



Growing Minds

The Science of Raising
Thriving Teens

Katy Granville-Chapman
with Sara Lazar and Sir Anthony Seldon

Praise for *Growing Minds*

In a world where tech companies are using brain science to capture teenagers' attention, this book draws on research into the adolescent brain to offer practical strategies that will enable young people to flourish. *Growing Minds* is a much-needed handbook for all who want to help teens make wise decisions, form healthy habits, develop resilience, and build lives of meaning and purpose.

Professor Edward Brooks, Director, Oxford Character Project,
University of Oxford

Our scientific understanding of the adolescent brain is still in its infancy. However, *Growing Minds: The Science of Raising Thriving Teens* brilliantly synthesises what we *do* know about brain-based strategies to improve the well-being not just of teenagers but of us parents too. I love the way this book is so practical. There's stuff on everything from how to change a teenager's mindset to ideas to get them to sleep more soundly; from how to understand the brain's reward system to ways we can help our teenagers connect to the kind of deeper values that give them purpose. I defy any parent or teacher not to finish this book and feel more positive and optimistic that we can help our teens to flourish – and guess what? It might even be a fun ride with Katy Granville-Chapman at your side.

Rachel Kelly, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of
The Gift of Teenagers: Connect More, Worry Less and
ambassador for SANE and Rethink Mental Illness

Every day we seem besieged by the 'latest breakthrough discoveries in neuroscience'. It can feel overwhelming. *Growing Minds: The Science of Raising Thriving Teens* makes this abundance of findings manageable and actionable. Ancient wisdom is skilfully integrated, too. When the authors point out that teens need to know from their parents that 'our love is non-negotiable, even in conflict', they are sharing both good science and the deep wisdom that predates science. Throughout the book, thoughtful explanations of how the brain and nervous system work (giving us the 'why') are paired with practical guidance to help parents create the conditions for their teens to flourish (giving us the 'how'). For example, if teens say that they have no friends, the book provides seven tools to change that dreadful, but increasingly common, situation. There are dozens more tools for so many issues, but also sage advice on how to use them

(such as keeping rewards unpredictable) – all in the service of promoting flourishing.

If you are looking for a gift for a friend or relative raising teens, this is it! What the authors have offered to the world is a work of love of the highest order.

Matthew T. Lee, PhD, Professor of the Social Sciences and Humanities, Baylor University, Director, The Flourishing Network, Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University

‘I’m writing this book ... from a place of shared struggle, commitment, and hope.’ Katy’s opening acknowledgement is a perfect reflection of the disarming candour, warmth, and positivity of this wonderful parenting toolkit. While she does not profess to have all the answers, the book’s intricate mix of illuminating neuroscience, the latest research, personal anecdotes, and invaluable practical advice convincingly addresses the infinitely complex and inspiring adventure of bringing up teenagers. Its concluding section, enticingly titled ‘Becoming’, points to the stimulating (and infinite) potential we hold inside ourselves – as young people navigating a demanding and ever-changing world and as parents steering those future citizens through the shifting dynamics of adolescence.

Growing Minds is a book for anyone who has wondered, wept, despaired, and delighted in parenting today’s teens. It guides, encourages, motivates, and, above all, it understands. And what a gift that is!

Jane Lunnon, Head, Alleyn’s School (Co-educational Independent School of the Year in the 2025 Independent Schools of the Year Awards), Co-Chair, The Coalition for Youth Mental Health in Schools, Best Head of a Public School in the 2020 Tatler Schools Awards

Growing Minds is a much-needed handbook on how we can help teenagers to thrive. Far from painting a doom-and-gloom picture about the youth of today, it gives an optimistic assessment of the potential of our young people and argues that, equipped with the right tools and techniques, parents have enormous powers to improve their children’s brain health and enable them to flourish.

In each section, clearly explained neuroscience and well-referenced research lead swiftly into practical, bite-sized advice. Every chapter ends with a helpful summary and top tips for busy families, along with a useful template for personal action points and pledges.

The authors are grounded, reassuring, and realistic in their advice for parents. But the readership of *Growing Minds* should also extend to school teachers and leaders, tutors, pastoral staff, and coaches. The book's pages are teeming with material that would enrich assemblies, tutorial programmes, and training sessions. Thoroughly recommended!

Rachel Macfarlane, education consultant and author on issues
of educational equity and creating the conditions for high
performance for all

Katy Granville-Chapman recognises the challenges of raising teens in a world that often works against their well-being. In *Growing Minds* she recognises that screens, processed food, stress, constantly being online, and high levels of social comparison can actively hijack young people's reward systems, but she never leaves us parents feeling lost. Instead, she offers us the science and practical tools behind small, achievable steps we can all take towards helping our kids build the resilience they need to flourish.

The central message is reassuring: resilience is not about toughness, perfection, or constant positivity. It's built in our homes and society through repeated moments of safety, connection, repair, and self-understanding. I especially valued the tools that emphasise listening well, modelling calm, and helping teenagers understand their emotions rather than suppress them.

For parents who feel overwhelmed by modern adolescence, this book is compassionate, evidence-based, easy to follow, and, most importantly, non-judgemental. *Growing Minds* is a treasure chest of tools that explains what is happening in a teenager's developing brain, then shows us parents how to work with that biology to build resilience rather than fight it.

Rachel Richards, creator and host of the award-winning podcast
Parenting Teenagers, Untangled

Teen stress is skyrocketing in an age overflowing with brain-building superpowers – yet, as this book shows, even tiny shifts in how teens sleep, move, and focus can rewire their brains for flourishing. *Growing Minds: The Science of Raising Thriving Teens* is that rare book that is both scientifically rigorous and immediately usable in everyday life with teens. As a university professor teaching undergraduates and working at the intersection of flourishing and organisations, and as a father of two adult children, I experience this work as a beautifully integrated view of the teenage brain – choices, emotions, bodies, and lives – brought together in a coherent,

research-grounded narrative. Granville-Chapman, with Lazar and Seldon, weaves contemporary neuroscience, psychology, and physiology into accessible tools, endnoted with care yet always translated into concrete practices for families. The book advances the literature by connecting brain health, meaning, and relationships in adolescence, and by framing parenting as the design of contexts that shape attention, habits, stress, and purpose. For practitioners, it offers a flexible toolkit, honouring the diversity of teens and families. I strongly recommend *Growing Minds* to anyone who lives with, teaches, coaches, counsels, or leads teenagers.

James L. Ritchie-Dunham, Clinical Associate Professor, Rosenthal
Department of Management, McCombs School of Business,
University of Texas at Austin

In an age of misinformation related to parenting advice and support, *Growing Minds* is just the ticket for an evidence-informed approach to parenting.

When it comes to raising and educating children, we too often wait downstream, managing the fall when things go wrong. Instead, we should be moving upstream to fix the bridge. What I love about this book is that it equips the reader with a proactive approach to parenting. Katy masterfully moves through some of the biggest pressure points of our time for young people and their families. She unpacks the evidence linked to nutrition, neuroscience, habit-breaking and formation, and more – and rather than presenting this research data in a raw, overwhelming format, Katy helpfully bridges the gap between the key findings and daily family life.

Parenting is a full-time job. It's about time we had a proper induction process, an objective resource base, and an evidence-informed approach to getting things right. This book is a timely contribution to this mission.

Andrew Young, Co-director, Pathfinder Teaching School Hub,
teacher, and author of *Adaptive Teaching: Culture to Classroom*

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Introduction

Our teenagers are growing up in one of the most complex, fast-moving, and uncertain times in history – and they’re doing remarkably well. They’re juggling intense academic pressures, navigating social challenges magnified by technology, and living in a world that feels unpredictable and demanding. And yet, so many of them continue to show courage, compassion, and resilience, every single day.

As parents, we see their strength – but we also see their struggles. We know what it’s like to watch our teens wrestle with friendships, self-doubt, and school stress, and we wish we could do more to help. We also know how hard it is to stay calm and resilient ourselves when the emotional temperature at home feels sky-high.

If that sounds familiar, you’re not alone. I’m right there with you! In fact, it’s exactly why I wrote this book: raising hopeful, loving, and brave teens in today’s world often feels like an impossible task.

But what if I told you we actually have more influence than we might think?

This book isn’t about adding more to your already overloaded life; it’s a call to do things differently. New research is giving us invaluable insights into how the teenage brain develops, and now is the perfect time to equip ourselves with the latest knowledge about how to help our children thrive. By understanding how brain health is shaped, we not only improve our children’s well-being, but also strengthen our own. Brain function isn’t something that’s fixed or fated; it’s dynamic, responsive, and deeply influenced by the choices we make every day.

One of the key messages here is this: we can make a difference. The teenage brain is incredibly adaptable, and even small, strategic shifts in our daily routines – how we eat, sleep, move, relate, and think – can have a profound effect on how we and our children feel. This book isn’t about striving for parenting perfection; it’s about progress: taking small, meaningful steps that will build long-term mental wellness.

No two brains (or families) are alike. That’s why this book isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, there are a range of science-backed strategies that you can customise to suit your family’s unique needs. Think of it as a toolkit: one that empowers you to experiment, adapt, and find what works best for you.

How to use this book

Feel free to read this book from cover to cover, or simply jump into the chapters that speak to your current challenges or curiosity. Each chapter stands on its own but, when read together, they create a fuller picture of how to support a flourishing teenage brain. At the end of each chapter, you'll find a summary of the tools discussed, along with space to create your own action plan to experiment with. Explore this book in whatever way fits best with your life right now.

And let me be upfront about something important: I am definitely not a perfect parent. I don't have all the answers, and I haven't implemented any of the strategies flawlessly with our sons. Far from it! Getting teenagers (and, in particular, our two strong-willed boys) to do what's best for their brains is incredibly challenging, even when you know what the research says. I'm writing this book not from a place of mastery, but from a place of shared struggle, commitment, and hope. By understanding what the strongest scientific evidence tells us, though, we can at least prioritise our efforts effectively and focus on what really matters.

For every key claim, I've included references so you can dig deeper if you'd like to.

I've written this book with the generous and expert support of Dr Sara Lazar and Sir Anthony Seldon, who bring top-level knowledge in neuroscience, psychology, education, leadership, and parenting. Together, we've seen the transformative power of brain-based strategies to improve health and well-being in both our personal and professional lives. Our shared hope is that this book will serve as a scientifically grounded, practical guide for parents navigating one of the most important – and most demanding – roles in life.

I understand that you might be feeling sceptical. You might be thinking, 'I'm just trying to survive the day. I don't have time to learn brain science or overhaul our family-life.' I'm there, too! This book isn't about adding more pressure; it's about working smarter, not harder. Many of the strategies I'll share are simple, quick to implement, and generally cost-free. Some of the most effective tools – such as improving sleep habits or shifting your mindset – don't require extra time or money, just a little knowledge and intentionality.

To help you navigate this journey

This book is structured around four key areas of mastery: our teens' choices, emotions, bodies, and lives.

- In Part I, *Helping Teens Master Their Choices*, we'll explore the fascinating neuroscience behind decision-making. You'll learn about the reward paradox – how the brain's reward system can drive both positive motivation and profoundly problematic behaviours – and how habits and attention shape our everyday experience.
- Part II, *Helping Teens Master Their Inner World*, dives into the emotional rollercoaster of adolescence (and parenting). You'll discover how to help your teen understand, accept, and regulate their emotions; how mindsets influence mental health; and how to manage stress in a high-pressure world.
- Part III, *Helping Teens Master Their Bodies*, focuses on the biological foundations of mental health. From nutrition and physical activity to sleep, we'll see how basic lifestyle habits profoundly influence brain function – and how we can support healthier routines at home.
- Part IV, *Helping Teens Master Their Lives*, looks at the big-picture elements of well-being and flourishing. What gives life meaning? How do relationships, love, and purpose fuel resilience, health, and joy? This part helps us connect our daily actions to deeper values, and supports our teens in doing the same.

We conclude with a chapter called 'Becoming', an encouragement that we can never get everything right, but that even the tiniest of changes can make a meaningful difference over the long term.

By the end of this book, you'll have a practical understanding of how to support flourishing: your teen's and your own. You'll gain tools to help your child navigate stress, build emotional regulation, develop healthy habits, and find purpose. Most importantly, you'll be empowered to take small, meaningful actions that can make a lasting difference in your family's brain health.

This isn't just a survival manual: it's a guide to flourishing. Let's get started.

Part I

Helping Teens Master Their Choices

Welcome to Part I of our journey into the teenage brain: a behind-the-scenes look at what's driving the decisions our children make every day.

In this part, we'll explore how powerful brain chemicals – especially dopamine – influence behaviour. We'll consider why teens (and adults!) are drawn to instant rewards, even when they know something better is just a little further ahead – if only they could wait. This 'reward paradox' is a normal part of how the brain works, but understanding it gives us a significant advantage as parents.

We'll also look at willpower, how habits are formed, and – importantly – how they can be changed. And, since attention is the gateway to connection, learning, and decision-making, we'll unpack how to help teens manage their focus in a world full of distractions.

By the end of this part, you'll have a stronger grasp of how the brain shapes choices – and how you can use this insight to support your teen in building healthier, more intentional habits.

Chapter 1

The Paradox of Rewards

Introduction

Why the brain's reward system matters

Winning an Oscar is supposed to be the pinnacle of success – one of the strongest ‘rewards’ our culture can offer. Yet Matt Damon described a moment after winning that famous gold statue that was far from joyous.

He recalled going back to his girlfriend's house after the ceremony. She went to sleep, but he couldn't. He sat there alone, still buzzing, staring at the award in the quiet of the room. And then a surprising thought surfaced:

I literally looked at it, I was alone with it, and I said to myself, ‘Thank goodness I didn't [screw] anybody over for this.’ And I had this wave of realisation: imagine just chasing that and not getting it until your 80s or 90s, looking back at your life and realising what an unbelievable waste ... It can't be good enough. It can't fill you up. It never will. If that's a hole you have, that won't fill it. I felt so blessed to have that awareness at 27 – to learn it then. Imagine figuring it out at 80 ... My heart broke for a second. I imagined another version of me, an old man thinking, ‘Where did my life go? What have I done?’ And then it's over.¹

This moment captures the paradox at the heart of human behaviour: our brains are built to chase rewards, yet the rewards we pursue often fail to deliver what we hope they will.

As parents, we experience this contradiction every day. Our brains – and our children's – are wired to seek rewards. This drive can fuel meaningful achievements, such as training for a charity run, setting up a community project to reduce plastic waste, or studying for exams to get into medical

school. But it's also what keeps teens (and us) endlessly scrolling, reaching for junk food, or obsessing over social media 'likes'.

At the centre of this drive is the brain's reward system: a network involving at least seven neurochemicals, with dopamine playing the leading role. Every time we experience something rewarding – eating, achieving, socialising – dopamine is released and activates areas like the ventral tegmental area (VTA) and nucleus accumbens.² This reinforces the behaviour, making us more likely to repeat it.³ Often, this is helpful; it supports healthy habits, such as doing homework, exercising, or connecting with friends. Even music or positive memories can trigger a healthy dopamine release.

But this same system can be hijacked. Tech companies, game designers,⁴ and processed food⁵ manufacturers have learned how to exploit our dopamine circuits, creating products that keep our teens – and us – engaged far beyond what's healthy.^{6,7} That's why screen limits and healthy eating plans often feel like a losing battle. We're not failing as parents (though I often feel like I am completely failing!); we're all up against carefully engineered environments designed to bypass the brain's natural brakes.

Teens are especially vulnerable. Their brains are still developing, and their reward systems are in overdrive – prioritising immediate gratification over long-term well-being.⁸ This explains why they may chase 'likes', obsess over popularity, take illegal substances, or push themselves for academic validation.

One of the clearest examples that both parents and scientists are concerned about is screen use. Apps and games deliver fast, frequent rewards – 'likes', pings, new levels – that can alter dopamine pathways, making it easier to get hooked on the quick hits of attention, as well as harder to step away.⁹ As Professor Anna Lembke, a Stanford University addiction expert, puts it, smartphones are 'modern-day hypodermic needles',¹⁰ delivering a dopamine discharge with every notification.¹¹

When the system backfires

The brain constantly tries to maintain balance, or homeostasis. When its reward centres are activated (primarily by dopamine) – for example, in an engaging gaming session, or eating chocolate – it tries to get back to equilibrium in two key ways:

1. It dampens reward sensitivity. Dopamine receptors become less responsive and can eventually reduce in number, which means your teen then needs more stimulation to feel the same reward; this dampening can also leave them feeling ‘meh’.^{12,13}
2. It activates stress chemicals. Levels of corticotropin-releasing hormone rise and trigger the release of stress-related neuromodulators, such as dynorphin, noradrenaline/norepinephrine, and hypocretin,¹⁴ increasing irritability, jitteriness, and crankiness.¹⁵ This can mean the behaviour stops being about fun – it’s more about relief.

There’s more: even as the reward fades, the craving for that particular activity intensifies, and other activities (like reading or walking) feel flat by comparison. Excessive social media use has been linked to changes in the ventral striatum, a brain region that processes rewards and motivation. Studies show heavy use can alter connectivity and reward-processing in this area. Since the ventral striatum helps our brain experience pleasure and rewards, these changes can make teens more drawn to quick online feedback (‘likes’, messages) but less motivated and self-controlled in other areas of life. This can impact their decision-making, emotions, and behaviour.^{16,17}

And, to make our job even harder, with excessive screen use we also see a deactivation of our executive control network – a major brain network that helps with higher-level thinking, including setting goals, making decisions, solving problems, using working memory, focusing attention, and, importantly, self-control.¹⁸

Research shows that excessive screen time is also linked to:

- poor sleep
- anxiety and depression
- a higher body mass index (BMI)
- cognitive decline.^{19,20}

Young people are especially at risk. Starting early with regular screen use can heighten their chances of facing mental health struggles, and even increase the likelihood of future substance use.²¹ So, the longer we can delay consistent screen exposure, the better it is for their overall well-being. This research has been taken seriously by the Australian government, which has passed a law preventing under-16s from having

accounts on certain social media platforms; they've even ruled that parents can't give consent for under-16s to join.²² Of course, this is easier said than done! We gave our children access to screens earlier than we would have liked, mainly because of COVID-19 and our wish to keep them connected with friends – and it's a decision we've since come to regret, as we've struggled to undo it.

The bigger picture: what we're up against

We're not just parenting in a dopamine-rich environment, we're parenting in a dopamine-exploitative one. Tech and food industries spend billions designing products that hijack our children's attention.^{23,24} No wonder traditional activities, such as reading, learning science, or family games struggle to compete. Constant exposure to fast, dopamine-heavy rewards rewires the brain to expect instant gratification, making slower, more effortful tasks feel almost intolerable.

And it's not just screens. Ultra-processed food, social comparison, achievement pressure, and even romantic crushes tap into the same system, shaping our teens' decisions every day.

What can we do?

Understanding how the reward system works helps us support – not fight – our children's brains. Dopamine isn't the enemy. It's what fuels motivation, curiosity, learning, creativity, and human connection. But when our reward system is overstimulated, it can lead to burnout, addiction, and emotional volatility.

Family toolkit to manage neurochemical rewards

Everyone reacts differently to rewards. Many of our friends' children could walk away from Fortnite mid-game; our boys, however, would morph into werewolves when asked to log off (they're much less dramatic now at 13 and 15!). And, while I can't resist a second (third, fourth, fifth ...) piece of chocolate, our older son can make a bar last for weeks. That's why parenting strategies need to be flexible: what motivates one teen may leave another cold.

This toolkit offers science-backed, real-world tools to help support our teens' (and our own) motivation, compulsive behaviour reduction, and healthy dopamine regulation.

Engaging dopamine circuits for motivation

We can establish a healthy level of dopamine circuit activation to support motivation – to complete homework, engage with family, pursue hobbies, and sustain the effort that daily life requires – via the following:

- warm, caring relationships
- balanced rewards
- natural light and outdoors activity
- some food and drink
- mindfulness.

Let's start with relationships.

Toolkit 1: Warm, caring relationships

Warm, caring relationships are among the strongest and most sustainable boosters of well-being.^{25,26} Research has increasingly shown that oxytocin – released during warm social connection – doesn't just promote calm and contentment. It also interacts directly with the brain's dopamine reward system, with the two appearing to amplify each other's effects.^{27,28} Genuine moments of connection with your teenager – when they feel truly heard, or receive a warm hug – may engage brain systems in a richer way than screen-based or food rewards. Screens and junk food can trigger dopamine, but they don't bring the same oxytocin response that real human connection does. While much of this research comes from animal studies and the picture in humans is still developing, the evidence suggests that warm relationships offer something neurologically distinct that artificial rewards are unlikely to fully replicate.

Close, compassionate relationships are also one of the most effective ways to curb overuse of anything – from screens to ultra-processed foods^{29,30} – another reason it's so important to help our teens build real,

in-person connections, rather than relying on social media or gaming to meet emotional needs.

A 2024 longitudinal study tracking young people from age 11 through to adulthood found that low positive parenting and low parental involvement predicted substance use at multiple stages of adolescence.³¹ In addition, a large study from Columbia University found that teens who trust a parent are less likely to use alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana, even when peer pressure is taken into account.³² Crucially, this is not just about supervision or rule-setting: it is the quality and warmth of our relationships that does the protective work.

Addiction has roots in genetics, brain function, the social environment, and their interactions, and studies increasingly show that the social environment influences vulnerability to, or resilience against, substance use and substance use disorders.^{33,34} The teenage years are a period of heightened reward sensitivity,³⁵ when the brain is particularly drawn to intense, fast stimulation – just what screens, ultra-processed foods, and substances provide. As we saw earlier, warm relationships offer a competing source of reward that engages the same brain circuitry, amplified by the addition of oxytocin, reducing the pull of those shortcuts.^{36,37}

Because relationships matter so much, we've dedicated an entire chapter to them (Chapter 11) – with practical tools. But we didn't want to wait. So in this part you'll find a few simple, actionable ideas you can start using right now to build connection and reduce reliance on high-stimulation rewards.

Tool 1.1: Listening really well

Being genuinely interested in what your teen has to say – more than in what we want to say – is essential for connection. This is especially important when it comes to highly rewarding activities that tend to capture their attention. As a bonus, involving teens in setting limits can lead to better buy-in – or at least greater cooperation. It's not guaranteed, but it's definitely worth trying.

Listening openly and patiently, and acknowledging their views, shows respect. You may also find that teens often have sensible ideas about boundaries and consequences. Many of the young people we've worked with are already aware of how screens and ultra-processed foods affect them, and are open to finding solutions.

These conversations don't just help with problem-solving – they also strengthen your relationship. And, as a bonus, that positive connection gives everyone a little dopamine boost.³⁸

Tool 1.2: Acknowledge and validate our children's feelings

Even if their reactions seem over-the-top, our teens' distress when stepping away from a game or social media is real. Given how they affect our brains, it's no surprise our children have intense feelings about losing access.³⁹ Validating their feelings – rather than dismissing them – can really help.

Tool 1.3: Create family traditions

One of the biggest challenges is replacing screen time with something our children will find engaging enough to give a try – our boys are particularly difficult to convince that anything is worth the cost of missing screen time. One thing that may help both with relationships and tackling screens is creating family traditions that become regular activities. For example:

- board game Wednesdays
- team-cooking Thursdays
- kitchen dance-party Fridays
- parkrun Saturdays.

It can take time, but creating rituals can help everyone adapt to the new routine, as well as create positive memories. These remain an aspiration for Jeremy and me with our teenage boys – screen-free time with their friends seems to work better. But some families have had great success with traditions like these. We talk more about rituals in our chapter on habits.

Tool 1.4: Provide positive feedback

Positive feedback can be helpful. When our teens choose to step away from screens, skip junk food, or do something less intrinsically rewarding

– such as tidying their rooms or eating vegetables they say taste revolting – acknowledging it helps reinforce the behaviour. Each bit of praise triggers a small dopamine release and, over time, this can turn positive choices into lasting habits.

Feedback can be verbal ('Thank you for clearing the table') or physical (high fives, hugs, fist bumps). Boys, in particular, often respond well to physical feedback. In fact, a study by the National Basketball Association (NBA) found that teams whose players used more physical touch – such as pats and shoulder taps – performed better later in the season.⁴⁰ Sara used this to good effect with her son. She began pairing fist bumps with spontaneous 'I love you' moments, creating a warm habit. Later, she used fist bumps to reinforce good behaviour – such as finishing chores – making them easier to complete with less conflict.

But feedback has a shelf life: we all adapt. To keep it effective, avoid overdoing it and mix up how you show it. In addition, praise for teens ideally should be specific, genuine, and linked to strategy rather than just the amount of work done – teens can lose trust in adults who praise them for effort without specifying what was effective about it.⁴¹ Sometimes the most powerful thing is simply to show that we noticed and that we trust them. Next, we'll explore how adaptation works and how to stay one step ahead.

Toolkit 2: Balancing rewards

If we don't manage the dopamine spikes triggered by praise, achievement, and winning, our brain's response to these short-term bursts can decrease over time – making future accomplishments feel less rewarding. This is adaptation. Keep praise low-key. A simple 'Good choice starting your homework early – you earned that A' is more effective in the long term than wild Barbie-themed parties to celebrate every success.

Tool 2.1: Don't layer too many tools together

Relatedly, stacking multiple dopamine-boosting activities, such as combining workouts with energy drinks, inspiring music, clear goals, and big celebrations, can boost motivation in the short term. But overdoing it leads to crashes and weakens long-term drive, as it raises the threshold

needed to feel reward from the activity. To sustain motivation we should avoid frequent high dopamine spikes and vary our regular activities. This keeps experiences rewarding over time.⁴²

Tool 2.2: Use (randomly) intermittent reward timing

Motivation stays stronger when rewards are unpredictable. This taps into the brain's reward-prediction error system – we get a bigger dopamine release when a reward is unexpected.⁴³

Social media and slot machines use this system to keep people hooked. But teens can use this to their advantage: try encouraging your teen to celebrate some of their successes, but not all.

This doesn't mean we, as parents, should only sometimes recognise good behaviour (like a slot machine only sometimes gives a reward to the player, even though they are consistently following the rules). This could leave our teen feeling confused or let down – we'll see why this matters in the next part. We can, however, mix up how we recognise our teens.

Why 'reward-prediction error' matters for parenting teens

Reward-prediction error is a system that helps explain some tough parenting moments. For example, if you say we *might* stop for ice cream because you got an A in your last paper, your teen's brain often hears this as a promise, especially if they like ice cream as much as I do. Dopamine fires in anticipation and, if the reward doesn't happen, the disappointment can feel intense. That's because dopamine neurons are activated most strongly when a reward is unexpected, remain at baseline when a reward is fully predicted, and are actually suppressed below baseline when an expected reward fails to materialise.^{44,45} These moments also stick – dopamine plays a central role in learning and memory, modulating synaptic plasticity in ways that strengthen neural connections associated with significant experiences⁴⁶ – so they can shape behaviour and expectations over time (either for good, or not so good!).

Teenagers today are navigating a world of unprecedented challenges, from academic pressure and social media to uncertainty about the future. As parents and carers we want to help them thrive, but understanding what they need can feel overwhelming.

Drawing on the latest revelations in neuroscientific and psychological research, *Growing Minds* reveals how the developing brain shapes behaviour, emotions, motivation, and resilience. Packed with practical, evidence-based strategies, it demonstrates ways to support healthy brain development, strengthen emotional well-being, and build the skills young people need to flourish.

Covering topics including sleep, nutrition, technology, stress, relationships, and habits, this essential guide will help you better understand your teenager and yourself, while creating the foundations for lifelong health, resilience, and success.

A much-needed handbook on how we can help teenagers to thrive. Thoroughly recommended!
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I defy any parent or teacher not to finish this book and feel more positive and optimistic that we can help our teens to flourish.
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A book for anyone who has wondered, wept, despaired, and delighted in parenting today's teens. It guides, encourages, motivates, and, above all, it understands. And what a gift that is!
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A treasure chest of tools that explains what is happening in a teenager's developing brain.
Rachel Richards, creator and host of the award-winning podcast *Parenting Teenagers, Untangled*

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