Introduction
This spark explores how adolescent brain development impacts interactions between youth and adults. It introduces your team to the biological changes that occur in the brain during adolescence and helps youth-serving professionals understand how brain development influences adolescent behaviors. This Spark will provide your team with strategies to be respectful to young people even during challenging interactions.

Objectives
By the end of this Spark training, participants will be able to:

- State primary attributes of adolescent brain development.
- Identify the ways these attributes impact interactions between youth and adults in the context of your organization.
- Identify personal biases in interactions with adolescents.

Supplies
Prepare these supplies prior to facilitating this Spark.

- Laptop
- Projector
- Speakers
- Video: give yourself time before the Spark to test the video and sound.
- Copies of the Adolescent Brain Development Spark Handout for all participants
- Writing utensils for all participants

Additional Resources
If you would like to learn more about this Spark topic, take a look at these additional resources.

- The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Brain Development
- TED Talk: The Mysterious Workings of the Adolescent Brain

Citation
If you plan to modify this resource, please cite or credit as: Adolescent Brain Development. Spark Training developed by the Adolescent Health Initiative at Michigan Medicine; August 2017; Ann Arbor, MI.
SPARK SCRIPT
Adolescent Brain Development

Key of Icons

= Slide change  = Estimated duration of topic  = Script for facilitator  = Note for facilitator

Intro/Hook  (5-10 minutes)

1 – TITLE SLIDE

Today we are going to do a 15-minute mini-training, also called a Spark. We’ll be looking at the basics of what research tells us about adolescent brain development, and how that plays out in our work with youth. We’ll also be thinking about what makes it challenging to be sensitive to teens’ needs.

Introduce yourself/yourselves.

2 – CASE SCENARIO: SHAYLA

To help us think about what this means in our day-to-day work, here’s a scenario that may seem familiar.

You work at the reception desk. 16 year-old Shayla is 10 minutes late for her appointment, and she comes up to the reception desk to check in. She does not look up at you, but instead, she stands at the desk and appears to be texting. In an upbeat voice you say, “Hello! Do you have an appointment?” She continues to look at her phone, frowns, and keeps texting while you wait. Finally, she looks up and says, “What?” We’ll come back to this scenario in a few minutes, but for now, consider your gut response to this situation.

3 – INTRODUCTION

We’re going to watch a 5-minute video clip from PBS Frontline on the teenage brain and then discuss the implications on the work we do with teens.

This slide/video can be skipped if you need to save time.

The link is: [http://bit.ly/2tWq8qb](http://bit.ly/2tWq8qb)

4 – DISCUSSION

What are some adolescent behaviors or characteristics that could be seen as positive? What could be seen as frustrating?

Examples include: passionate, feel strongly about social justice, trying to learn as much as possible, want to experience everything, always on their phones, do things that don’t make sense, don’t listen.

Which adolescent behaviors or characteristics do you notice most in your organization? Which are most challenging? Most rewarding?
Adolescent Brain Development

Examples include: give one word answers, show up late or don’t show up at all, are willing to share if asked, sense of humor.

5 – ADOLESCENCE IS A VITAL PHASE

Adolescence is an essential stage of life, and its developmental characteristics are a natural part of the way the brain is changing. Even if we know that “teens will be teens,” and adolescence is an important phase of development, it can still be challenging to work with teens. Some people love working with them, some don’t – either way, understanding what’s going on for them can help us be respectful and give them the support they need.

What are some of the ways we’re trying to be respectful of the developmental needs of adolescents?

- We’ve added new resources for youth chosen by a teen advisory council.
- We try to avoid using jargon to explain things.
- Add any others you want to.

Key Concepts  (3 minutes)

6 – BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Functional MRI has shown us how the brain develops from age 5 to age 20. There are significant changes that occur during the period of adolescence, with some parts—like the prefrontal cortex—not fully maturing until the mid-20s.

7 – BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

In the front of the brain is the prefrontal cortex, which is the part that controls complex decision-making, judgment, and understanding cause and effect. At the same time that the prefrontal cortex is developing, the limbic system, which is in the middle of brain, is highly active. That is the reward center and controls emotions.

8 – DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE BEHAVIORS

As part of their development, many adolescents crave novelty and seek new experiences. The combination of these developmental characteristics can result in behaviors that can be really challenging for both adults and teens. Also, the need for peer acceptance is at its peak, and many teens seek excitement through risk behaviors. Sometimes they don’t always have an accurate perception of the consequences of their behaviors (like using alcohol, drugs and having unprotected sex). Also, most teens are focused more on themselves and their needs than they are on others. These are all normal and developmentally appropriate when we consider the way the brain is changing.
9 – DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE BEHAVIORS

It can be hard to remember that this process is normal for teens. When a toddler has a tantrum, our first reaction might be irritation, but usually our adult brain kicks in and reminds us that they are probably hungry or they just need a nap, and this behavior is normal for a child. Often, though, when we interact with teens and see negative behaviors that can be challenging or annoying, we forget the developmental explanation for these behaviors.

10 – WHAT CAN WE DO?

Considering this, what can we do to adjust our behaviors or reactions to give teens the patience and respect that they need? It’s up to us as adults to help them along the way, and it’s what we have to do to truly provide youth-friendly services.

Application (7 minutes)

11 – BEYOND GUT REACTIONS

Let’s look at some scenarios to think more specifically about how we can do this. First, we will revisit Shayla’s scenario along the top of the worksheet together. She was late, and then was texting while the receptionist was asking her if she had an appointment.

What is your gut feeling about this?

This might make someone annoyed or mad.

Ask staff about what negative assumptions they may have, or just say:

Sometimes, without consciously thinking about it, we create a quick story in our heads about why someone is behaving a certain way. In this case, we might think to ourselves, “I bet she’s texting a friend about something unimportant, and she’s rude to ignore me.”

Here’s where we need to rewrite the story and imagine other possible reasons Shayla is behaving as she is. One possibility is that she was late because she had to take a bus to get here and the bus was running late. When she walked to the front desk, she frowned when she got a text from her mother saying that she needed to get home as soon as possible to watch her younger brother. Developmentally, she might be tuned in to her own needs more than the receptionist’s, so she is distracted by her text and doesn’t reply right away.

Now, this situation still might be frustrating – and the text could also really have been from a friend about something trivial – but it can help us give teens the benefit of the doubt, and not let our gut feeling control our reaction to the teen.

Turn to the people near you, and in groups of two or three, pick a scenario that applies most to the work you do. Instead of figuring out how to handle the situation, let’s focus on how we’re feeling and thinking. Once you’ve picked your scenario, discuss these same questions we went through with Shayla across the top of the table.
You may opt to do this as a group or 2-minute discussion in pairs.

Would anyone like to share their group’s response to their scenario?

Allow 1-2 pairs to share, if there is time.

12 – THANK YOU

Hopefully today’s discussion has sparked some ideas on how we can all better meet the developmental needs of the young people we work with. To keep this conversation going over the next month, I will share Sparklers, or case scenarios, that relate to adolescent brain development. I’ll post the Sparklers in places that you all can easily see them. When you see a Sparkler, take a moment to read the scenario and think through the questions listed on the page. Thank you for your participation!