

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2014

Adolescence, the Age of Opportunity: Interview with Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D.



[Episode 90] Today's episode is about adolescence. I spoke with Laurence Steinberg, who wrote the book Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence. He is the author of approximately 350 articles and essays on growth and development during the teenage years, and the author, co-author, or editor of 17 books. He has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the American Psychological Association's Bronfenbrenner Award for Lifetime Contribution to developmental Psychology in the Service of Science and Society and its Award for Distinguished Contributions to Research in Public Policy, as well as the National Academy of Sciences Henry and Bryna David Lectureship in 2009, Steinberg Research Network the first winner of the Klaus J. Jacobs Research Prize for Productive Youth Development. In 2013, he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

In today's interview Dr. Steinberg and I spoke about the growing gap between onset of puberty and the end of adolescence; challenges facing parents, providers, and policy makers to provide adolescents with experiences and skills needed to be successful; and how reconceptualizing adolescence as an age of opportunity rather than an age risk is an essential reframing to address the needs of this youth in the developmental stage. We ended our conversation with recommendations for practitioners, educators, and policy makers.

One note, even though Dr. Steinberg and I work in adjacent buildings at Temple University, I interviewed him over Skype because he was out of the state.

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From Temple University website: http://www.cia.temple.edu/psychology/faculty/laurence-steinberg/)

Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D., is the Distinguished University Professor and Laura H. Carroll Professor of Psychology at Temple University. He received his A.B. in Psychology fromassar College and his Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from Cornell University. Dr. Steinberg is a former President of the Division of Developmental Psychology of the American Psychological Association and the Society for Research on Adolescence, former Director of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, and a member of the MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on Law and Neuroscience. An internationally recognized expert on psychological development during adolescence, Dr. Steinberg's research has focused on a range of topics in the study of contemporary adolescence, including adolescent brain development, risk-taking and decision-making, parent-adolescent relationships, school-year employment, high school reform, and juvenile justice. He served as a member of the National Academies' Board on Children, Youth, and Families and chaired the Academies' Committee on the Science of Adolescence. Dr. Steinberg was the lead scientist in the preparation of the American Psychological Association's amicus briefs submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court in Roper v. Simmons, which abolished the juvenile death penalty; Graham v. Florida, which prohibited the use of life without parole for juveniles convicted of non-homicide crimes; and Miller v. Alabama, which prohibited the use of mandatory life without parole for all juvenile crimes.

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Transcript

[00:13] Jonathan Singer: Hey there podcast listeners, Jonathan here. Before we get into today's episode on adolescence. I want you to take a minute and think about your own adolescence.

- How old were you when you realized, 'I'm not a child anymore?'
• How old were you when you thought of yourself as an adult for the first time?
• What's that thing you did as an adolescent which, at the time made no sense to the people around you, and once you stopped to think about it, maybe it didn't make much sense to you either?

A few years ago, one of my favorite podcasts, an Australian show called, All in the Mind, had an episode called, The teenage years of my heart.

"And this is all in the mind. Natasha Mitchell with you on Radio National abc.net.au/rn. I swear while we're here, you would've seen all the press coverage in recent years about the teenage brain. That it's a work in progress. That major structural changes are going on during adolescents and that this explains why we teens were sometimes impulsive, risk takers, emotional, explosive, you've got the picture."

I loved this episode because Natasha Mitchell sounds so cool. And because it addressed a fundamental question: is adolescence real or is it just a social construction? And it got me wondering, I've been thinking about adolescence all wrong!

Well according to today's guest, Larry Steinberg, the answer is yes, we have been thinking about adolescence all wrong. And he wrote a whole book called Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence in order to change our minds. Dr. Steinberg is one of the most influential developmental psychologists of the 21st century. His bio is so long, that if I read it all, there wouldn't be any time for the actual interview. So, here's some highlights: He's the author of over 350 scholarly publications, including the classic textbook Adolescence. Dr. Steinberg is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, American Psychological Association and the Association for Psychology Studies. Dr. Steinberg was the lead scientist in the preparation of the American Psychological Association's amicus briefs submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court in Roper v. Simmons, which abolished the juvenile death penalty; Graham v. Florida which banned the use of life without parole for juveniles convicted of non-homicide crimes, and Miller v. Alabama which prohibited the use of mandatory life without parole for all juvenile crimes. And on September 9th, 2014, Eamon Dolan published his book, Age of Opportunity which Martin Seligman, father of positive psychology, described, as quote, "Simply the best book I have ever read about adolescence." Which is a pretty glowing recommendation. In today's interview, Dr. Steinberg and I spoke about the growing gap between the onset of puberty and the end of adolescence, challenges facing parents, providers and policy makers to ensure that adolescents have experience and skills needed to be successful and how reconceptualizing adolescence as an age of opportunity, rather than an age of risk or simply surviving, is an essential reframing in order to address the needs of youth in this developmental stage. We ended our interview with implications for practitioners, educators, and policy makers.

A quick note about the interview, even though Dr. Steinberg and I work at adjacent buildings at Temple University, I interviewed him over Skype because he was out of the state. And I want to learn more about Dr. Steinberg please check out his website at laurencesteinberg.com or follow him on twitter @ldsteinberg. To connect with the global community of social worker podcast listeners, please visit our Facebook page at facebook.com/swpodcast or follow us on twitter @swpodcast. And if you like what you heard today and are curious to learn more, consider buying his book Age of Opportunity, online or at your local independent book store.

And now, without further ado, on to episode 90 of the Social Work Podcast, Adolescence, the Age of Opportunity: An interview with Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D.

Interview

[05:09] Jonathan Singer: Larry, thanks so much for being here on the Social Work Podcast to talk to us about adolescence.

[05:10] Laurence Steinberg: Sure, I'm glad to be here.

[05:12] Jonathan Singer: In your new book, you propose an entirely new way of thinking about adolescence. So, two related questions, first, how have we been thinking about adolescence? And second, how should we be thinking about adolescence?

[05:31] Laurence Steinberg: Well, I think that the conventional view of adolescence is, that it's a time of inherent difficulty, difficulty for parents, difficulty for educators, difficulty for other people who work with teenagers. And I think that while certainly there are some people who have problems and many families who have problems during this time period, that that's the wrong way to think about what adolescence is. And what I try to argue is, that we ought to think about adolescence as a time of opportunity and not a period that is characterized by problems. But one way to think about it is, that a lot of messages we hear from the media and the popular press are that adolescence is a time when the National Academy of Sciences Board on Children, Youth, and Families and chaired the Academies' Committee on the Science of Adolescence. Dr. Steinberg was the lead scientist in the preparation of the American Psychological Association's amicus briefs submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court in Roper v. Simmons, which abolished the juvenile death penalty; Graham v. Florida which banned the use of life without parole for juveniles convicted of non-homicide crimes, and Miller v. Alabama which prohibited the use of mandatory life without parole for all juvenile crimes. And on September 9th, 2014, Eamon Dolan published his book, Age of Opportunity which Martin Seligman, father of positive psychology, described, as quote, "Simply the best book I have ever read about adolescence." Which is a pretty glowing recommendation. In today's interview, Dr. Steinberg and I spoke about the growing gap between the onset of puberty and the end of adolescence, challenges facing parents, providers and policy makers to ensure that adolescents have experience and skills needed to be successful and how reconceptualizing adolescence as an age of opportunity, rather than an age of risk or simply surviving, is an essential reframing in order to address the needs of youth in this developmental stage. We ended our interview with implications for practitioners, educators, and policy makers.

[06:50] Jonathan Singer: Hmm, Fascinating. Now I'm going to ask you to elaborate on that in a minute, but before we get there, I'm curious - Why are you suggesting that we should think differently about adolescence, has the research changed?

[07:07] Laurence Steinberg: Yeah, So, one of the most exciting breakthroughs in our understanding of adolescence, this new understanding that I describe in the book, comes from brain science. What I think we can tentatively conclude is that adolescence looks like a second period of heightened brain plasticity. Lots of people know that the brain can be affected by experience. That that's not a new idea, but the age of risk is a new idea. And I think most people recognize that the early years 0-3 constitute a period when the brain is especially influenced by experience. What new research is telling us, is that adolescence looks like a second period of heightened brain plasticity. And to me what this means is that we really need to pay careful attention to the kinds of experiences that we provide young people, because the experiences that they have during adolescence may have a profound effect on how their brain develops and therefore a profound effect on the rest of their life.

[08:11] Jonathan Singer: And I think one of the things that people often say about adolescence is they don't realize how profoundly their lives could be changed by their decisions. In the introduction of your book, you told a little story of a teenage girl form a well to do family who was caught shop lifting. You suggested that asking her to explain why this happened was almost an exercise in futility. What's going on in the adolescent brain that would be an argument against that kind of insight-seeking?

[08:44] Laurence Steinberg: Those of us who have raised and worked with teenagers have recognized that lots of time kids just get carried away in the moment. And they don't really understand why they do what they do. And I don't think that necessarily trying to get them to understand why they did what they did is going to be particularly productive. Now that doesn't mean that talking about experiences that we wish they wouldn't have had isn't valuable, but I wouldn't approach it as a matter of insight. I might approach it as kind of, well, when you are in this kind of situation, what could you do to get out of it? From happening. As I describe in the introduction that we've done at Temple on adolescence suggests that when teenagers are with their friends, this really activates certain brain regions that might make them do risky and reckless things that they wouldn't do by themselves. And that's how I think certain things that kids do that we're being doing on peer influence and the adolescent brain.

[09:48] Jonathan Singer: So, what are the implications of this changing brain, this plasticity problem with self-control or rewards for pleasing peers, that make adolescents do things that they wouldn't do? I'm thinking specifically about implications for social workers who work with youth in schools, you know, mental health settings, adjudicated youth, etc., etc.

[10:07] Laurence Steinberg: Well I think that there are a number of important implications here. The first implication, I think, has to do with what we mean about plasticity. So, when the brain is very plastic, it's highly influenced by experience. And plasticity, you see, it's not just about the brain, it's about the brain being highly influenced by experience, that means that people can really benefit from positive experiences as well as be harmed by negative ones. So that's what I mean when I talk about an age of opportunity, that it's an opportunity to help kids develop in positive ways with respect to how we react to their bad behavior. And a lot of my research, as you know, is on juvenile offenders. I think we need to recognize that adolescents don't have during adolescence that they've done this with adjudicated offenders and helped them develop some self-control as well. This is just one, you know, one approach. There are other things that turn out to be effective with aggressive kids, for example. But I think that the general principle here is that, acquiring the capacity to regulate one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors is what we ought to strive to do when we're working with kids in need.

[11:29] Jonathan Singer: I'm very encouraged to hear you say that the adolescent brain is very open to positive experiences. Are there some experiences that you have suggestions for future episodes, please visit www.socialworkpodcast.com. If you'd like to help parents provide adolescents, that are better for adolescent brain development than others?

[11:50] Laurence Steinberg: Well I think that it's useful to step back and say, what do we want to accomplish during this developmental period and how can individuals in helping professions and in education and parents, for that matter, move kids toward this goal? And to me, I think the most important task of adolescence, the important developmental task, is improving self-regulation, self-control, whatever to you want to call it so that kids are better able to take control of their emotions and their thoughts and their actions. And what I think is encouraging is that there is a movement now mainly within education, but I think it will spread probably to the helping professions as well. There's a movement to help people use what we call, what people are calling "non-cognitive skills." It's a terrible phrase, but that's the phrase that people are using and what they mean by that, I think, really has to do with self-regulation and self-control, and there's some things that seem to work. 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