



# THE TEENAGE BRAIN ON PIANO

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LISA WITHERS, D.M.A.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF MUSIC AND DEAN OF THE SCHOOL OF ARTS & SCIENCES AT EMORY &  
HENRY COLLEGE (VA)



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What do you find challenging about teaching teenagers?

What do you enjoy about teaching teenagers?

# Challenges for Today's Teens



1. Pandemic(s)
2. Technology
3. Political Polarization
4. Economic Uncertainty
5. Climate Change
6. Increase in Mental Health Issues for Teens
7. Setbacks for Diversity and Inclusion
8. Overscheduling

# Adolescent brain growth: Ages 11-24



Features four characteristics:

1. Novelty Seeking
2. Social Engagement
3. Increased emotional intensity
4. Creative exploration

# What is happening in those brains?



1. Gray matter thins and white matter (which connects different parts of the brain) increases in volume. Functional connections undergo widespread changes.
2. Adding a huge number of neurons. Teenagers form them at a rate of four to five times that of adults (Damour, 2023). Underused neurons are subtracted.
3. Myelination increases. The sheath that insulates neurons thickens and increases speed of neuron movement.
4. Ideal conditions for piano study – increasing cognitive connections and speed of learning.

# Teenage Behavior – Reframing the Perspective



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Risk Taking  
Apathy or Lack of Motivation  
Egocentrism  
Emotional Intensity  
Vulnerability to Peer Pressure

Willing to Experiment – Open to Change  
Questions Status Quo/Explores New Ideas  
Developing Identity and Purpose  
Exuberance/Zest/Expressive  
Open to new relationships and interactions

New approaches to the neuroscience of adolescent brains have emerged in the past 10 years. Instead of cross-sectional approaches, scientists are using longitudinal designs. (Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study – follows 12, 000 teens – 250 papers)

# Opportunities for Piano Teachers



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1. Develop *relationship first* – outcomes second approach to each student. Every adolescent is different. What makes your student tick? What music do they listen to? What books do they read or games do they play or TV do they watch? What clues might this give you about repertoire choices that would motivate?

2. Music study is an opportunity for teenagers to develop emotional granularity which helps them process intense emotions. Think about asking them to describe emotional mood of pieces in more specific ways. Not just sad – how about beleaguered, resentful, disappointed? Instead of happy – how about carefree, exuberant, delighted?

# Opportunities for Piano Teachers



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3. Embrace the adolescent desire to separate/individuate from adults. Within parameters, give them *artistic or musical choices*. Allow them to make some decisions at every lesson and have some autonomy. Have them choose some repertoire for themselves.

4. Use a feedback style that allows them to use their own self-reflection and focus on *teacher guided questions* rather than declarative critique. Modelling and encouraging *mindful self-compassion* helps build healthy perspective as well as *self-worth* rather than self-esteem.

Let them know that they are wonderful, interesting, and amazing humans separate from their skill, ability or effort as a pianist. The piano playing is simply (and wonderfully) an expression of that beautiful human-ness.



# Opportunities for Piano Teachers



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5. Give teenage students an *opportunity to serve* in your studio. Have them play a duet with a younger student or even teach a lesson. Encourage them to design a theme for a studio recital. Provide or encourage opportunities for them to use their skills and talents as a pianist in a local nursing home, an elementary music classroom, or a church service.

6. Teenagers will often follow the lead of *trusted adults*. Piano teachers have an opportunity to be those trusted adults. Recent neuroscience studies indicate that adults have as much influence as peers (see “[\*What Neuroscience Tells us about the Teenage Brain\*](#)” by Zara Abrams) on teenagers’ development.

Teenagers are loyal, compassionate, funny, challenging, and creative. They enrich our lives and help us grow in new directions, both musically and personally!



