The Amazing Adolescent Brain: Challenges, Opportunities and Promising Interventions

The adolescent brain is markedly different from that of a child or an adult.

At the NW Children’s Fund Forum on January 31, Dr. Linda Chamberlain shared insights into the unique characteristics of the adolescent brain. Approximately 450 parents and youth-serving individuals – from schools, universities, nonprofits, courts, health care and more – gathered at the Washington State Convention Center to learn how brain development influences the way adolescents experience and behave in the world.

As in the first few years of life, adolescence offers a period of heightened brain plasticity. Profound changes in the brain impact teens’ emotions, decision-making and behavior. This period of plasticity offers a “second window of opportunity,” Dr. Chamberlain explained, for learning and shaping behavior. Utilizing strategies informed by brain science, parents and other adults who work with teens can help them build resilience and achieve other positive outcomes.

Dr. Chamberlain identified several critical characteristics of the adolescent brain. For example:

**Teens weigh risks differently.** Research has revealed that the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain associated with reasoning – does not fully mature until the mid-20s. While adults weigh the potential consequences of their actions and assess risk, adolescents act impulsively. No matter their origin or culture, teenagers are wired to seek novelty and take risks.

**The teen brain responds differently to alcohol.** Compared to adults, teens have a reduced sensitivity to both the motor coordination and sedative effects of alcohol. Adolescents are missing critical cues that let them know they’ve had too much. And because their brains are still developing, substance abuse may cause irreversible damage.

**Teens are more likely to misinterpret facial expressions.** Did you know that adolescents are more likely to inaccurately perceive anger on people’s faces? They rely more on the amygdala – the impulsive, limbic region of the brain – which leads to quick judgment.

**Promising Interventions**

Dr. Chamberlain described some important brain-based strategies for working with adolescents. Teens are best supported with hands-on,

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skill-based learning and opportunities for positive risk-taking and to discover new interests. They need more sleep than adults, and will benefit from tools to build brain connectivity and manage stress.

Adolescents need healthy adult relationships – people who will hang in there even when being pushed away, who will validate their feelings instead of judge them. Dr. Chamberlain also underscored the importance of educating teens about how their brains work, which helps them to have a “growth mindset” – an understanding that they are a work in progress and have the power to help themselves thrive.

Visit nwcf.org/events/forum for the Forum video, PowerPoint deck and resources about brain development and trauma. You may also check out the ParentMap story outlining key insights from Dr. Chamberlain’s presentation: www.parentmap.com/article/teen-brain-science-linda-chamberlain.

Adolescent Mental Health and Children of Trauma

Data shows that teen depression and anxiety are on the rise. These issues are even more pronounced in the lives of the vulnerable youth NW Children’s Fund serves. Speakers from three NWCF partner agencies shared illustrative vignettes at the Forum of youth whose adolescence was severely impacted by their experiences as victims of child abuse and neglect.

Above, from left to right: Mona Locke (welcome speaker/Forum moderator); Dr. Linda Chamberlain (keynote speaker); Lorena Jimenez de Sepin of SafeFutures Youth Center, Sarah Pulliam of Cocoon House and Janis Avery of Treehouse (agency speakers/panelists).
### Healing Abused Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency / Program Description</th>
<th>Grant ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amara: Foster-Adoption Program</strong> / Parenting and adoption services to create safety and permanence for at-risk and special-needs children.</td>
<td>12,500</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Childhaven</strong> / Developmentally-focused trauma care and treatment services to support the healing of abused and neglected children ages 0-5.</td>
<td>12,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dawson Place Child Advocacy Center</strong> / Coordinated medical, mental health, advocacy, protection and law-enforcement services for abused children in Snohomish County.</td>
<td>15,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lutheran Community Services Northwest: Permanency Planning Foster-Adopt Program</strong> / Provides abused and neglected children with safe, secure and permanent homes.</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northwest Immigrant Rights Project: Immigrant Child Advocacy Project</strong> / Legal services and advocacy for abused, abandoned and undocumented immigrant children.</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pediatric Interim Care Center</strong> / Immediate, short-term, medically supervised care for drug-exposed and fragile infants.</td>
<td>12,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ryther: Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC) Model</strong> / Implementation of trauma-informed framework for intervention with youth and families who have experienced multiple and/or traumatic stress.</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secret Harbor</strong> / Therapeutic foster care, in-home support and residential treatment services for young people who have experienced significant trauma due to abuse and neglect.</td>
<td>12,000</td>
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### Strengthening Fragile Families

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<tr>
<th>Agency / Program Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Boyer Children’s Clinic: CHERISH Program</strong> / In-home therapeutic intervention to support foster parents in building nurturing relationships with young children with special healthcare needs.</td>
<td>8,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Child Care Resources: Homeless Child Care Program</strong> / Help and guidance for homeless families in finding child care providers and accessing support services.</td>
<td>14,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Domestic Abuse Women’s Network</strong> / Comprehensive, empowerment-based programs and services to help survivors and their children attain and maintain violence-free lives.</td>
<td>15,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Housing Hope: Tomorrow’s Hope Child Development Center</strong> / Therapeutic programming to help homeless and at-risk families overcome barriers to age-appropriate development for their children.</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interfaith Association of Northwest Washington</strong> / Referral, support and advocacy services for families during and after their stay in emergency shelter.</td>
<td>10,500</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lydia Place: Parent Support Program</strong> / Parent educator home visits, group parenting education, transitional housing and therapeutic interventions for children in shelters.</td>
<td>11,200</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>New Phoebe House Association</strong> / Comprehensive recovery and reunification program for families who face multiple challenges and are involved with the child welfare system.</td>
<td>9,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rochester Organization of Families</strong> / Resources and services for children, youth and families to achieve a healthy, positive and drug-free community.</td>
<td>16,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Solid Ground: Children’s Program at Broadview</strong> / Programs and support for children who have experienced homelessness and domestic violence.</td>
<td>15,500</td>
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### Helping At-Risk Youth

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<tr>
<th>Agency / Program Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Auburn Youth Resources</strong> / Multi-service support for at-risk, homeless, abused and neglected youth in South King County.</td>
<td>13,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Big Brothers Big Sisters of Island County</strong> / Mentoring for low-income, high-risk and pre-teen girls in Island County.</td>
<td>4,400</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southwest Washington</strong> / Mentoring for children who are at risk of dropping out, violence, substance abuse and other juvenile problem behaviors.</td>
<td>12,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Communities in Schools of Renton</strong> / Mentoring and wraparound academic and support services for at-risk students.</td>
<td>14,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Community for Youth</strong> / Support for the social, emotional and academic development of vulnerable high-risk youth through mentoring, learning experiences and community.</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends of the Children</strong> / Long-term professional mentoring to guide children facing tough challenges to reach their potential and achieve their goals.</td>
<td>13,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jefferson Teen Center</strong> / After-school services and a daily, healthy nutrition program for youth living in the rural north-eastern corner of the Olympic Peninsula.</td>
<td>6,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Northwest Youth Services: Positive Adolescent Development Program</strong> / Emergency housing and case management for homeless youth ages 13-17.</td>
<td>16,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Readiness to Learn Foundation</strong> / Programs to stabilize the school experience for students during difficult periods and connect their families to basic needs resources.</td>
<td>7,500</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Seattle Education Access</strong> / Higher education advocacy and opportunities for young people struggling to overcome poverty and adversity.</td>
<td>11,100</td>
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<td><strong>TeamChild</strong> / Advocacy and legal services connecting high-needs youth in crisis with support programs and services.</td>
<td>11,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>YouthCare</strong> / Shelter, case management, service referrals and crisis resolution for homeless adolescents.</td>
<td>13,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Youth Tutoring Program - Catholic Community Services</strong> / After-school tutoring and enrichment program for kids living in Seattle low-income communities.</td>
<td>9,000</td>
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Inside:

NWCF Forum Highlights
Winter Grant Recipients

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