

Understanding how young workers think

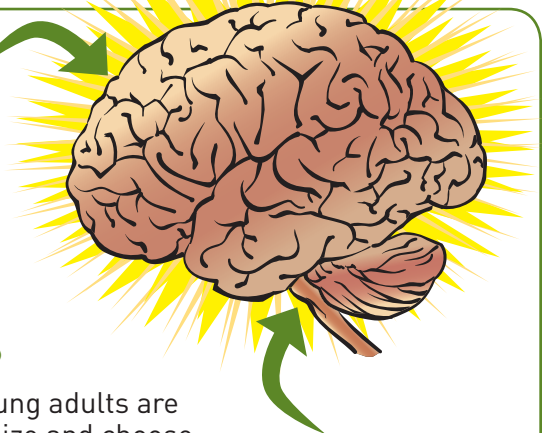
Expecting young adults to learn and make decisions like a mature adult is like asking them to ride a bicycle before they can walk.

Each person's brain develops at its own pace. However, studies show that the parts of the brain that regulate survival (breathing, heart rate, and fight or flight) mature faster than the parts that regulate decision making, strategizing, and problem solving.

Tuning out the static

Imagine getting behind the wheel for the first time in rush-hour traffic in a strange city without a map or GPS. Horns are blasting, lights are flashing, and road signs are written in an unfamiliar language. Welcome to the young worker brain.

As children learn, their brains are building millions of nerve connections, or synaptic pathways. As they get older, those pathways that continue to be used will survive and grow; others won't. This natural "pruning" allows the brain to gain focus. Before it is complete, however, young adults may experience difficulty focusing. It's like having the radio tuned to several channels at once.



prefrontal cortex
judgment, decision making, problem solving
Still developing into our 20s

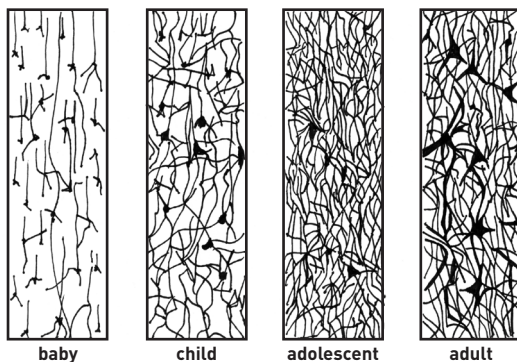
Who's in the driver's seat?
In calm situations, young adults are more likely to rationalize and choose to act safely. When stressed, they can react without thinking clearly—even if they have previously demonstrated knowledge of safe practices. The stronger, more developed part of the brain takes control.

amygdala
breathing, heart rate, emotion, fight or flight
Fully developed by our early teens

"The brain isn't fully mature at 16, when we are allowed to drive, or at 18, when we are allowed to vote, or at 21, when we are allowed to drink, but closer to 25, when we are allowed to rent a car."

Jay Giedd, neuroscientist,
National Institute of Mental Health

Examples of synaptic growth and pruning.



Helping young workers stay on track

Training young adults in a familiar environment with only enough stress to make the work challenging allows them to focus better on the task at hand. Deliberate practice—including the ability to safely try and fail—with a mentor who models the desired task or behavior reinforces muscle memory and learned decision making.

A recent Harvard study showed that **young women** reach full brain maturity between **21** and **22** years of age.

Young men do not reach full brain maturity until **nearly 30** years of age.