamin, executive director of the Children's Action Alliance.

"They're going to come out and then what? It really doesn't make sense in the long term or even in the medium term. It only makes sense for the moment because you get them out of your hair."

For the youngest offenders, education and programs that promote cognitive development are crucial to change criminal behavior, said Debra Miller, principal of Hard Knocks High, a school for juveniles transferred to adult court, at Maricopa County's Madison Street Jail.

"It's important to remember that they are still kids, and they make decisions like teenagers do because they don't have the cognitive abilities that an adult would," Miller said. "They are not fully developed even though they think they are. They are 15, 16, 17 years old, and they make bad choices."

While no one is arguing juveniles should get a free ride, Steinberg said they need to be held accountable in ways that take into account the immaturity of their brains.

"A lot of that delinquent and criminal behavior that is committed by kids is something that they're going to grow out of. If his judgment isn't mature, it doesn't make sense to lock someone up for 20 years. He might be a very different person in three or four years," Steinberg said.

"What we want to avoid doing is making them worse."

- Judi Villa

"Life in juvenile prisons" slide show available:

<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/news/articles/1113JUVIES-MAIN14.html>