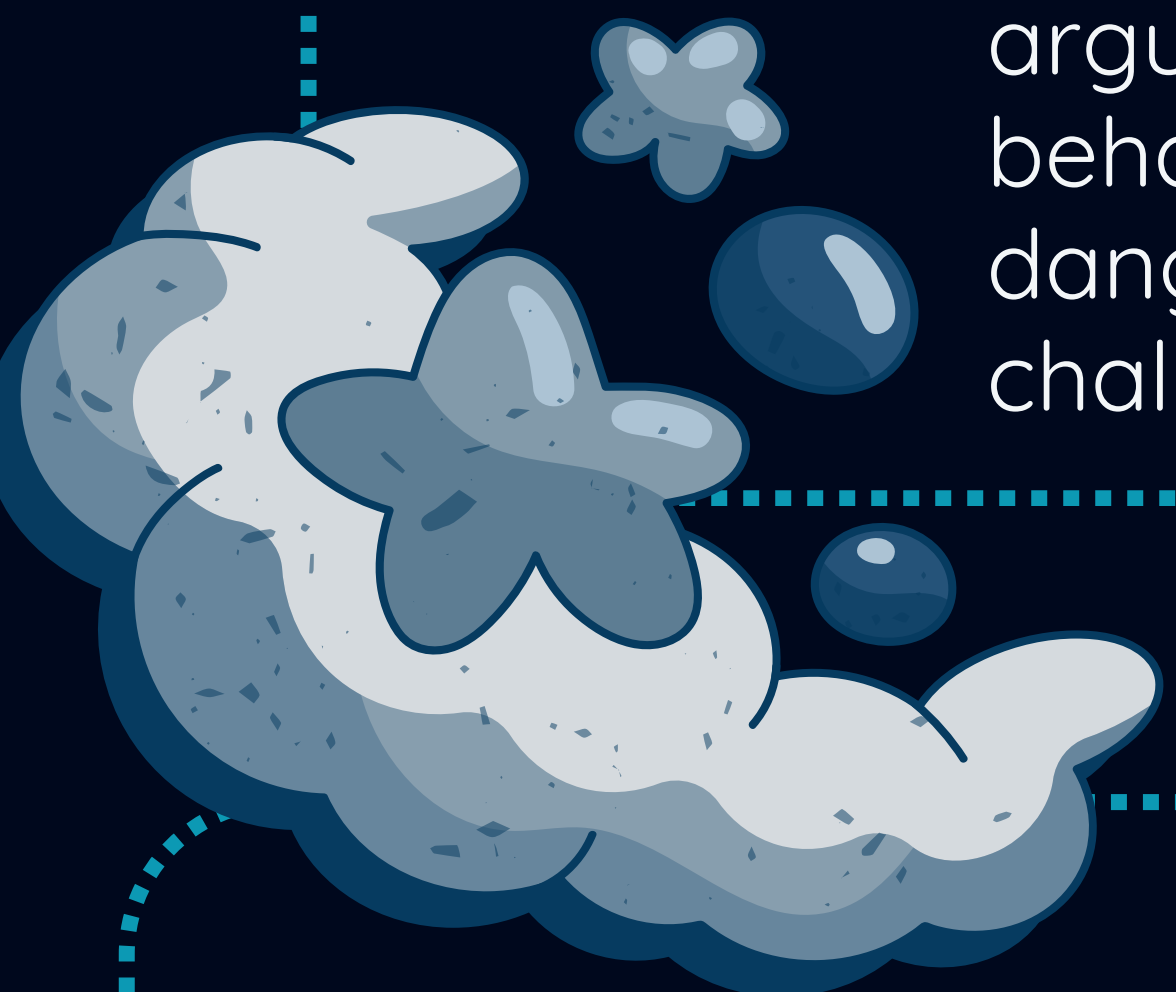


The Dangerous Myth of the Deficient 'Teen Brain'



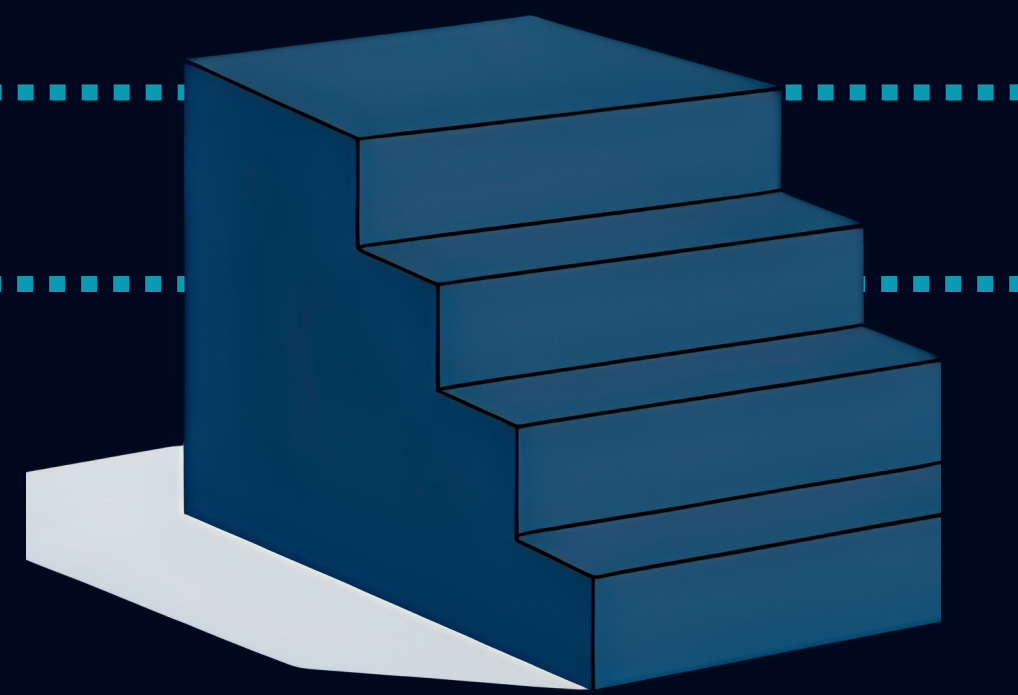
The Myth...

- The notion that young people have undeveloped brains has become a popular argument to explain their supposed poor behaviour, however this is a flawed and dangerous position that needs to be challenged...



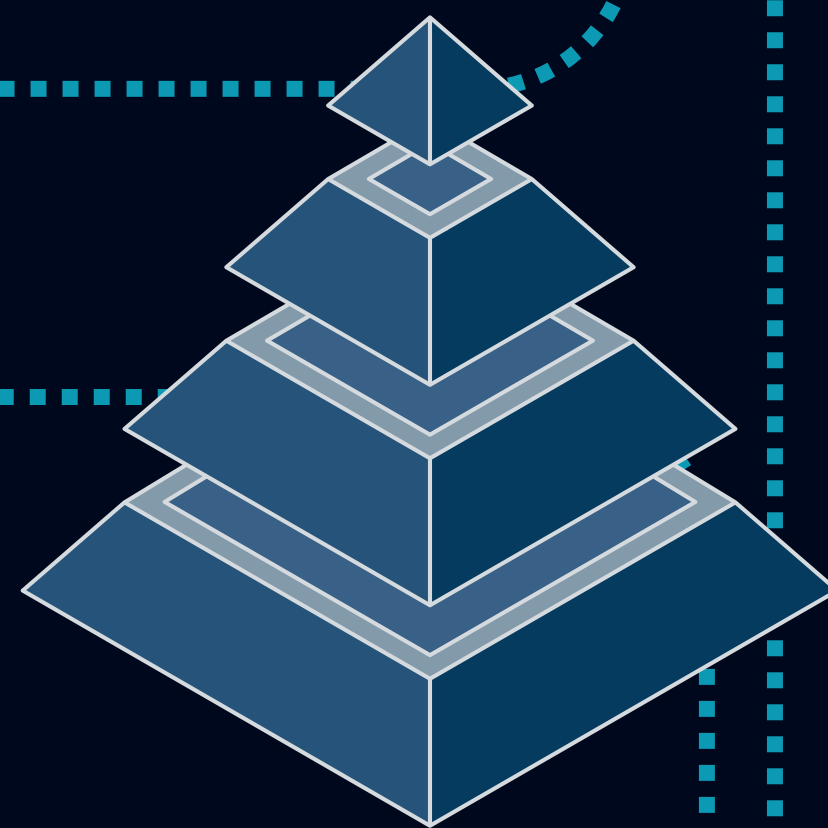
The Core Claims...

- Young people do not have a developed pre-frontal cortex until their mid 20's.
- Young people rely on their amygdala for decision making.
- Young people's brains undergo 'pruning', so their brains regress during this time.
- For these reasons, young people engage in risky and impulsive behaviour and lack the ability to plan ahead or think rationally.



The Problem...

- Whilst there is evidence of brain development and functional differences at different ages, the link between brain development and behaviour is overstated and exaggerated.
- This is called 'Brain Overclaim Syndrome'



The Alternative Arguments...

- Most young people are highly capable and engaged members of society who mostly do very well at school, work, and volunteer their time more than most other age groups.
- Most young people in pre-industrial societies do not display 'typical teen behaviour': Is the supposed 'teen turmoil' a symptom of Western culture rather than brain development?
- Many studies into 'teen brains' are selective in their data analysis, and ignore data where young people outperform adults.
- When it comes to risk taking and dangerous behaviours, adults commonly engage in higher rates of these behaviours than young people. Adult populations have higher rates of committing violent crimes, homicide, drug trafficking, and substance overdoses than young people.



The Dangers...

- Brain size and function have been used as arguments to dehumanise and exclude societal groups throughout history, including women, people with disabilities, and people of colour.
- Such exclusion has led to so-called 'protective policies'.
- Scientific findings can lead to inaccurate societal discourse, resulting in phrases like 'their brains are not connected yet' and 'they have baby brains', which perpetuates the disempowerment of young people.
- The 'teen brain' argument could eventually result in legislation that would exclude young people from voting, driving, working, and more until their mid 20's. Is this where we want to end up?

The Solutions...

- Don't believe everything you hear, especially if it is popular. As Derrida once said, 'beware the loudest voice in the room'.
- Challenge people, ask them which research they are referring to when making these claims and engage in respectful debate; education is key.
- Avoid infantilising language and attitudes towards young people, and promote empowering language.
- Offer examples of young people doing amazing things!

Learn More...

- Read:
- Epstein, R. (2007). The myth of the teen brain. *Scientific American Mind*, 18(2), 56-63.
- Bessant, J. (2008). Hard wired for risk: Neurological science, the adolescent brain and developmental theory. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11(3), 347-360.
- Males, M. (2009). Does the adolescent brain make risk taking inevitable? A skeptical appraisal. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24(1), 3-20.
- Epstein, R. (2010). *Teen 2.0: Saving our children and families from the torment of adolescence*. Linden Publishing.
- Moshman, D. (2011). Adolescents and their teenage brains. *Human Development*, 54(4), 201-203.
- Bessant, J. (2020). *Making-up people: Youth, truth and politics*. Routledge.