



THE GROWING BRAIN

Episode 4: Making Sense of the Teen Years

Guest: Dr. Aileen Fullchange

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Teenagers! There's so much to love, and also... a few things to be curious, worried or just confused about. In this episode, we dive into what's happening in the brain of teenagers, and how parents can respond.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. This podcast is produced by Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to social emotional health for kids, families, adults, and communities. This first season of The Growing Brain is dedicated to parents. We will explore the joys, challenges and mysteries of parenthood through the lens of social emotional health. In this series, we'll shed light on topics such as how kids' brains work and healthy discipline, all better equipping parents to grow healthy brains. I'm your host, Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute.

Maureen *Welcome back to the growing brain podcast. Our guest today is Aileen Fullchange. Aileen is a licensed psychologist on our therapeutic services team at Momentous Institute. And Aileen - fun fact - is a former middle school teacher, which is relevant because today we are going to talk about teenagers. This is one of those ... so I've mentioned on other episodes that I have kids, but mine are really young. So, um, I have no experience with teenagers. If you see me over here, feverishly taking notes, that's what's going on... preparation for a few years from now. Um, I want to start today by talking about this idea... I hear it a lot and I'm guilty of saying it, this idea of like, oh, you know, the teenage years are going to be so terrible and kind of grit your teeth and survive the teenage years. And, you know, just the other day, my husband, I made a joke about our daughter. She was being kind of... giving us some attitude and we were like, oh yeah, the teenagers are going to be terrible. Um, so, but that's of course not entirely true. And I know for people, especially people like you who show up to work every day and choose to work with teenagers, that there's a lot of beauty in the teenage years. So I wanted to start by opening it with that. And just, can you tell us some of, what are some of the things that you love about teenagers?*

Aileen *Yeah. So first I just want to start by saying if you're a parent and you have no anxiety about the teenage years, that might also be something to look at. Um, so I think it's normal to have at least a certain amount of healthy anxiety about really any stage of life, but especially the teen years. Um, because the*

teen years come with a lot of change. And that's something that I love about working with teens is that I am never bored because they're always changing from day-to-day, from moment to moment. Um, this is a time period where, you know, there's changes in their body. So they get really curious and they ask these questions that sometimes can be even challenging for us as adults. And I know for me, I learn a lot from the teen clients who I work with. Um, their, their brains are, you know, in general kids' brains are more flexible, more adaptive than, you know, the brains of us as adults and teens, especially, you know, they're in this process of identity formation and discovering who they are physically, psychologically, mentally. Um, and it's just really cool to see, see that happen.

And also one of the things I really like is to see teens start to grow into their independence, to start making their own choices. Um, their brains are also such that they start developing abstract thinking. So you can have these conversations with them that are really deep, that you probably can't have with your kids at their stage right now, but about values, their own values, um, about, you know, their dreams and hopes for the future, um, about their dreams and hopes for the future for their neighborhoods, for their communities, these kinds of really big-picture discussions, you can start having them with these kids. That's a really cool thing about them.

Maureen *I love that. Yeah. I love that. Thank you for sharing all that. So let's talk about what's going on with teenagers. You kind of alluded to it. And in the first episode of this podcast, I talked with Laura Vogel about the development of the brain and how the brain develops over time and stages. And... and we know that teenagers' brains don't function the same as adults' fully-formed brains. And we see that and the science, uh, confirms what we can sort of imagine based on the behavior of teenagers. Um, so we know impulse control is one of the things that, you know, the brain is still under construction on. What are some of the other behaviors that we see that are sort of specific to teenagers?*

Aileen I want to even reframe that, like when we think about impulse control, um, and the way I see is it teens still have this ability to really live in the present.

Maureen *Mmmm.. nice.*

Aileen As adults, we're always like, okay, what are we doing for dinner? What are we doing tomorrow? What are we doing the next year? Some of us plan into you know, retirement and the next several decades. Um, but the beauty of being a kid still, being a teenager, is that they're really, they're really living in the present moment.

Maureen *Nice. I like it.*

Aileen They're really enjoying the here and the now, and they're not really thinking about the future consequences, which will look like what's called impulsivity.

Maureen *Yeah.*

Aileen But it, but I think it's a stage, you know, that eventually does go away. And so to enjoy that, I think as a parent or as adult caregivers, to be able to see that and enjoy that and learn from that as something that we can, that I feel like I learned from my teen clients, um, but other... other areas. So I mentioned identity development. So in this stage of life, kids are really asking themselves: who am I? What's the group that I belong to? Is there a place where I belong? And when I say identity, I'm talking about kind of, it could be every single aspect of identity, racial identity, sexual identity, my social identity, and that shows up in, um, you know, kids might, teens might change their clothing, you know, their clothing style every year... every couple of days, or, you know, from day to day, um, they might be trying out different identities in terms of how they look, their physical appearance, also who they're hanging out with, um, the words that they're using, the TV shows that they're watching, you know, all of these things, they're trying them out. Um, and it's a really neat thing to see a kid, a teenager, start to kind of explore these and figure out what fits for them. So that's one piece.

Um, another really big component is the importance of peer relationships, so that this stage in life, most teenagers start kind of separating from their parents and, um, seeking out a peer group where they feel like they belong. But also, you know, it works both ways, right? So they, they can influence their peers and their peers can influence them. Um, so at this stage of life, the impact of peers can sometimes be just as great or as, or greater than the impact of the adults in a child's life. The direct impact and not to say that parents have no sway over that, but just to be aware, it makes sense. You know, if a kiddo is wanting to hang out with their classmates more, you know, their same age neighbor more and not hang out with mom or dad or, uh, adult caregivers every single day, that's going to make sense. That's totally normal, totally healthy. We actually want to see that happening. Um, so that's one piece.

Um, another big piece I mentioned was the physical changes. And with that comes a lot of curiosity and can also come a lot of confusion. So not just from the actual, you know, the teenager reacting to the physical change of like what's whose body is this what's going on. But also there's these hormonal changes that teens might not have any idea of, you know, why am I feeling this way? It can be a confusing time and confusion of course can be stressful.

Maureen *Right.*

Aileen Um, and for most parents, you know, it's been a while since we've been at that stage. Um, so it's important for us to have empathy, to be able to, okay, remember what it was like way back when, when I had that going on and to be able to empathize with what our teens are going through.

A big change that happens that, uh, can result in a lot of butting heads, is this desire for more increased independence. So for some families, as kids approach the teen years, there can seem to be more conflict as teens start to assert their independence. And of course, you know, that we have this kind of stereotype of the teenagers, a teenager thinking I know it all, right. And we, as adults, know they don't know at all, but for a teenager to say, hey, I know, that's also developmentally appropriate.

Maureen *Right.*

Aileen They're trying to, it's not, they're not actually saying they literally know everything, but it's a way of asserting independence. Like, hey mom, dad, I got it. I got this. I want a little space here. And that's normal and healthy. So, you know, we're not looking for zero conflicts in that stage of life. We're looking for a reasonable kind of healthy amount of conflict. Um, where a teenager is saying, hey mom, dad, I want to do this. Or that rule isn't fair. Or, you know, these kinds of, even the, you know, I mentioned the abstract thinking starts to develop. So what we might see is no kids really talking about what's fair or not fair. So teenagers often have this really strong sense of fairness and justice. You let my brother do that, but I'm not doing that, you know. Why? Well, that's not fair, you know, and these, and they can kind of, they can be conflictual. They can feel conflictual, but it's also really healthy and normal because they're, their teen brain is trying to figure out what are the values that make sense to me that are my values that are important. And that's it. It can become such rich, meaningful discussion.

Maureen *That's great. I just want to repeat it because it was so powerful. What you just said, the goal should be. Oh, the constructive conflict. So not no conflict, which is impossible. And also not the goal. The goal is to have some kind of conflict and have it be the kind that they grow from and learn from, and that we, you know, embrace that a little bit.*

Aileen Absolutely.

Maureen *I think about teenagers being so close to adulthood. And so, so many of the things they're going through is just basically practice for in just a few years when they're going to be adults. I, I kind of make a joke about my, my kids, my daughter. Um, when she was a toddler, she was so independent and we were like, I want you to be an independent adult. I just don't want you to be independent right now in this parking lot. You know, right now I want you to follow my directions. And when you're an adult, of course, I want you to be independent, but all of those things that they're doing over time, are*

practice for that. So of course we want them to exert that independence. It just can be hard in the moment.

Aileen Yeah, exactly. Like we want our teenagers to exert the independence. That's their job. But the job of parents is to still maintain healthy boundaries, to still set those limits.

Maureen *Right.*

Aileen So we're not saying, okay, parents they're asserting independence, all right. Go ahead and fly because you know what, they don't know how to fly yet. They might not know that they don't know how to fly, but it's our job to kind of still set healthy limits and boundaries, and also to be really transparent about why we're setting those healthy limits and boundaries.

Maureen *So can you tell a little, let's go there a little bit. Can you explain some examples about what that, what that looks like? What are some of those boundaries and then also, how do you do have that conversation?*

Aileen Um, so, okay. One thing that comes up all the time is cell phone use. So I have families, um, where their teenage son or daughter, they're on their cell phone, they're on social media. Um, you know, and I had a family, for example, talk about how difficult it is to get their teen daughter off of theirs, off of the cell phone, especially at night. Right. And so there's, so there's a couple approaches here, right? So one approach is you give me the cell phone. End of story. I'm the parent, that's it. Right? So that, that might work with kids who are not teenagers, right. Kids who don't... don't necessarily have that abstract level of thinking. And, um, you know, the, the, a child, a younger child's brain, um, they might not have that desire to know what is the value behind what's that the more abstract thinking, versus with a teenager that doesn't work because their brains are at the level where they're ready to start understanding the why, what's the value driving this action. So if mom says instead, you know, sweetie, we gotta take the cell phone away at night because you know, it impacts your brain when you have the blue light. I know you're not gonna be able to sleep well. And guess what happens when you don't sleep well? Tomorrow, you're going to be grumpy and I'm going to deal.... I have to deal with the grumpiness and your teacher's going to have to deal with the grumpiness and your grades are going to fall and et cetera, you know, these are the reasons, cause it's my job to make sure you're healthy and I want you to do well in school. So I still need you to, to put the phone away to give the phone to me or whatever, but this is why.

Maureen *Yeah, that's good.*

Aileen So, yeah. And I think also there's um, so as I mentioned, there's a tendency to have more conflicts. That's a normal and healthy, and I think it's important that parents also pick and choose the battles.

Maureen

Right.

Aileen

So, you know, do we really want to battle about, I don't know, that pair of jeans has a little hole on it. You cannot walk out the door with that versus, hey, we need to get your grades up. And so, um, just to be able to be mindful of that, because entering that time period, it can be exhausting and it can be tiring. And also you want to pick the conflicts that can kind of be the most productive conflicts to have. So if we're going to have a conflict yet, let's, we can have a conflict about grades because grades are important. They're going to impact your life trajectory. But the little hole in the cuff of your pants. Okay.

Maureen

Are there, or you would advise parents to sort of do that, give or take dance with their kids? So the kid kind of pushes back and instead of doubling down, you know, well, the rule is, you know, no cell phones at night. And so maybe not that one, cause that, that sounds pretty clear-cut, you know, no cell phones in your room at night.

Aileen

So this is a stage of life where problem solving and self-advocacy can be learned and taught. And I think even in the cell phone example, um, I can see a situation where a parent says to their child, to their teen, you know, we can't have the cell phone at night. I know you really want it. And, um, tell me a little bit more about what we can do about this. So, and I've had parents actually sit with their teens and kind of walk through... okay, so this is the goal, its not like I am imposing this rule, its that this is the rule. How can I help you achieve that, that outcome of not having a cell phone at the end of the night... and then actually walking through... okay, well maybe, maybe I can have it till 9:00 PM.

- Well, that seems a little late. You know, it makes me worried. What can you do so I'm not so worried?

- I can set an alarm at 9:00 PM.

- Okay. So if the alarm goes off at 9:00 PM, what should I expect?

- Well, I'll put the cell phone away.

- I'm really worried that you're going to get it back. So what should we do?

- Okay. I'm going to...

You know, so kind of this problem, this joint problem-solving process, right, um, this is an opportunity where parents also get to model expressing their needs. So, you know...

- You know, sweetie, I really got to get to sleep. I can't be monitoring the cell phone thing. What can you do? You know, what can we do to make sure that this works out for the both of us? Um, and that way it creates less of an antagonistic environment of, well, I need that cell phone gone now.

- Well, no, I don't want to give it up.

- Well, I said, yes.

That's what doesn't work for that the teen years at all.

Um, and I think there's also, you know, every, every generation there's going to be slightly different values, right? Our kids grew up in a different

world than we grew up. Um, so, uh, it's important that we also hear what's going on with our kiddos. So before the teen years, maybe it was easier for parents to be able to say, hey, do this, do that. And you know, kids will be more compliant, but at this stage in life, that's not going to work anymore. There's going to have to be more dialogue and conversation. And dialogue and conversation... it requires two people. It's not just one person talking, its not just, you know, mom's saying, hey, do this, do that. It requires listening. And that's a skill. I think that, um, as parents that's something new at that stage of life, is for us as adults to be the listeners instead of the tellers.

Maureen *Right.*

Aileen And for them to actually feel heard.

Maureen *Right. That they're not just shouting into a dark darkness.*

Aileen Yeah. And I think that's, that's so important on many levels. One of the other themes in the teen years is around identity and self-esteem. Um, so for some kids, they might find it more difficult to find a solid, you know, sense of identity and to feel a group where they belong. And that can have a huge impact on self-esteem, but we want kids to have multiple sources of self-esteem and self-worth. And one of the most important sources during this time is from their caregivers. So the more that caregivers can listen and just be, and be present, the more it sends a kind of implicit message of, hey, you're worth my time. You are worthy. And that can be, um, a buffer against kind of the other stressors during that stage of life.

Maureen *That's great, I wanted to kind of touch on that. You said at the beginning about how teenagers are pulling away from their parents and, you know, adult figures and kind of leaning into their social figures. And so I, you know, as a parent, I think that can be hard when it feels like your kid is totally disconnected and doesn't want anything to do with you. It might feel like that sometimes. So what you're saying is that there's still a very important role for adults.*

Aileen Absolutely.

Maureen *And, and... what does that look like? How do you show them that you care, even when it feels like they're really not listening or interested at all?*

Aileen So I think the first thing when you consider as adults is don't take anything personally. So if, I mean, imagine if you're a teenager with all these hormones going through your body, these physical changes, um, you may have changed schools or are about to change schools. Um, you know, your peer groups might be changing. There's just generally a lot of confusion and stress. So if your teenager, you know, has these mood swings or lashes

out in anger or becomes upset one day or... don't take it personally, it might have to do with any of those other factors that I just mentioned.

Um, so that's one thing. The other is, um, I think it's pretty common that parents feel like, oh gosh, I'm not needed anymore because my teenager is, you know, not really talking to me as much, not showing me as much affection, hanging out and wanting to go out the house and hang out with their friends all the time.

You are very much needed. The way that you show up in the way that you're needed is going to be different, right? So they don't need you, um, to be, um, you know, to be kind of as involved like with, you know, when you're, when a kid is in kindergarten, you have to pack the bag, you have to do this. So you're not needed in that way, but you're needed in a different way. You're needed as a stable presence. Um, you're needed as still a base from which they can go and explore. Teenagers do well and they're able to feel comfortable exploring and hanging out with their peer groups and all that when they feel like they have a stable base to come back to.

So like, let's take physical affection. So like classic example, you know, like one day a parent... parents say this to me all the time... like one day he just didn't want to kiss me goodbye and it's, and it can feel like, oh my gosh. But again, it's not personal, right? So this is part of differentiating. This is part of becoming more independent. Um, it's not necessarily showing so much physical affection, but there's affection in other ways that's shown. And for parents, it's still important to show kids, to show teenagers, hey, I'm still here. And there's a couple ways that that can happen. Um, so, and there's, there's, so there's a couple of ways that that can happen and there's also some barriers to that happening. So one is just that, you know, they're because they're really living in the moment, they're not planning for the future. It's not like they're thinking, oh, I need to invest time in this relationship with my mom or dad, you know.

Maureen *Right.*

Aileen That's, that's not where their head is supposed to be at. They're supposed to be kind of in the present. Um, and then there's also just like a culture gap, right? So kids, teenagers have their own culture and oftentimes what's cool is to consider the parents not cool. That's a way of being independent, right? Um, that's totally normal.

Maureen *That one, I think has stood the test of time.*

Aileen Yes. So as parents, again, our role, um, you know, there's certain parts of identity formation that, um, it's not up to us to control, it's up to us to just be there, present and witnessing with our kids. Um, so this is where the practice of listening, of being present of actually being available. So I hear some parents saying, you know, my kiddo won't talk to me. And I talk to the

kiddo and they're like, well, they're on the phone, my mom or dad, they're on the phone, they're watching TV, et cetera. So to be physically available is important to actually be off of the phone, be off of the television off of the computer and just being present. Um, or, you know, there's some parents that have said, well, they won't talk to me. You know, when I ask them, how are you? Tell me really what's going on. And that again, it's normal for teenagers to want a little bit of privacy.

So I think that's perfectly normal and parents can kind of look for red flags. So like, if there's a sudden change in, uh, grades, a sudden change in peer groups, a sudden change in mood that's beyond kind of the typical mood swings that you might see in the teenage years. Um, any of those kinds of sudden changes, that might be cause for more inquiry. Um, but there's no sudden changes like that, and, you know, grades are doing well, all that, you don't have to know every single detail of what happened in your kiddo's day. So that's one thing. You know, I mentioned teenagers... the, the typical thing is that they're trying to be more independent and we can support that by really kind of letting them lead the interactions.

So I had, um, I worked with, uh, I've worked with a lot of families where their kids play video games, parents... like, I don't really play much video games, I haven't since I was a teenager. Um, but that doesn't mean... so I'm not saying, you know, you need to go learn how to play the video game. Although if you do, that's pretty awesome.

Even being in a room while your kid is playing video games and just noticing, oh, you're playing that video game. Okay. Tell me what that's about, you know, those sorts of things. Or if a kiddo is, you know, um, willing to share about, oh, you went to a party. How many kids were at the party, um, how did you get to the party and kind of these low lifts.

Like, it's easy to say how many people were there. It's harder to answer, hey, were there drugs at the party. Right? So there's, some of it is just respecting the boundary, um, both the physical boundary, but also the emotional boundaries, um, and the kind of desire for a little bit more privacy.

Maureen *Yeah. That makes sense. I've heard some parents say that they get the most information out of their teenagers in the car. And that makes sense with what you're saying, it's less, so it's less obtrusive. The parent's not sitting down with the kid and asking questions. It kind of just respect some of those boundaries like you're talking about.*

Aileen Absolutely. And oftentimes that's, that might be the only time where there's one-on-one time. So that's another piece that's I think important for parents to be aware of is to create spaces for one-on-one time. Where... where you're letting the teenager lead. So, you know, we're gonna do a once a week coffee date. You don't have to say anything or do anything. We're just going to hang around for an hour. But again, it's important that as parents, you know, there's not this barrage of questioning...

Maureen *Like an agenda. There's not an agenda of questions.*

Aileen Right. And yeah, the other piece, I think also is that teenagers are really hyper sensitive to criticism. So anything that might seem like criticism, it's going to cause them to shut down. So even something as innocuous seeming as, oh, you're wearing that shirt? And that, for someone who's going through body changes, trying to figure out identity changes, you know, that can seem like a criticism. Um, so just, you know, and every teenager is different, right? Some teenagers will, will respond to that positively and others might feel like, oh my gosh, you know, I need to go change this or I don't... I feel kind of put on the spot right now. Um, but you know your teen and it's okay to make mistakes.

Maureen *Right.*

Aileen This is, this is also I think, a stage in life where parents have such a powerful ability to impact kids in terms of modeling some of the values that we want them to show like a value of being able to own one's mistakes. We all make mistakes. That's okay. Parents make mistakes. That's okay. It's okay for us as adults to model making a mistake, apologizing, making up for it. It's wonderful to model those things.

Maureen *Yeah. And I assume it probably feels sometimes like the kid's not even listening or noticing, but I sure they are.*

Aileen Yeah. Yeah. So, you know, there's a lot of, kind of like posturing that happens in the teen years. You know, I want to show up as the cool kids. So I'm going to act like what I think a cool kid should act like, which is, you know, being stoic or, you know, that sort of thing. So I think as parents, we have to kind of, um, consider our kids' actions through this, this understanding, um, and in fact, I really encourage parents in general, just to learn more about like, ask your doctor, you know, for resources, ask if there's a therapist who you're connected to, come, come to Momentous, you know, ask us about, hey, what should I expect from, from my teen during this time period? The more that you can kind of know what to expect, I think the more that you can kind of alleviate your own anxiety as an adult, um, and the more you can support your child. Even if your teen isn't talking directly to you, but they're talking to someone else who is an adult caregiver. So, you know, if you're in a two-parent household and they're talking to the other parent, you know, it's important that there is somebody, some adult caregiver that's connected. If they're really close to a teacher, you know, those sorts of relationships are really important.

If it's not specifically you again, you don't have to take it personally. There's a lot going on. But if there is someone who, you know, that they're comfortable with, it's okay to become kind of an ally with that person. So, you know, my, if my teenager is close, really close to their aunt... I might check in with her aunt and say, hey, just want to see how things are going,

you know, I know my kiddo talks to you or, you know, if it's a two-parent household, hey, sweetie, can you tell me a little bit about how, you know, my, my kiddo is doing? So it's important to know that even if it's not you, that might be okay.

Maureen *And how do you do that in a way that doesn't violate their trust? So if they're disclosing things to an adult and then that adult goes and tells the parent, is that a conversation you, you would suggest you have before?*

Aileen Transparency is a good thing. Yeah. So I mentioned how, you know, teenagers have this kind of strong sense of.. can have a strong sense of justice. So over-communicating with them is preferable to under-communicating because we don't want to breach, um, we don't want to break that trust, but saying, hey, you know, I know you talked to your auntie, you know, um, I want you to feel comfortable with her, you know, and also once in a while, sometimes I talk to her just to make sure, cause it's my job to keep you safe and healthy. And just so you know, sometimes I talk to her. Something, as simple as that.

Maureen *Another layer with some teenagers is when they belong to, uh, when there may be second generation, first generation Americans and their parents maybe come from a different cultural background than the child and so they're kind of balancing two cultures, right? The culture at home and the culture of their peer friendships. And that can be really tricky for parents, I know. So what kind of advice do you have for parents who are watching their kids grow up in a very different environment than the one they grew up?*

Aileen So first I just want to acknowledge that that can be really hard for both parent and child. Um, so I think, yeah, there's just so many, there's so many layers to this. So, one is that I think it's important for us as the grownups to acknowledge, these are my values. These are, this is what my culture is to be able to just acknowledge that, and to acknowledge, hey, my teenager grew up in this culture here in the United States, and this is different. And also that it's not that one is better than the other. Um, in fact, the research shows that when kids are able to, um, kind of access both cultures, that that generally results in the best outcomes. Um, so it's important to have those dialogues. There's an activity that we actually, that, um, I facilitate with parents and it's just simply kind of creating this Venn diagram of okay... I'm mom. Here are my values, here are the things that I like to do. All right. You sweetie. Okay. Go ahead and create yours. Okay, so those are yours. Okay. Now, where do we overlap? And what are the kind of the strengths of each culture? And also what are the parts that we don't like so much about each culture?

Right. And to be able to, to go toward that conversation, there's so many conflicts that actually happen around cultural values. Um, if we don't talk about it, it becomes like we're talking about this stuff on the surface without really talking about the root.

Maureen *Right. That makes sense.*

Aileen So being able to navigate that also, you know, as I mentioned, the research shows that when kids are able to have a strong grounding in both, um, their parents' culture of origin and kind of the culture here in the States, that's when, or if there's multiple cultures, if, if kids have access to their cultures, however many there are, that's what results in the best outcomes.

Um, so that means, you know, like for me personally, so my, my parents immigrated from Taiwan. I was born here in the United States, so there was a lot of differences in culture, you know, dating for example. Um, there's a lot of differences. That's a whole, whole 'nother podcast right there. Um, so being able to have those conversations, but also giving, uh, so not giving up the cultural tradition. So, you know, my parents, being able to be rooted in a Taiwanese culture and for me to be exposed to Taiwanese culture is, is helpful, is useful for our kids, for your kids, for your teenagers, those of you who are listening to the podcast, making sure that they're able to be part of your culture and kind of see the strengths of that, but also allowing them to share, okay, mom, dad, these are my values. This is my culture. This is what I like. This is, you know, my, my classmates or my peers who are from different cultures or from the culture of the United States, this is what we do. Um, so just being able to negotiate that and talk about that is important.

Maureen *Let's talk about kids who are going through some of those big identity, uh, things that you've talked about, kids who are exploring their sexuality or their gender identity and, and how do parents navigate what in, in some cases feels completely foreign to them?*

Aileen Mm-hmm. So I think there's a lot of, um, interplay between, like, cultural values here. So what the research says is that it's normal in this stage of life to be thinking about, to be exploring, to be kind of trying on different gender identities, sexual identities, that that's completely normal and healthy. Um, it can, so, yes, it's, it's normal also for parents to feel some anxiety about that, or some worry about that because obviously certain gender identities, certain sexual identities are more discriminated, have more, um, stressors that they might have to deal with in life. Um, but the research also says that when parents kind of accept that their kids are going through this process and normalize it for them, that, that results in the best outcomes. And that's regardless of, you know, kind of after they've gone through this, this period in their, um, adolescence, regardless of what sexual gender identity they do end up landing with. Because again, kids are really hypersensitive to criticism. Some, some kids are really hypersensitive to criticism during this time and something like gender identity and sexual identity, those are really core, really core.

Maureen *And you're very vulnerable, I assume.*

- Aileen Very vulnerable. Right? So in general, in this stage in life, teenagers are vulnerable. And then we talk about things like sexual identity, gender identity, add an extra layer of vulnerability. Um, so I really encourage parents during this time to really just normalize, hey, it's okay that you're having these thoughts and feelings. That's a normal thing.
- Maureen *So a big theme, a big theme I'm picking up from this conversation is this idea of just being available, not pushing too hard and just sort of, I'm here when you want to talk and kind of creating sort of basically a safe space and then normalizing that these are normal things that teenagers go through. And that seems to be sort of your advice about teenagers.*
- Aileen And I think there's also a parallel process, like as a, as a clinician, um, working with, with parents who have teenagers, um, you know, there, I think sometimes parents see things or they feel anxiety and they might worry that their own level of anxiety or worry is not appropriate. But again, a certain amount is normal. Yeah. You want to be a little, a little anxious, you know, to a point that's healthy, right?
- Maureen *Yeah. So we've talked some about, uh, peer relationships and friendships between teenagers. And of course that's lovely when the friends they are hanging out with are the sweet kids who you've known your whole life or your friends' kids and kids you enjoy. And then that can be a challenge when the kids they're hanging out with are kids who you think of as maybe being a bad influence on your child or kids who seem to have different values from your family. So what does, what do you do as a parent when you think your kid is hanging out with someone who maybe you don't really want them with?*
- Aileen So the first thing to know is that teenagers, people in general, but especially teenagers, want a sense of belonging. So, um, it doesn't work to just say, stop hanging out with so-and-so because there's still gonna be this need to belong.
- Um, so first of all, um, I think it's important that, that us as the adults, the caregivers that we provide environments where there's are... we provide enough opportunities for kids to make friends with people who we might consider to be in positive peer influence. If we're going to say, hey, you can't hang out with so-and-so, there's gotta be other people.
- Maureen *Yeah.*
- Aileen So whether that is, um, you know, after school, clubs, church, other community organizations, just making sure that there's actually a structure, um, for teenagers to go and interact with kids who are more, who you might consider more positive or healthier influences. Um, so that's one, I think this is also a time period where there's, there can be so many rich conversations. Like you can talk about peer pressure. You can talk about,

you can validate... yeah, you know, it makes sense that you want to do this, you know, X, Y, Z, that's a normal thing for people to feel. And also there's this thing called peer pressure. And you can give into peer pressure, but you get to decide right now, like you are, you're becoming an independent, you're eventually going to be an adult. You get to decide what are your values? Is your value to hang around, you know, X, Y, Z person who, you know, is doing X, Y, Z, you know, crimes or whatever, worst case scenario. Um, like what is your value? Who do you want to be? Um, so that's one rich conversation that could be had.

Um, there's also conversations around what makes a good friend. Um, and also, how do you be a good friend? So talking about trustworthiness, talking about loyalty, talking about dependability, um, you know, talking about these core values and how does... so that we can talk about the core values and also, how does this actually look like, what does this look like in the real world?

So these are just really rich conversations. Um, you know, making sure that, uh, we talk also about the role of empathy. So, you know, is your friend empathetic toward you? Are you empathetic toward your friends? But just be explicit about what are the measures of what makes a good friend or not, right. Talking about the *why* versus, nope, that's a bad friend.

Maureen *Right.*

Aileen Um, and I, and I know that it can be hard for parents because oftentimes when our kids are hanging around other kids, there can be sense of powerlessness and also a lot of fear and anxiety, which makes sense. Um, but it's almost like we want to slow down so that we can speed up later.

Maureen *I would also add, um, it may be helpful for us to challenge our own assumptions and biases about other people. It's possible that that friend who we have a negative perception of is providing something to our child that we're not aware of, some kind of support, or some kind of...*

Aileen Absolutely. So oftentimes I know that at Momentous, we talk about chasing the *why*, so, you know, as parents taking a pause, breathing, calming down our own brains and then saying, okay, *why* is this happening? What is the need that this is fulfilling? And then from there having a conversation and being, really being in a posture of listening first, before changing and going slow before going fast. Those are very useful regardless of, of, of stage of life, but especially during the teenage years.

Maureen *Yeah, for sure. Especially, I'm thinking about so much of teenagers is just... leaves, adults feeling confused and perplexed. So that posture chasing the why, like, I want to know really what, what are you thinking and what is this, what is the meaning of this for you instead of just coming in with my adult assumptions.*

Aileen I think it's a, just a general, generally good tip for adults. And when I'm noticing fear and anxiety, is that because I'm confused?

Maureen *Yeah. Yeah.*

Aileen Okay. So how do I address that? How do I get some clarity? So I'm not so confused, right?

Maureen *So we're coming up on time. And at the beginning of the episode, you talked about some of the joys of teenagers and that identity, and I think the way you reframed impulse control will stick with me for awhile. I love that living in the moment. Um, so as we're closing, I was wondering if you could share just a little bit about how you think parents can capitalize on some of these, these positive traits that you opened with.*

Aileen So. Like I said, I think it's normal for parents to have a fair amount of anxiety and worry as their kids enter the teen years and continue having that during the teen years. Um, and it's, it's, it can be easy to kind of get caught up in the anxiety and the worries and the fears. Um, and I challenge all the parents who are listening to really catch your teens doing well. And to let them know when you've caught them doing well. Um, you know, they still, even though they think that they can do everything on their own, their brains, we know scientifically, aren't fully developed yet. And we also know that self-esteem and self-worth can be fragile during this time. So catching them doing well not only helps them with that sense of self-worth and self-esteem, but it also helps to make that relationship that you have with them more solid. And it can also teach them values, and it, it actually does something to the brains of us, the adults being able to see the positive can help kind of alleviate our own anxiety.

Um, the second thing I think is helping, helping teenagers be able to kind of utilize and channel their independence and encourage them to problem solve. Um, so if there's something that's upsetting or if there's a conflict, instead of, instead of, you know, you as parent and your teenager, you know, going head to head, how about put your heads together and especially encourage their use of their brain to solve the problem? So the problem is a shared problem.

So how can we solve the problem together? And I will literally, sometimes I will literally ask a kid, okay, so you want this to happen? What do you think can be done about it? Let's problem solve. Let's put on our creativity hat and let's figure this out. Cause one of the, I didn't mention this earlier, but one of the wonderful things about the teen years is also just the amount of creativity that they have.

Because they're, you know, they're in this stage of just so much change and you know, their, their prefrontal cortex isn't fully developed and there's this kind of impulse control that, uh, or lack of impulse control, which also, I

think another way to reframe it is just that they're very creative and there's almost this, um, um, how am I trying to say this? The ideas that they come up with are not as censored as for us as adults, which means we get to have a lot of creative ideas and some of which work, some of which don't work. But, you know, creativity is something that's, that's a strength that we want to help bring out. And so I think facilitating our teenagers in problem solving is something that we can do to help bring that out.

Maureen *Well, thank you so much for this conversation. I'll probably relisten to it every year in the next couple of years, when my kids become teenagers. I learned a lot and I really appreciate you taking time to talk with us.*

Aileen It's my honor and pleasure.

Thank you for joining us for The Growing Brain podcast. We hope you have enjoyed this discussion. Please be sure to subscribe for future episodes and to learn more about us and access additional resources and content, please visit us online at momentousinstitute.org.