

“Adolescents can not feel the future,” was the best take home message from Abigail Baird and the Teen Brain Symposium sponsored by the Juvenile Justice Advisory Board, earlier this month.

Humor and insight were the order of the day as Dr. Baird provided perspective into why teenagers do “stupid stuff.” The truth is there are physical differences in the adolescent decision making process that make it unique. The short answer is that the portion of the brain called the frontal lobe hasn't fully developed yet.

“The frontal lobe can think about things in the future you haven't done,” said Baird. “Your brain gives you constant information about things you haven't experienced.”

As an adult, the brain automatically considers situations and how they are either good or bad. When teenagers appear not to be thinking concerning a decision, it actually just takes longer for that process. The bad news is that sometimes a decision must be made in a split second. For the teenage brain, if time isn't permitted according to Baird, “feeling is quicker than thinking.” So while it may appear that teens aren't thinking at all, their life experience doesn't lend an immediate answer to help make the decision.

JJAB Coordinator, Deborah Gill would not have been surprised with a low turn out on such a snowy morning, but was delighted instead. “We had 129 people sign-in even with the snow continuing all morning. People came from Los Alamos, White Rock, Santa Fe, Rio Arriba County, Bernalillo and Taos. We were very pleased,” said Gill.

Another major area of focus for the presentation included the priorities in the life of the teenager. Unless you have lived under a rock, the cream that rises to the top of the teen priority scale are peer relationships. Their relationships are their life and even though they've spent the day together, the need to recap the events of the day is at the top of their to do list before they can move on to other topics like parents, homework and other things that adults view as a higher priority.

Baird likens the period of the middle school years to that of a toddler. While parents often have great patience for the toddler, the attitude toward the teen is negative. The best bet according to Baird is that, “You may want to work with the biology, than against it.”

Small painful lessons are key to the development of life experience and “Being a friend to a teenager abdicates your spot as a parent,” said Baird.

To reinforce the lessons, rewards work best for boys and punishment works best for girls. Along the gender lines, problems with friends rate highest for girls and problems with status or in school rate highest for boys.

Finally Baird illuminated the fact that, “People who get pushed too hard in school don't develop their life lessons.” While parents can't always change class sizes or the amount of homework that needs to be done in a given day, they can always take a step back and think about how their attitudes might affect the student.

Neighborhoods were part of the solution in the life of the teen. The Asset building relationships formed in neighborhoods can have a great payoff when kids are at an age that makes it hard to relate to parents or ask questions. Parents should hang in there because even they are often shunned during the teen years, the data shows they are listening and they do come around eventually.

It does take a village and the JJAB isn't shy to thank the many people that helped pull off the event. "We would like to thank UNM-LA, the YMCA, Mike Young of EMV Studios, all the volunteers who helped. Susan Mack of Family Strengths Network was instrumental in developing the program and we thank FSN for the informational packets that were made free of charge to the participants. Multiple agencies as well as Community Relations at LANL helped promote the event," said Gill.