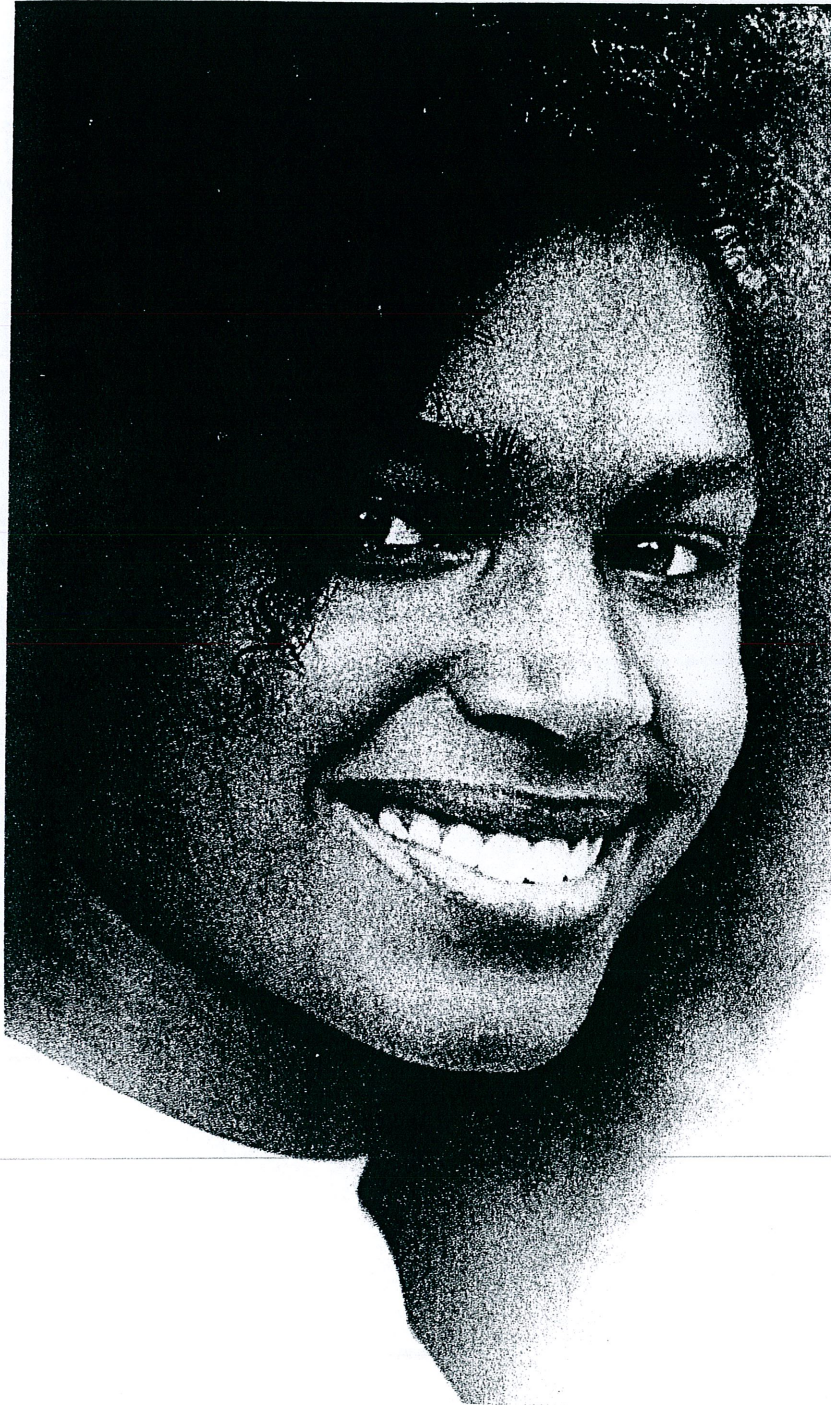


## THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN: WHY DO TEENS BEHAVE THE WAY THEY DO?



**F**rom sleeping late to forgetting their homework to behaving rebelliously, teenagers can be enigmas to their parents. Nancy Brown, Ph.D., a health educator and child and adolescent development expert at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation (PAMF), gives insight into a question parents often ask: Why does my teenager act like this?

**Q: Teens often behave in ways that baffle adults. Why is this?**

**A:** Parents often wonder what makes teenagers do (or not do) certain things, such as send text messages constantly, sleep too much, or act indifferently to them or other adults. Some teenagers are compliant and easygoing. But as many parents know, it is also common for teens to go through a period of rebellion and resistance. Understanding teen behavior requires an understanding of the adolescent mind and how it develops.

**Q: Are teens' brains really different?**

**A:** Medicine is only beginning to understand the development of the human brain, but we now challenge previous notions that brain development stops early in childhood. Brain development continues well into the 20s for most people. And some areas of the brain, particularly the neocortex — the part of the brain responsible for language, planning, empathy and executive functions (like prioritizing and organizing) — develop later than other areas, such as the amygdala, which is the “gut instinct” part of the brain.

**Q: If the adolescent brain is still developing, does this affect a teen's behavior?**

**A:** Yes. Some days your teenager may act his age, while other days he may behave as if he is 4 years old again. This is because the neocortex is not fully developed. Therefore, teens rely more on the amygdala, the part of the brain that manages emotions and memory.

**Q: Does this mean I should cut my teen some slack?**

**A:** The brain of a 12- to 14-year-old is going through the same level of change it did at 2 to 3 years of age. Unused neurons are being pruned away, while others are being strung together into the neural network as a result of learning and experience. This is when your teen really needs you!

If you understand that most teens behave inconsistently, and that this behavior does not reflect a lack of caring, it will be easier to be patient and use these situations as an opportunity to provide character education. For example, explain to your teen why the teacher is probably annoyed and feels disrespected when assignments aren't done on time.

But while patience and understanding are important, we should also not make excuses for our teens. They still need to learn how to control their own behavior. We can provide the most support by modeling the same type of behavior we want to see our teens display.