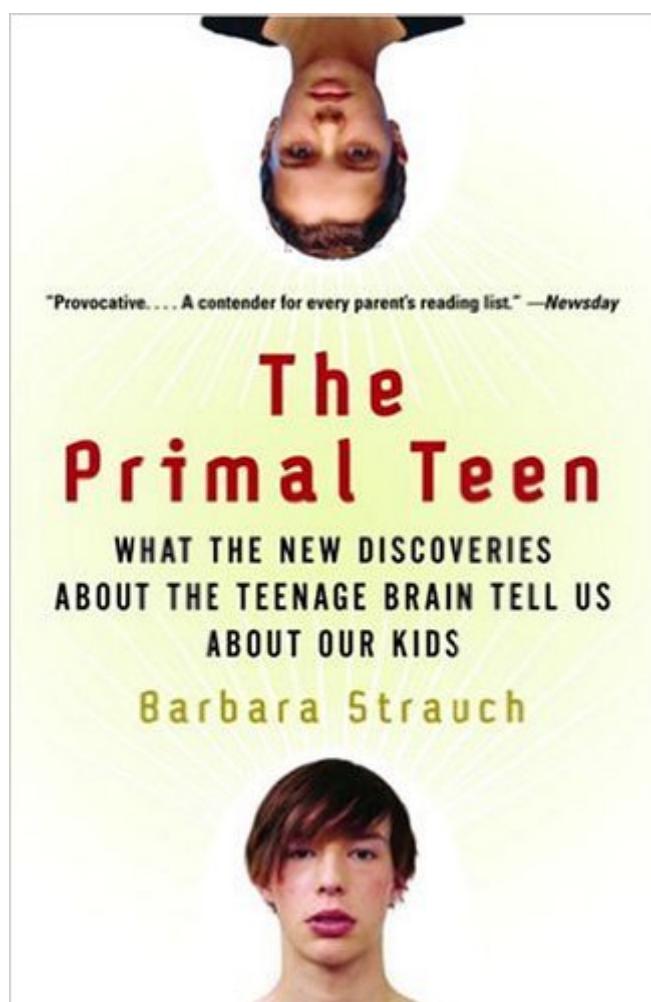


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The Primal Teen: What The New Discoveries About The Teenage Brain Tell Us About Our Kids



Synopsis

For anyone who has ever puzzled over the mysterious and often infuriating behavior of a teenager comes a groundbreaking look at the teenage brain written by the medical science and health editor for The New York Times. While many members of the scientific community have long held that the growing pains of adolescence are primarily psychological, Barbara Strauch highlights the physical nature of the transformation, offering parents and educators a new perspective on erratic teenage behavior. Using plain language, Strauch draws upon the latest scientific discoveries to make the case that the changes the brain goes through during adolescence are as dramatic and crucial as those that take place in the first two years of life, and that teenagers are not entirely responsible for their sullen, rebellious, and moody ways. Featuring interviews with scientists, teenagers, parents, and teachers, *The Primal Teen* explores common challenges—“why teens go from articulate and mature one day to morose and unreachable the next, why they engage in risky behavior”—and offers practical strategies to help manage these formative and often difficult years.

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Customer Reviews

"They'll grow out of it", said Granny. "Don't give up on them", says neuroscientist Jay Giedd. Between these two admonitions, Barbara Strauch vividly relates how old ideas of brain development have been overthrown by recent research. Her judgement of "recent" is expressed with the dismissive comment that any source found prior to 1996 was "too old". She thus adds another brick to the edifice being constructed in cognitive sciences. The studies have gone beyond research in

human cognitive studies to include other primates - chimpanzees and monkeys in demonstrating the roots of human behaviour. These findings are providing a wealth of new insights into our evolutionary roots. Strauch has contributed much in our knowledge of who we are in the animal kingdom. Although the studies are new, and further research is necessary, Strauch explains the patterns that are emerging. Further work can only provide more enlightenment. Although her research covers many fields and countless workers, the key source is Jay Giedd. Giedd was prompted by data showing how adolescent brains exhibited unexpected changes. "Gray matter", that term we so often blithely use to indicate the brain and mind, was expanding in teens. It actually grows beyond that of the average adult, then "dramatically thinning down" some time later. This find suggested many changes are occurring in teen brains - making them, in Strauch's estimate, "a bit crazy . . . but crazy by design". She reminds us throughout the book that while teenagers may appear physically mature in stature, what is going on in their brains is unfinished. They may look like us, but their behaviour is generally radically different. Incomplete brain development is the root cause of these departures from what we consider "normal".

The strength of the book is in its message: teenager's brain undergoes a tremendous change, and realizing this would greatly help parents, teachers and others dealing with teens. The book's weakness is in the details: the science is muddled and the narrative often confused, leaving many of the open questions on the table. The book's central point is that during teen years kids develop the part of the brain, prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for putting the brake mechanism in their decision making system. Without this part well developed, kids seem to have no way of restraining and analyzing their free-ranging emotions. Hence attitude problems, blow-ups and other unfortunate trademarks of the age. This process of brain development helps better understand the behavioral peculiarities of teens (aloofness, thrill seeking, even drinking and smoking). The prefrontal cortex, which is under construction throughout the teen years, requires large amounts of dopamine, the neurotransmitter instrumental in our feeling of wellbeing. Because of this, during these years there is much less dopamine in other parts of the brain. So, to feel good teenagers need to bombard their brain with much stronger stimuli. Hence drugs, alcohol etc. Immediately, though, Strauch contradicts herself: she claims that teenagers are awash in dopamine, the "reds are redder" for them, they see the world in much accentuated colors. On top of that, estrogen, the hormone produced in women, and to a lesser extent in men, revs up dopamine as well. The author never comes to a conclusion on whether teenagers have dopamine in excess or lack it.

I don't have children, but I do have an interest in mind and the brain, so when an on-line friend, Steven Haines, recommended it I decided to read The Primal Teen. As catchy as the title may sound, the book is actually quite serious about the subject of the developing teenage brain. Although the author is not herself a neurologist or neuroscientist, she is a skillful journalist (New York Times and Newsday). The topic is well researched with primary sources taken from prestigious professional journals like Nature Neuroscience, Brain Research, Journal of Comparative Neurology, Cerebral Cortex, Annals of Neurology, etc. While some of those articles cited are late 1980s, most are 1997 to 2002 (the book was published in 2003). Ms Strauch also interviewed some of the researchers personally for their input on what the scientific data are likely to mean and how it impacts teens and their families. Topics covered are: where the new data are coming from; teens and impulsive behavior; the whens, wheres, and whys of changes in the structure of the brain; what animal studies have to say about development of the brain in adolescents; why teens take risks; why teens seem to keep late hours and sleep late in the day; the chemistry of the brain and puberty; and the effects of drugs, tobacco and alcohol on growing brains. I was a little frustrated with the lack of actual suggestions for parents on how to cope with their changing teen. To some extent the anecdotal stories of some of the researchers who had teenaged children and those from the author herself provided insight into possible approaches, but on the whole very little by the way of helpful problem solving was offered. This may well be because too little has yet been done to make definite statements.

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