

The Adolescent Brain

What school safety professionals need to know before they respond

Teen brains are still under construction. The regions that handle judgment and impulse control mature years after the regions that drive emotion and reward-seeking — and that gap shapes how teens act, especially under stress.

The Feeling Brain

LIMBIC SYSTEM & AMYGDALA

Develops early and drives emotion, reward-seeking, and reaction to stress. Under threat — including a police or security encounter — it can trigger fight, flight, or freeze before reasoning kicks in.

The Thinking Brain

PREFRONTAL CORTEX

Handles planning, judgment, and impulse control — and is one of the last regions to finish developing, often not until the mid-to-late 20s. Under stress, this capacity narrows even further.

*Sometimes described as “a gas pedal before the brakes are installed.” Two processes drive the gap: **myelination** (insulating neural pathways so signals travel faster, front of the brain last) and **synaptic pruning** (unused connections fade while frequently used ones strengthen — meaning a teen’s experiences literally shape which pathways survive).*

BECAUSE OF THIS GAP, TEENS OFTEN STRUGGLE TO

- Show empathy
- Understand consequences
- Pause before acting
- Resolve conflicts
- Be kind

The same teen who shows joy, kindness, and empathy one moment can show impulsivity, risk-taking, or cruelty the next. That’s not inconsistency — it’s brain development in progress. They’re also more sensitive to peers watching, and more likely to take risks or act out in front of them.

FIELD-TESTED APPROACHES

- Approach calmly — slow your pace, tone, and give extra time to respond
- Listen actively; lead with empathy and patience
- Recognize signs of trauma — a defiant reaction is often a stress response, not disrespect
- Focus on solutions, not just discipline; be consistent, authentic, and non-judgmental
- Build relationships outside of enforcement moments to earn trust
- Follow up — consistency matters more than any single interaction

WHY PUNITIVE-ONLY RESPONSES FALL SHORT

Zero-tolerance and purely punitive responses don’t reduce reoffending or make schools safer — the American Psychological Association’s Zero Tolerance Task Force found no evidence they improve behavior or safety. Developmentally-informed approaches that pair accountability with support produce better outcomes for both youth and public safety.