For thousands of years, in pretty much every culture around the world, children were children, and adults were adults. The line between these two worlds was clearly marked, and individuals were either on one side or on the other. Children participated in family and culture at large in culturally accepted, boundaried ways, and were encouraged to look toward, aspire to, and prepare for the day they'd cross the line into the adult community (which was usually around age 13 or 14 for girls, and 15 or 16 for boys). Historically, every culture had some sort of rite of passage to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood.[1]

What are the Rites of Passages today?

- From culture
- From parents
- From society

Adolescence was originally thought of as an 18-month window of time from age 14½; to 16- a bit of a culturally endorsed holding pattern in which "youth" were allowed an opportunity to wrestle with "adolescent issues."[2]

The three main tasks of adolescents came down to:

1. Identity "Who am I?"
2. Autonomy "How am I unique, and what power do I have?"
3. Affinity "Where and to whom do I belong?"

By the time the 1970s rolled around, at least in the United States, adolescence was considered to be about 5 years long (or six school years)-extending from the commonly understood starting age of 13 to the normal graduation-from-high-school age of 18. At the turn of the 20th century, when adolescence was first talked about, the average age for the onset of puberty was 14.5 years old. This physical change became the de facto starting point for adolescence. But between 1900 and 1970, the average age for the onset of puberty dropped by about a year and a half, to 13 years old.[3]

Research shows that most believers begin their journey of faith *prior* to the age of 13 or 14.[4] There is no question that the peer group begins to play a more significant role in the life of your

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[1] Mark Oestreicher, *Understanding Your Young Teen: Practical Wisdom For Parents* [Kindle] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 180.

[2] In 1904, G. Stanley Hall was the first to popularize the word *adolescence* with the publication of his book by the same time *(Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, and Religion* [New York: Appleton, 1904]).

[3] Mark Oestreicher, *Understanding Your Young Teen: Practical Wisdom For Parents* [Kindle], 221.

[4] Barna. http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/196-evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids.

young teen; but you're still in the top spot, influence-wise. It's not until the later years of high school that peer influence starts to eclipse parent influence, with peer influence clearly taking the lead during emerging adulthood.[5]

The average age of puberty has continued to drop. These days, girls begin developing breast buds and pubic hair as early as 9.5 or 10 years old, and they often experience menarche (their first period) around age 11 or 12. For our purposes, it's fair to say that puberty now begins around age 11.[6]
Parents of teenagers in your home:

1. Homes where at least one parent is meaningfully engaged in the life of the teenager
2. Homes where parents are physically present, but not meaningfully engaged in the life of the teenager

Most parents focus on the externals: physical growth, body change, sexual development, voice changes. In fact, my [Mark O] contention has always been that you can't find a single teenager, anywhere, who doesn't think at some point (often for extended periods of time - even years) that they're turning out wrong. They think they're too short or too tall, too thin or too fat, too behind the development curve or too ahead of it.[7]

What is the primary goal of parenting? The goal of parenting a teenager should not be creating miniature versions of ourselves. It shouldn't be making nice, compliant citizens. And it sure shouldn't be raising "successful" wage earners. The primary goal of parenting a teenager is to raise an adult.[8] They should finish their adolescence by saying "I'm ready to take responsibility for myself, for my decisions - good and bad - and for my influence for myself."

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[5] Mark Oestreicher, *Understanding Your Young Teen: Practical Wisdom For Parents* [Kindle], 246.

[6] Marcia E. herman-Giddens, Eric J. Slora, Richard C. Wasserman, Carlos J. Bourdony, Manju V. Bhapkar, Gary G. Koch, and Cynthia M. Hasemeier. "Secondary Sexual Characteristics and Menses in Young Girls Seen in Office Practice: A Study from the Pediatric Research in Office Settings Network," *Pediatrics* 99, (April 1997): 505-512. http://pediatrics.aapublichations.org/cgi/content/abstract/99/4/505 (accessed 3/13/09).

Diana Zuckerman Ph.D., "When Little Girls Become Women: Early Onset of Puberty in Girls," National Research Center for Women and Families-Children's Health, http://www.center4research.org/children11.html (accessed 3/13/09).

P.B. Kaplowitz, S.E. Oberfield, and the Drug and Therapeutics and Executive Committees of the Lawson Wilkins Pediatric Endocrine Society, "Reexamination of the Age Limit for Defining When Puberty is Precocious in Girls in the United States," *Pediatrics* 104, (October 1999): 936-941. http://www.pediatrics.aapublications.org/cgi/content/full/104/4/936?ijkey=51a3e30c7ef66356541e2f346991c5cc9300baf7 (accessed 3/13/09)

[7] Mark Oestreicher, *A Parent's Guide to Understanding Teenage Brains: Why They Act the Way They Do* [Kindle] (Simply Youth Ministry, 2012), 48.

[8] Ibid, 140.

Dr. Robert Epstein, a noted psychologist and former editor of Psychology Today wrote,

> *"...Until about a century ago...adolescence as we know it barely existed. Through most of human history, young people were integrated into adult society early on, but beginning in the late 1800s, new laws and cultural practices began to isolate teens from adults, imposing on them an increasingly large set of restrictions and artificially extending childhood well past puberty. New research suggests that teens today are subject to more than ten times as many restrictions as are most adults, and adulthood is delayed until well into the twenties or thirties. It's likely that the turmoil we see among teens is an unintended results of the artificial extension of childhood."*[9]

Adolescent specialists now say that adolescence, on average, extends to 30 years old. In fact, adolescence is so long now (almost 20 years - a full ¼ of the human lifespan!) that it's talked about in three stages:

- Young teen (11-14)
- Late teen (15-20)
- Emerging adult (20-30)

The major shift, then, has that we no longer provide responsibility (and the expectation that goes along with it) to teenagers and young adults. And in our misguided ideas about *protecting* our children, we often remove the consequences to their choices, which completely undermines the learning about responsibility that consequences provide.

- Responsibility and decision-making are functions of the frontal lobes. And while that part of the brain isn't fully developed until around 25 years old, the brain has an amazing ability to compensate for weaknesses. Think of it this way:
    - Responsibility given -> responsibility experienced -> responsibility learned.
    - A teenager who is never given *meaningful* responsibility can't be expected to be responsible.

Teenagers spend almost every waking minute in a homogeneous grouping of peers (or alone). Today's teenagers have almost no opportunity to spend time with adults in the world of adults (the only time they spend with adults is when the adults come into the world of teenagers). As a result, teenagers and young adults have little opportunity to practice being what I like to call apprentice adults.[10]

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[9] Robert Epsten, *Teen 2.0* (Fresno, CA: Quill Driver Books, 2010), 3.

[10] Mark Oestreicher, *A Parent's Guide to Understanding Teenage Brains: Why They Act the Way They Do*, 166.

Big Discovery #1: Meet the Temporal Lobes

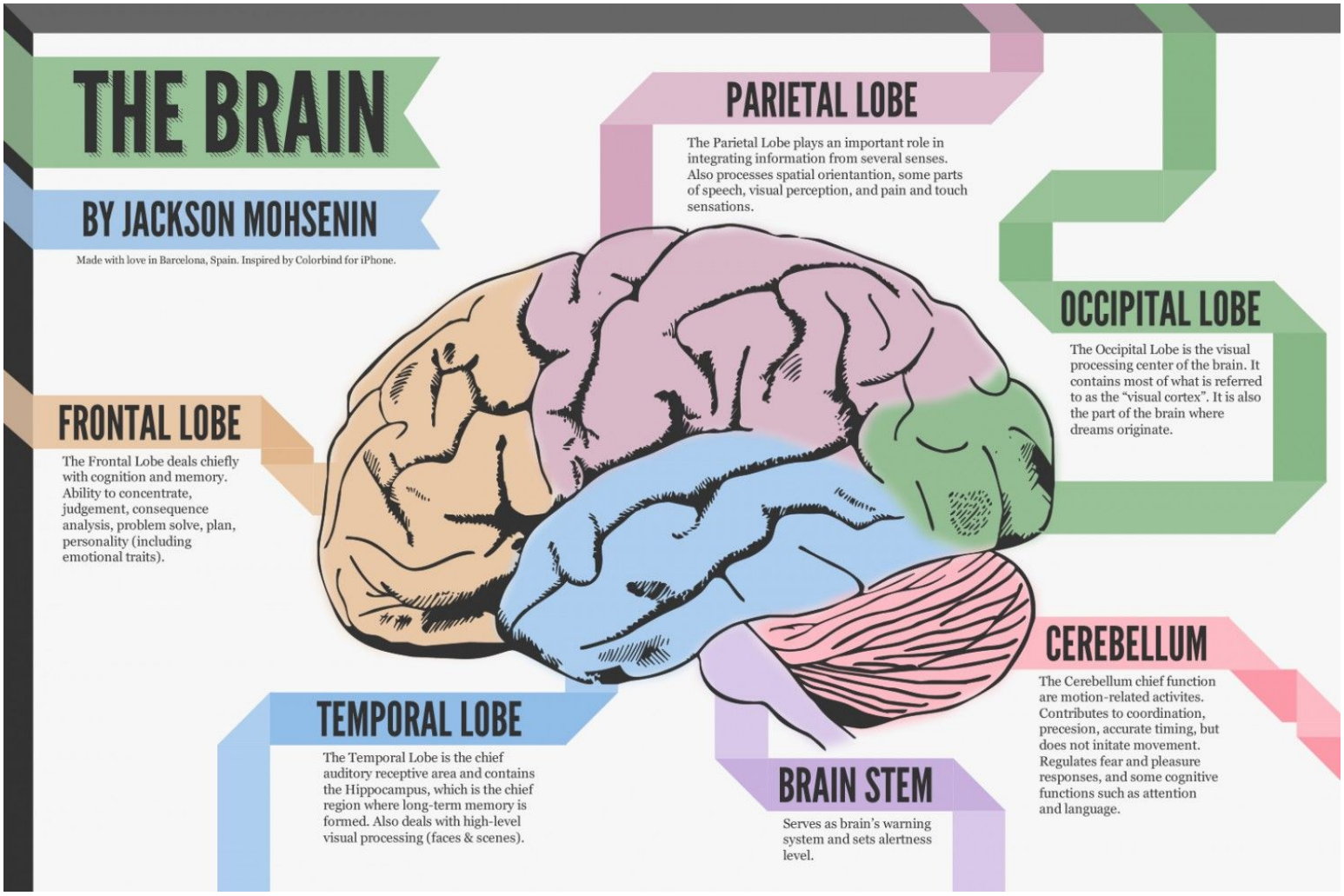
Human brains are usually talked about in terms of having four lobes (sections), mirrored on both the left and right sides of the brain. While various brain functions aren't completely isolated to one or another lobe, there do seem to be particular functions that take place primarily in one lobe. For instance, the occipital lobes at the back of your head are responsible for all things vision-related

The temporal lobes are an area of significant underdevelopment in teenage brains. The temporal lobes are responsible for emotional interpretation and understanding. They're underdeveloped in all teenagers, but are significantly more underdeveloped in guys.
It is important to think through how we respond to this information. The research does not prove that teenagers are incapable. In fact, there's research to show that teenage brains compensate in other ways for this limitations. So a healthy way of response is a combination of patience and understanding, coupled with a tour-guide approach to helping teenagers interpret their emotions and the emotions of others.

Big Discovery #2: Meet the source of your parental frustrations, the Frontal Lobe

One of the biggest discoveries is the underdevelopment of the prefrontal cortex in teenagers. The frontal lobe is often called the brain's CEO, or the decision-making center. Here's a partial list of the functions it's responsible for:

- Decision-making
- Wisdom
- Prioritization
- Impulse control
- Planning
- Organization
- Focus



However, there is NO research that shows a *causal* relationship between these underdeveloped areas of teenage brains and behavior. In other words, just because a particular segment of the brain is still growing does *not* mean that teenagers are incapable of making good decisions or exercising wisdom (or any of the rest of that list).

But the question remains, How can we expect our teens to actually be responsible if we never give them the opportunity to try it out (and fail)? How can we expect them to use their brains if we don't allow those brains to mature?

Big Discovery #3: Rerouting the Highways (or, Neurons Grow Then Go)

Neurons are the "electrical wiring" of the brain and, when grouped together, are referred to as neural pathways. By the way, best estimates of normal neurons counts in a human brain are

between 80 and 120 billion. A couple of years prior to the onset of puberty, the brain goes into a massive growth frenzy, adding millions of additional neurons. They, at puberty, a switch is tripped, and the process reverses itself. Over the two to four years following the onset of puberty (roughly 11-12 through 15-16), the brain cuts back millions of neurons.

Jay Giedd, the lead researcher on teenage brains at the National Institutes of Health, calls it a "use it or lose it principle."[11]

[11] pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/interviews/giedd.html