

## **ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT: IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE**

If we want to guide adolescents to a more responsible, crime-free lifestyle, then we must meet them where they are: How do they think, and how do they process information? How can we communicate with them and develop their trust? What are they capable of developmentally, and how can we guide them in considering consequences of their decisions? How do they perceive the world, themselves, and their own behavior?

Juvenile courts should ensure that all staff working in the court has an understanding of adolescent development and should be continually working to ensure that all parts of the juvenile court experience are informed by adolescent development. There are a number of areas where you court may want to examine practice and determine if changes are needed to align practice to these adolescent development principles. You may consider how youth voice and choice are incorporated in case level decision making. Or you could explore how court orders and case plans promote competency development, critical thinking, and pro-social activities.

In selecting an area of focus, it will be helpful for you to create a stakeholder group that comes together for the express purpose of improving juvenile court operation. Your stakeholders should be made up of judges, representatives from the district attorney's office, representatives from the defense bar, chief probation, juvenile court management, court administrators, representatives from community service providers, representatives from youth oriented-prosocial activities (like youth sports leagues), youth and their families, and of course the community. Once you've gathered your stakeholders together, there are a number of things your team needs to know including:

- What is meant by “developmentally appropriate” interventions;
- What recent research tells us about adolescent brain development, and what this has to do with adolescents’ emotional intensity, impulse control, and decision-making;
- Precautions about placing youth in programs with adults;
- Why adolescents use alcohol and other drugs, and how this is different from adults;
- Why adolescents are willing to engage in risk-taking behavior;
- How to determine if service providers have developmentally appropriate programming;
- Why and how to partner with youth in their own case management;
- How to respond to adolescent behavior with incentives and sanctions in a way that encourages responsible behavior;
- The impact of empowering youth through leadership in the program.

### [Recommended Resources](#)

Toward Developmentally Appropriate Practice: A Juvenile Court Training Curriculum developed by The National Juvenile Defender Center in Partnership with Juvenile Law Center (December 2009). The four- hour curriculum, available on request at <http://www.njdc.info/macarthur2.php>, includes modules on cognitive, moral, identity/social, brain, and biological/physical development as well as a module on how various types of disabilities and disorders affect youth’s decision-making capacities and behavior.

Sarah-Jayne Blakemore: The mysterious workings of the adolescent brain. In a June 2012 TED talk (14:26) cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Sarah-Jane Blakemore compares the prefrontal cortex in adolescents to that of adults to show how teenage impulsive behavior, their inability to consider consequences, and the way they relate to others can be explained by brain development and activity.  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/sarah\\_jayne\\_blakemore\\_the\\_mysterious\\_workings\\_of\\_the\\_adolescent\\_brain.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_jayne_blakemore_the_mysterious_workings_of_the_adolescent_brain.html)

The three NIH resources described below are available at

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/child-and-adolescent-mental-health/index.shtml>

- **The Developing Brain: What it Means for Treating Adolescents**  
Videocast (1:54) of a presentation on May 10, 2012 sponsored by the National Institutes of Mental health: Jay Giedd, M.D., Anne Marie Albano, Ph.D., and Jason D. Mathison, MA, Nationally Certified School Psychologist present information from their research on the relationship of adolescent brain development to teen behavior, learning, substance use, relationships and mental health issues. The presenters explain the need for different approaches and interventions for early and late adolescence.
- **The Teen Brain: Still Under Construction**  
This 10-page National Institutes of Health publication (2011) presents information from the most recent brain research. Key points addressed include impulse control, impact of hormonal changes on behavior, adolescent learning, and the effect of social media on the developing brain. Available in PDF format (downloadable) or free hardcopy (order).

- Development of the Young Brain

YouTube video (4.51) presentation by Jay Giedd, M.D., in which he explains the growth and pruning that occurs in the teenage brain and how that affects their reasoning, their emotions, and their behavior. He emphasizes the powerful influence of parental modeling on teenage behavior, and talks about the impact of teens' increase of multi-media devices on the developing brain.

### Questions for Discussion

What training do we provide to all court and stakeholder staff to ensure they are informed on adolescent development? How frequently do we provide this training?

What questions do we ask potential service providers to determine whether their programs are developmentally appropriate? Should we change these questions or add to them?

What is our process for diverting youth from the formal juvenile justice system for status offenses?

How will we ensure that all the components of our program meet the changing developmental needs of youth?

How can we plan to involve and empower youth in our program? (e.g., decision-making, input, leadership.)