
Ways Students Learn

The period of adolescence is an exciting and pivotal stage of life! A large portion of the brain has already developed by this time. However, one of the only aspects remaining that will continue to develop over the next 15 years is the frontal lobe. This part of the brain is used to make decisions. As the brain works through synaptic pruning, a process that emphasizes maintaining certain connections the brain needs and disregarding those that it doesn't, it works from the back of the brain forward. Therefore, with the only portion of the brain remaining to be developed, that which allows individuals to effectively make decisions and weigh the pros and cons, the adolescent's brain turns to the amygdala and relies on it.

The amygdala is associated with emotions, impulses, aggression, and instinctive behaviors that, if in control, drives the adolescent to act on gut responses and thoughts rather than taking the time to make a thought-out decision. As a result, because the adolescent's brain continues to be a work in progress, the way students spend their time is crucial to their development as it will depict which connections are kept and which the brain will leave behind.

There are a variety of distinct changes occurring throughout adolescence that will quickly become evident while spending time with them and teaching them. Adolescent's biggest influencers tend to be their peers. As children approach their pre-teen stage, they are often known to worship heroes and figures in their lives. This hero worship often shifts to their friends and peers within their lives, idolizing them and hoping to behave in a way that wins their approval, even if it does not align with the desires of their caregivers or other important figures in their lives. Peers are so influential that some adolescents may also feel self-conscious about their physical appearance and compare their bodies, or what they are wearing, to others around them. Making missions heroes come alive for students helps them see positive Christian influences they can model their lives after.

Trying new things and having new experiences intrigues adolescents. They are developing their identity during these years and trying new things. Pursuing new experiences is often a way that adolescents explore their own limits, abilities, and boundaries. This may provide some risk as adolescents have the tendency to believe bad things will not happen to them and some new things can prove to have consequences that the adolescent's emotional, impulsive desire did not anticipate. Trying new foods or crafts that are important to the cultures where missionaries live and work can provide an interesting hook to keep students engaged in learning about missions.

Adolescents also desire more independence. They generally desire to be understood as an individual and want to separate from their parents. This desire does not always last throughout the rest of the adolescents' development, but does play a role in wanting to establish who they are as an individual and sometimes not wanting to be associated within a group, such as their family.

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This may be fueled by cultural expectations evident in their media intake, which shapes and impacts how they communicate and what they desire. Missions discipleship experiences that allow students to gain independence can vary from asking students to lead weekly activities within your group, leading one-time missions projects, or working on a project that would support a missionary or missions work on their own (art, crafts, or even creating something on a computer).

The adolescent brain is still learning how to control and express emotions. The impulsivity of their brain may prevent them from thinking through what they are saying which may result in seemingly dramatic expressions of their emotions or for harmful things to be said. Adolescents are also highly sensitive to others but may misread others' emotions. Therefore, adolescents still often need direction in understanding what they are feeling as well as trying to understand what others are feeling and walking through. Missions experiences often need to be debriefed with students to help them process emotions and what was experienced and to realize the importance of what occurred in their lives.

The adolescent's thinking patterns are now more logical and they can understand more abstract concepts and issues that are not always simple. They are able to see problems and issues from various perspectives. The adolescent is also developing his or her own set of values which may lead him or her to question more things around them so that they are able to understand things from multiple angles and make a logical conclusion themselves. Missions discipleship leaders should help students grasp unfamiliar terms and complicated ideas by consistently answering questions, defining terms, and giving students opportunities to share what they are experiencing as they learn.

Spiritually, many adolescents who grow up in the church desire to know what the Bible says about various topics related to lifestyle issues and behaviors. They may ask lots of questions, express doubts, and seek assurance about their spiritual lives. They often pray for forgiveness and are interested to learn about life after death. Their impulsivity may come into play as they may experience frustration with the desire to stop some behaviors and recognize their apparent inability to do so. Adolescents are increasingly able to apply spiritual principles to life throughout this period of growth and can grasp deeper spiritual concepts and biblical truths. This is an amazing time to experience and understand the Great Commission and can be when students make serious life-long commitments to become a Christian or even to missions service or ministry.

Missions discipleship leaders have an opportunity to shape how a generation hears and responds to God's calling for their lives!

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