

Making Decisions

PURPOSE

Students who have aspirations for their future are more likely to take the steps needed to avoid obstacles (including sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy) that may get in the way of their goals. Identifying the messages they receive about sex helps youth better understand the different factors that can influence their sexual decision making. In turn, youth can be better prepared to take the necessary steps to delay sex or use protection when having sex.

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Participants will:

1. Describe goals and aspirations they wish to achieve in the future.
2. Identify messages they receive about sexuality.
3. Explain how outside pressures can impact sexual decision making.
4. Understand how to make abstinence work effectively.

If using the Supplemental Activity on the Developing Brain:

5. Understand how the developing brain influences sexual decision making.

LESSON SUMMARY

Activities	Minutes	Materials and Preparation Checklist
A Goals & Aspirations Bucket List	10	<input type="checkbox"/> Make one copy of My Bucket List worksheet for each student.
B Messages We Hear About Sex	20	<input type="checkbox"/> If doing the carousel activity, post 3 pieces of easel paper around the room with the headers (Adults, Peers, and the Media). Have markers for each small group. <input type="checkbox"/> If working in small groups, make copies of Messages We Hear About Sex worksheet for each small group.
C Decisions, Decisions	15	<input type="checkbox"/> Make copies of the Decisions, Decisions scenarios, one for each small group of 2-3 students. More than one group can have the same scenario.
D What Makes Abstinence Work?	10	<input type="checkbox"/> Easel paper or white board and markers for recording student brainstorm.
E Reflection & Closure	5	<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare notecards or student journal option for answering reflection questions.
Supplemental Activity: The Developing Brain and Sexual Decision Making	25	<input type="checkbox"/> Review the mini-lecture: The Developing Brain and Sexual Decision Making . <input type="checkbox"/> If using the recommended video, review in advance. Show in class or assign as homework. <input type="checkbox"/> Copy The Developing Brain and Sexual Decision Making diagram for each student.



INTRODUCE THE LESSON

Say:

In the last class, we introduced some of the topics we'll be covering during Best Practices. Now we're going to explore how pregnancy and STIs may fit into or effect individual goals and aspirations. We'll also look at some of the messages people hear about sex and how these can influence sexual decision making.



ACTIVITY 2A: GOALS & ASPIRATIONS BUCKET LIST



INTRODUCE THE ACTIVITY

Say,

Many people have goals and aspirations for the future—both short and long term. Consider these as your own personal bucket list. These can include present goals like being class president, learning guitar or beating your favorite video game. Your bucket list can also include future goals like hiking the Appalachian Trail, getting a job, starting your own business, buying a car, or furthering your skills or education. Take a few minutes to write down some of the items on your bucket list. Remember this could be anything from school and hobbies to your future career or family goals.

- Hand out a copy of the *My Bucket List* worksheet to each student.
- Give students 5 minutes to complete their worksheet.
- Ask students to share some of their goals with the large group. Encourage students to respond to short-term goals as well as longer-term goals. Ask if anyone plans to have a family some day and when that might fit on their timeline.

FACILITATOR NOTE

It is important to remember that students in your class may have already experienced a pregnancy or STI. While this curriculum is designed to promote responsible sexual decision making, it is key that our messages reduce shame and embarrassment so young people will feel more comfortable having honest conversations and getting help when they need it from trusted adults.

BRAINSTORM

Select a couple of the goals your students shared and ask the following questions:

1. **How could having a baby impact any of the goals on your bucket list?**

Possible answers:

- *Might have to delay your education plans.*
- *May not be able to participate in sports or other activities.*
- *Social scene and friendships may change.*
- *Working would be more difficult if you have to pay for childcare.*
- *What you earn would go toward supporting a child.*

2. **How would an STI or HIV get in the way of your plans?**

Possible answers:

- *Might have to pay for testing and treatment.*
- *May be challenging to discuss with a partner.*
- *Might be stressful and emotionally distracting.*
- *If the STI was not curable, you'd have to manage it the rest of your life.*
- *Some STIs may cause infertility if not diagnosed and treated, or in the case of HIV may impact your long-term health or eventually lead to death.*

3. **What can you do to avoid having an STI or unintended pregnancy?**

Possible answers:

- *Wait to have sex.*
- *Use protection—both condoms/oral dams and birth control—to avoid STIs and pregnancy.*
- *Get regular STI testing.*

SUMMARIZE

In summarizing the activity, include these key points:

- **While pregnancy and STIs may cause a range of emotions, they are nothing to be ashamed of. By talking to a health care provider or trusted adult, you can get the support you need to make the decisions that are best for you.**
- **Taking care of a baby may present new challenges and additional stressors, which can affect your goals and aspirations.**
- **Getting an STI can also become a stressor, whether it's getting tested and treated, or managing an STI that cannot be cured. If left untreated, STIs can cause serious health consequences.**
- **In the lessons ahead, we're going to focus on preventing pregnancy and STIs. Whether this information is relevant to you right now or will be sometime in the future, it's important for young people to have all the facts.**



MY BUCKET LIST

On the bucket list below, write down some things you want to do this year, before you graduate or beyond. These can be goals related to career and family, sports or hobbies, places you want to see, or books you want to read. Your goals are unique to you and can change over time.



- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Reflection Questions:

1 Are some goals more important to you than others? If so which ones?

2 Where can you get support to meet your goals (friends, teachers, counselors, family, etc.)?

3 How might having sex or relationships affect your goals now and in the future?



ACTIVITY 2B: MESSAGES WE HEAR ABOUT SEX



INTRODUCE THE ACTIVITY

Say,

While our goals and aspirations can be a factor in the choices we make, so can the messages we receive -- whether they are helpful or not, true or false. We're going to explore some of these messages, identify where they come from and how they might influence our decisions around sex and relationships.

In small groups or as a carousel activity, have students explore the following:

What are some of the messages people your age hear about sex from:

- your peers (your friends or people your age in general)
- adults in your life (parents, teachers, other family members, medical providers, etc.)
- the media (music, movies, the internet, social media, advertising, etc.)

Feel free to use your own list or add other sources of messages about sex.

Option 1: Small group work

- Pass out one copy of **Messages We Hear about Sex** to small groups of 3-4 students.
- You can assign each group one of the following sources (Peers, Adults, the Media) and ask them to brainstorm some of the messages they hear from these sources. You can also have each of the small groups brainstorm examples from all of these sources.
- After 10 minutes, ask a reporter from each small group to share their responses, making sure that all groups have a chance to share.

Option 2: Carousel activity

- Write each of the following – **Peers, Adults, Media** – on separate pieces of easel paper and post them around the room.
- In small groups of 3-4, students move from one paper to the next, writing down the various messages about sex they hear from those sources.
- Have small groups start with one category. After 2-3 minutes of brainstorming messages, ask them to move to the next paper. They will first read the responses already written by the previous group, place a check mark on those they agree with and add their own responses. Time the movement – 2-3 minutes per category – before they move along to the next.
- Continue until each group has responded to each category.
- When they are back where they started, ask the groups to read the messages written down for each of the sources. If anything written on the paper is unclear, ask for clarification.

DEBRIEF THE ACTIVITY

After the groups have finished their work, ask the large group:

1. Which of these messages would you categorize as helpful?

Possible answers:

- *Wait to have sex until you have consent or feel you're ready.*
- *Sex should feel good and be something each person wants to do.*
- *No one should pressure another person to have sex.*
- *There is a lot of diversity in what people want and who they are attracted to.*
- *It's your choice to have or not have sex.*
- *How to get protection or practice safer sex.*

2. Which of these messages seem harmful or unhelpful?

Possible answers:

- *Sex is the only way to show love and affection.*
- *Unrealistic or unhealthy expectations around body image, relationships and sex.*
- *Sexually explicit media (pornography) often gives distorted or negative messages about the way bodies should look or the kinds of sex certain people/genders are supposed to "be into."*
- *Messages aren't always factual or include conversations about ways to prevent pregnancy and STIs.*
- *Messages can make people feel pressured (or pressure someone else) to have sex even if they're not ready.*
- *The messages often include stereotypes, exclude diversity in sexual orientation, gender or expression and assume everyone is heterosexual.*
- *Only hearing the negative consequences of sex can leave out important conversations around consent, relationships and allowing people to think about what they want (or don't want) in a relationship.*

3. How can these messages impact someone's decisions around sex?

Possible answers:

- *Not having the facts can leave many young people unprepared for making healthy decisions around sex, using protection or having conversations with a partner.*
- *People in a relationship may have different expectations around sex.*
- *Messages can make you feel bad about yourself (if you don't look or perform a certain way, or you feel pressured when you don't want to have sex).*
- *If you think everyone else is having sex and you aren't, you do it anyway to fit in.*

FACILITATOR NOTE

In Scenario #3, Jacob uses *they* as a gender-neutral pronoun. Think about how you will respond to students looking for clarification on the character's gender identity. For example, consider asking them to notice their assumptions, ask if gender makes a difference in the scenario, and prepare an explanation for why some folks prefer *they* as a pronoun.

If you or your students need more information on pronouns and diverse gender identities you may want to watch a video on your own or with your students. Below are two videos that may be helpful.

Range of Gender Identities by AMAZE <https://amaze.org/video/gender-identity-range-gender-identities/>
Trans 101 by YGENDER and MINUS18 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3ZzpTxjgRw&t=198s>

For more information and support, email education@mainefamilyplanning.org

SUMMARIZE

In summarizing the activity, include these key points:

- **We've now explored some of the messages about sex that come from different sources—some of these messages are helpful and others can be unhelpful, false or even harmful.**
- **It's important to recognize and talk about these messages because they can influence the decisions a person makes around sex and relationships.**
- **As we move forward in the next lessons, we want to make sure we are including everyone, and focusing on positive messages around sexual health.**



MESSAGES WE HEAR ABOUT SEX

Think about all the messages you and your peers may hear about sex. Brainstorm a list of these messages below by where those messages comes from: **Peers** can be your friends, or other people your age, **Adults** can be your parents/guardians, teachers, other family members, medical providers, etc. and **Media** can include social media, other online sources, music, movies, or advertising. These may be both spoken, unspoken and even mixed messages.

PEERS	ADULTS	MEDIA



ACTIVITY 2C: DECISIONS, DECISIONS

INTRODUCE THE ACTIVITY

Say,

Whether we're aware of it or not, messages we hear from friends, family or the media have an impact on the decisions we make. We are going to look at some scenarios of young people who are thinking about their relationship situations and pressures they're feeling. They've received messages about sexual health that impact how they view their situation, their options and the decisions they make.

- Hand out copies of the Decisions, Decisions scenarios to small groups of 2-4 students. More than one group can have the same scenario.
- While they read the scenarios, ask them to underline or highlight the messages that may influence how the characters might feel or the decisions they make.
- Ask the groups to discuss and record their responses to the questions included in their scenarios.
- Depending on available time, review the scenarios and have students share their responses. If more than one group has the same scenario, be sure to include responses from each group.
- Use the debrief questions on the worksheets and the Facilitator Keys to guide discussion of each scenario.

SUMMARIZE

- While making decisions about sex and relationships is up to each individual, it's helpful to be aware of the messages that may influence our decisions.
- Friends, family, counselors, other trusted adults and support organizations can provide help with making safe decisions.
- Remember that we all make decisions that might not turn out how we expect. Regardless of the decisions we make, there are lessons we can learn and more opportunities for making healthy decisions in the future.



DECISIONS, DECISIONS -- SCENARIO #1: MARIA AND JOE

Directions: Read the following scenario. Underline or highlight messages that Maria and Joe are receiving. Answer the following questions below.

Maria and Joe are juniors in high school.

They've been in a steady relationship for a while and are trying to decide if they're ready to have sex. Many of their friends have had sex, and others haven't because they don't want to complicate their future plans with a relationship that includes sex. Both Maria and Joe are thinking about their plans after high school. Maria is looking at a career in the medical field and gets a lot of support from the school counselor and her foster parents. Joe isn't sure what he wants to do, but is looking at being a mechanic or maybe going into the military.

They can easily get caught up in the moment and feel physically and emotionally ready for sex. On the other hand, they want to be careful and avoid a pregnancy, which could complicate their lives. Maria also doesn't like to keep secrets from her foster mom who is always asking if she and Joe are sexually active and keeps pushing her to go to family planning. Maria's biological parents had her when they were teens, and Maria would like to take a different path for her life and wait until she's ready to have a child. Joe's family is very strict about not having sex before marriage, so he tries to avoid those conversations at home.

Maria and Joe's gut tells them they should hold off on having sex, but they also have a difficult time not acting on their feelings for each other.

Answer the following questions:

1. What decisions are Maria and Joe trying to make?

2. What are some of the messages they've received about their situation? From where?

3. What should Maria and Joe do?

FACILITATOR KEY**SCENARIO #1: MARIA AND JOE**

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They can easily get caught up in the moment and feel physically and emotionally ready for sex. On the other hand, they want to be careful and avoid a pregnancy, which could complicate their lives. Maria also doesn't like to keep secrets from her foster mom who is always asking if she and Joe are sexually active and keeps pushing her to go to family planning. Maria's biological parents had her when they were teens, and Maria would like to take a different path for her life and wait until she's ready to have a child. Joe's family is very strict about not having sex before marriage, so he tries to avoid those conversations at home.

Maria and Joe's gut tells them they should hold off on having sex, but they also have a difficult time not acting on their feelings for each other.

Answer the following questions:

1. What decisions are Maria and Joe trying to make?

Even though they feel physically and emotionally ready to have sex, they also don't want to complicate their future plans with a possible pregnancy.

2. What are some of the messages they've received about their situation? From where?

***From peers:** some are having sex, some aren't. Maria gets support for future education and career goals from the school counselor and foster family. Maria's foster mom wants her to go to family planning; Joe's family doesn't support sex before marriage. While they might think they should wait, they also feel ready to have sex.*

3. What should Maria and Joe do?

Facilitate student discussion on the pros and cons of Maria and Joe's decision.

- *There's no right or wrong answer. Maria and Joe need to decide what's right for them. Communication is key in making a decision that they both can agree with.*
 - *If they decide to have sex, it should be consensual for both. They can be prepared and visit a family planning center, pharmacy or school health center to get condoms or birth control to prevent pregnancy and STIs.*
 - *If they decide not to have sex, what steps should they take?*
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SCENARIO #2: SHAWN AND ETHAN

Directions: Read the following scenario. Underline or highlight messages that Shawn and Ethan are receiving. Answer the following questions below.

Shawn and Ethan are seniors in high school.

Shawn and Ethan have been keeping a secret from everyone they know. They've been dating for about 6 months, but haven't told anyone. Now they're deciding whether or not to tell their families and friends they are in a relationship. It's been ridiculously hard for them to keep it a secret. Ethan believes his family will be supportive since they have an extended family member who came out years ago and no one made a big deal about it. Shawn is not so sure. His family is more conservative and he's heard them make negative comments about people who are gay and transgender.

There is a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) group at their school, and with all the celebrities and stories about LGBTQ issues in the news, a lot more people are supportive of LGBTQ students. Even so, Shawn and Ethan aren't sure how people in their school might react. Ethan and Shawn know their feelings for each other are real and want to be able to tell their family and friends, but they are unsure of the reactions they might get. By keeping it a secret, they feel anxious and sad because they want to feel free and safe to express their feelings like everyone else.

Answer the following questions:

1. What decision are Shawn and Ethan trying to make?
They are trying to decide whether or not to tell their family and friends they are in a relationship and wonder if they'll be accepted and safe.
2. What are some of the messages they've received about their situation? From where?
Ethan's family is supportive of same sex relationships. Shawn's family don't seem to be accepting of LGBTQ people. They aren't sure about how their friends will react if they come out as a couple. At school and in the media/news there seems to be more acceptance of LGBT people.

3. What should Shawn and Ethan do?

Facilitate student discussion on the pros and cons of their decision, for example:

- *Coming out is an individual decision and the journey can be different for people.*
- *How would this possibly impact their relationships with their families and friends?*
- *If they keep it a secret, how might it impact their relationship with each other and with friends and family?*
- *If they decide to tell others about their relationship, where could they go to feel safe and supported? For example, a school counselor, trusted adult or organization that supports LGBTQ youth.*

FACILITATOR KEY**SCENARIO #3: JACOB**

Directions: Read the following scenario. Underline or highlight messages that Jacob is receiving. Then answer the questions below.

Jacob is a sophomore in high school. (Jacob uses they/them pronouns).

This year Jacob is learning about sex ed in health class. Some of Jacob’s friends are in relationships and they brag and joke around about sex a lot. Jacob just doesn’t get it. They can’t imagine having sex with anyone or even being a relationship with someone else. Jacob often just plays along when conversations about sex come up because they’re worried what their friends would say if they told them their true feelings about it.

In class, the teacher often says how everyone will need the information about sexual health at some point in their lives, but Jacob isn’t so sure about that. The only person they’ve told is the school nurse, who said that it’s normal for some people to feel this way. With everyone talking about sex, Jacob still feels like there must be something wrong. They’re not sure if they will ever feel that sex with another person would be something they would be interested in. Jacob wonders if they should reach out and ask for help in figuring out what’s going on.

Answer the following questions:

1. What decision is Jacob trying to make?
Whethersomethingis wrongwiththemfor notfeelinginterestedinsexorrelationships. Wondering if they should talk to someone about these feelings.
2. What are some of the messages they’ve received about their situation? From where?
Jacob’s friends are always bragging about sex. Jacob’s teacher says that everyone will need information from sex ed class at some point. School nurse says these feelings are normal.

3. What should Jacob do?

Facilitate student discussion on how to help Jacob.

- *Should Jacob feel there is something wrong with them?*
- *Where could Jacob go to talk about their feelings?*
- *Some individuals are clear about their sexuality, some are not. For some people, they don’t figure it out until later in life. There is no right or wrong. Jacob may find they’re asexual or needs a certain kind of connection with someone before feeling like they want to be sexual. Talking it over with someone could help Jacob sort out their feelings.*

FACILITATOR KEY**SCENARIO #4: ALMA**

Directions: Read the following scenario. Underline or highlight messages that Alma is receiving. Then answer the questions below.

Alma is a junior in high school.

Alma comes from a family with strong religious beliefs, one of which is that Alma should not date outside of their religious community. Her religion and family are very important to Alma. She is used to having to navigate her religious identity in a school where most people have very different beliefs from her family. Now it's become more complicated since Alma started dating Matt over the summer. She hasn't told her parents because she is afraid they will disapprove. During a family holiday, she talked with a few of her cousins who started dating people outside their faith in college. They said that while it caused some strain with their parents at first, their families are starting to accept their new relationships.

Matt says he will support Alma's decision to tell her parents about their relationship, or not. Alma doesn't like being secretive, but she is afraid if she tells her parents they'll make her stop seeing Matt. She doesn't want to choose between a relationship with Matt and a relationship with her family. While she has friends at school that say it's important for her to be true to herself, she feels like they don't really understand her situation. Alma wishes there was more information on how to have relationships with cultural differences.

Answer the following questions:

1. What decision is Alma trying to make?
Alma is trying to decide whether or not to tell her parents she is dating Matt.
2. What are some of the messages she's received about her situation? From where?
Alma is receiving messages from her religious community, parents, her cousins, Matt, and friends at school. Her parents disapprove of her dating outside their religious community, while her cousins, Matt and friends are being supportive.
3. What should Alma do?
Facilitate student discussion on how to help Alma:
 - *Who could Alma talk to for advice on how to tell her parents?*
 - *What are some strategies for Alma to reconcile her religious beliefs and her parent's rules with her desire to keep dating Matt?*
 - *What might be some helpful resources for Alma in navigating her decision?*



ACTIVITY 2D: WHAT MAKES ABSTINENCE WORK?



Say,

In Lesson 1, we learned the definition of abstinence. What do we mean by abstinence?

Possible answers:

- *Choosing not to have sex.*
- *For some, this means not having vaginal, oral, or anal sex.*
- *For others, it may mean not engaging in any kind of sexual activity.*

BRAINSTORM

Write on two sheets of easel paper or on the white board the following statements, and record students responses:

- **Why Do People Choose Abstinence**
- **What Makes Abstinence Work?**

1. Why might some people choose not to have sex?

Possible answers:

- *Personal or religious beliefs and values*
- *Not emotionally ready to be in a sexual relationship*
- *Not interested*
- *Because they want to build a relationship on things other than sex*
- *Haven't found the right person*
- *Want to avoid pregnancy or STIs/HIV*
- *Don't want to jeopardize future goals*

2. If a person has decided they don't want to have sex, what can they do?

Possible answers:

- *Find others that share similar beliefs and values around not having sex*
- *Avoid situations/places that would make it difficult to stick to their decision*
- *Have confidence in their decision*
- *Have alternative ways to show someone how they feel*
- *Be able to communicate their decision to a partner*
- *Understand that drugs/alcohol could affect their ability to remain abstinent*

SUMMARIZE:

In summarizing the activity, include these key points:

- **Maine youth health data shows that more high school students are choosing to not have sex.** (Source: *Maine Youth Integrated Health Survey*)
- **Just because someone has had sex in the past, it doesn't mean that every relationship has to be sexual. Abstaining is something people may choose at different points for different reasons.**
- **In relationships, everyone has the right to choose to be sexual or not, and can change their mind at any time. Every opportunity for sex can be a new and unique decision.**
- **It is important when making the decision to have sex, a person feels prepared and excited rather than pressured or unsure.**
- **As we go through this unit, you will learn more about affirmative consent. Consent plays a large role in practicing and being supported and respected in one's choice to be abstinent.**



ACTIVITY 2E: REFLECTION & CLOSURE



REFLECTION

In a journal, notecard or online format, like Google Classroom, ask students to write their responses to the following questions:

1. What pressures or messages (if any) have you received to be sexually active?
2. List the positive influences or messages that can help you reach your goals.
3. Write down at least one thing that would help you make decisions around sex in a relationship.

CLOSURE

In closing the lesson, include these key messages:

- **A good way to sort through all of the messages we receive around sex is to PAUSE and give yourself time to think about what you want.**
- **In the next lesson we'll look at personal sexual boundaries and how to communicate those boundaries with a partner.**
- **The more you think about and practice these skills, the more prepared you will be when faced with sexual decisions, now or sometime in the future.**



SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITY: THE DEVELOPING BRAIN



- Introduce the activity: **We just looked at how messages you hear and see from others may influence our attitudes about sex. At the same time, we're also getting messages from the brain that can impact the way we make decisions. In this activity we'll explore how the brain develops in the teen years.**
- Hand out a copy of **The Developing Brain and Sexual Decision Making** diagram to each student so they can record their own notes as they learn about the different parts of the brain and their functions.
- Select one of the following options for providing your students with facts about the brain.

Option 1: Mini-lecture

Read the Mini-lecture out loud to the class. Ask students to fill in the boxes on the Developing Brain diagram as you read **The Developing Brain and Sexual Decision Making**



Option 2: Video (students can view in class or as homework prior to the lesson)

The Teenage Brain Explained from the online series *Sci Show* by Hank Green. The video is a total of 9 minutes. If you want to save time you can advance to minute 3:55 where the most relevant brain discussion begins. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiduiTq1ei8>

FACILITATOR NOTE

Review the video before showing or sharing the link with students. Video links are always changing. Check the link in advance and let us know if you find broken links. If you discover other relevant brain development videos and resources, let us know!

DEBRIEF THE ACTIVITY:

Ask students the following processing questions in a large group.

1. **How do the different parts of the brain work together to help teens grow into adulthood and make healthy decisions?**

After students give their answers, repeat these key messages:

- The **pituitary gland** produces the sex hormones that start puberty and the development of the reproductive system.
- The **pre-frontal cortex**, the thinking part of the brain, helps think through decisions, weigh consequences, helps with self-control and plans for the future. This part of the brain is still maturing during the teen years and even through the mid-20s.

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- The **amygdala** is the reward seeking part of the brain. It processes emotions and can be impulsive but also gets us to try new things and gets us excited about things that are important to us—like being accepted by our friends. The amygdala is fully developed in the teen years.
 - **Brain stem**—the gut instinct. The brain stem tells us to fight, flee or freeze when in danger. It sends messages, like that sick feeling in your stomach, when we’re not safe. It’s fully developed at a young age but adults tend to use this more than teens when making quick decisions.

2. What are some of the ways the developing brain challenges sexual decision making?

After students give their answers, repeat these key messages:

- The brain doesn’t always think things through.
- It’s not easy to stop or pause when you get caught up “in the moment”.
- The reward and pleasure seeking part of the brain sometimes takes over the more rational part of the brain, especially in high pressure social situations.

3. Some people think that teens are not capable of making sound decisions. What would you tell an adult about the brain that would convince them that teens can be trusted to make healthy decisions?

Possible responses: Teen brains are still under construction. Most of the time we can make healthy decisions, but sometimes other things get in the way, like wanting to fit in, taking risks and seeking rewards. We just need more practice and time to keep growing and learning how to make responsible, healthy decisions.

SUMMARIZE

In summarizing the activity, include these key points:

- **When making decisions around sex, whether now or in the future, it’s important to understand what is going on inside your head.**
- **Even when you end up doing something you hadn’t planned, don’t use your brain as an excuse! You still have the ability to make sound decisions and plan ahead, even when your brain is still under construction.**
- **A good strategy to use when making decisions is to PAUSE. This gives your brain time to process all the information around you so you can make healthy, safe decisions.**

FACILITATOR NOTE

You can find additional resources about the teen brain on the Scholastic website, including extensive information about the impact of drug and alcohol use on the developing brain.
<http://headsup.scholastic.com>

Many things can negatively influence the brain’s maturation process, including the use of drugs and alcohol, abuse, neglect or other types of trauma.

Some of your students may have experienced one or many of these factors which may impact the way their brains function in risky or pressured situations and increase their sexual risk-taking behavior.

FACILITATOR

MINI-LECTURE: THE DEVELOPING BRAIN & SEXUAL DECISION MAKING

Be sure to hand out the brain diagram for students to follow along and fill in information as you go. You can also project the diagram at the front of the room.

Not long ago, scientists thought the brain stopped developing at a young age. Now we know that the brain keeps maturing into the mid-20's. It's important to take a few minutes to understand the brain, because it can play a big role in making healthy sexual decisions. You can make notes on the diagram as I go through the different parts of the brain.

The pituitary gland really starts things off with puberty. The pituitary gland is the size of a pea, but produces many of the hormones that regulate many body functions. This includes the changes that come along with puberty: not only the physical changes but also our changing moods throughout the day.

Many regions of the brain work together to influence decisions we make. Let's start at the front with the pre-frontal cortex--the master planner, thinking part of the brain. It is in charge of weighing the consequences and the pros and cons of a situation. During the teen years, the **pre-frontal cortex** is not yet fully developed and can be overpowered by the reward and pleasure seeking part of the brain, the amygdala (uh-mig-dah-lah).

The amygdala is the reward and pleasure center of the brain. It is also responsible for the emotional roller coaster that can sometimes happen during the teen years. The amygdala is fully developed by adolescence and it can step in and take over the slower pre-frontal cortex when making decisions. The amygdala may tell you to go along with your peers when making a decision, instead of first thinking it through. On the other hand, the amygdala is what makes teens more interested in trying new things and taking risks.

Here's a couple of examples of the pre-frontal cortex and amygdala at work:

1. **You get a video of your friend doing something really embarrassing. You're tempted to share it with others because you know it will get a lot of laughs.**

Stop and ask your students, **what part of the brain is speaking here? The amygdala.**

You know you should ask your friend before posting (this is the pre-frontal cortex), but you don't have the patience. So you go ahead and post it without asking.

Ask your students what part of the brain won over? **The amygdala!**

2. **You are very tempted to ditch studying when a group of friends invites you out to a late night movie during finals.** Again, ask your students what part of the brain is tempting you: the **amygdala.**

You know you need a good grade on your final to pass the class. (The pre-frontal cortex is working here.)

Although you're REALLY tempted, you decide to study and take a rain check until after finals are over. The pre-frontal cortex wins!

A chemical in your brain, called dopamine, is released when something feels good. During the teen years, the brain produces a lot of dopamine. This is especially true when taking risks, and especially when it involves your friends and peers. This is why research shows that teens are more likely to give into peer-pressure than both younger children and adults. The social rewards pump up the dopamine, which feels great, and you want more!

Another process happening in the brain during the teen years is synaptic pruning. Neurons and synapses in the brain become more specialized during the teen years. It's the "use it or lose it" phase. Cells and connections that get used during this time grow stronger and those not used will wither and die. It's why you should keep on learning a foreign language or playing a musical instrument if you want to hold on to those skills as you get older.

Teens can learn things faster and are more open to trying new things than they will be in their adult years. So this is when teens **should** take lots of risks—**healthy** risks. Learning helps the brain build the connections needed to operate at full capacity. This process also results in making faster, wiser decisions based on experience.

Trust your Gut: At the base of your brain you have a fully developed **brain stem** ready to help you out. This part of the brain is the fight, flee or freeze part of the brain that sends out warnings when a situation is dangerous. Your brain stem's gut instinct can be your internal brake system. If you're in a situation that gives you a sick feeling in your stomach, it could be your brain telling you "Not safe! Don't do it!"

Bottom line:

Teens are as capable as adults of making good decisions. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise! But more often for teens, the social and emotional brain takes over and doesn't give the thinking part of the brain time to weigh in. It's natural for you to listen to the part of the brain that's speaking the loudest. But you can still take time to make wise decisions.

That's why it's important to PAUSE and give yourself time to let the thinking brain finish its work before letting the reward seeking part of your brain take over.

Here are some good tips when making important decisions:

1. **Press PAUSE**
2. **Check in with your GUT**
3. **THINK** about what could happen and how it might affect your goals
4. **GET ADVICE** from others, if needed, before moving forward



THE DEVELOPING BRAIN & SEXUAL DECISION MAKING

Student Worksheet

Amygdala

Responsible for:

-
-
-
-

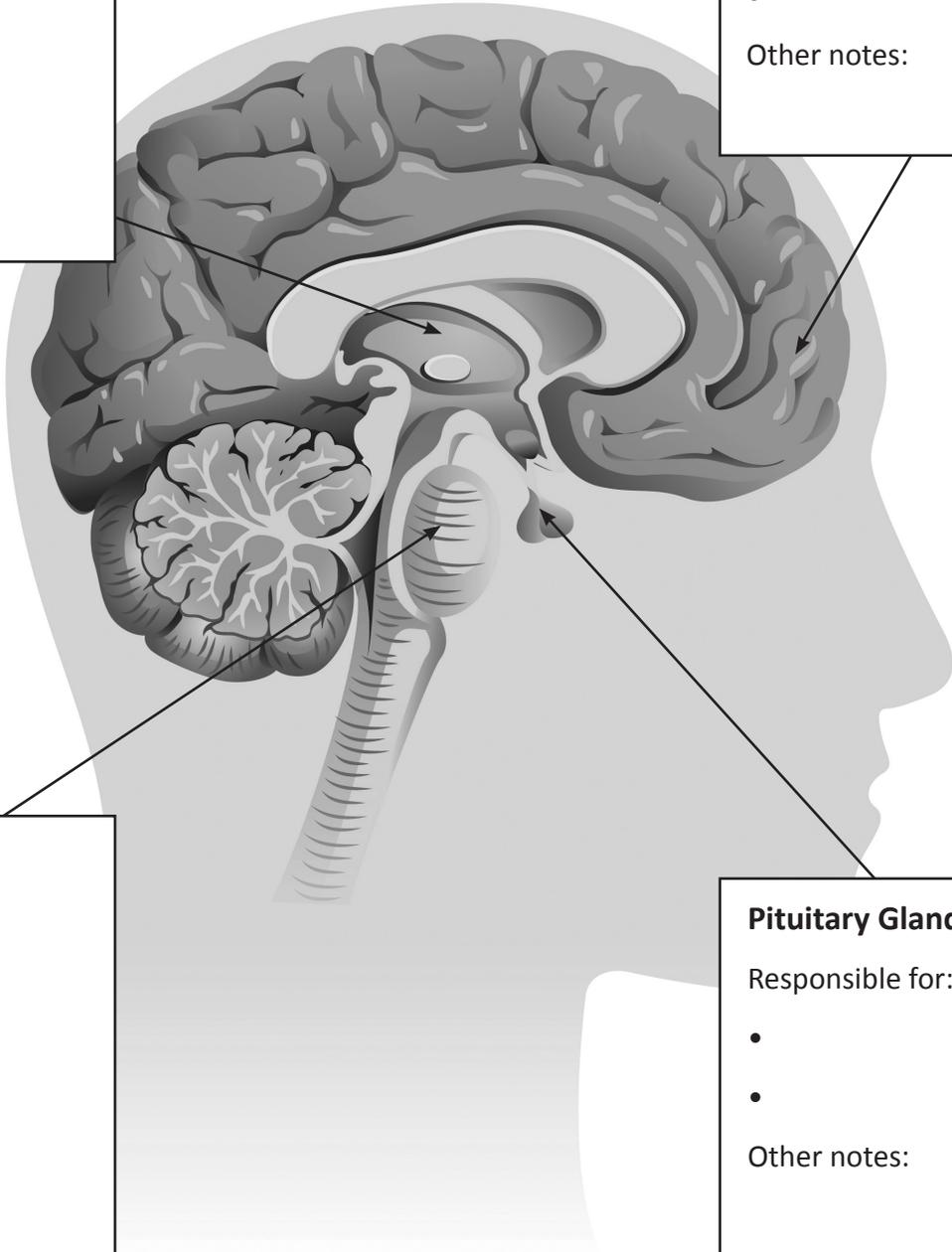
Other notes:

Pre-frontal cortex

Responsible for:

-
-
-
-

Other notes:



Brain Stem

Responsible for:

-
-
-

Other notes:

Pituitary Gland

Responsible for:

-
-

Other notes:

Amygdala

Responsible for:

- Processing emotions
- Pleasure and reward seeking
- Risk seeking behavior
- Impulsive behavior

Fully developed by the teen years.
Can take over sexual decision making process, especially in the heat of the moment.

Pre-frontal cortex

Responsible for:

- Goal-setting & planning
- Self-control
- Understanding & weighing consequences
- Evaluating choices

Still developing through the mid-20s

Can be overshadowed by pleasure and reward messages from the amygdala during decision making.

Brain Stem

Responsible for:

- Gut instinct & reactions
- Fight, flee or freeze

Fully developed at a young age.

During decision making, adults tend to rely on this gut reaction more than teens do.

Pituitary Gland

Responsible for:

- Producing hormones, including sex hormones
- Starting the changes of puberty

