

Assembly or tutor time session for secondary-age young people



These ideas can be adapted for use in school, for home-schooling or online learning.

Aims

- To explore the theme of personal growth and the teenage brain
- To emphasise that we are always growing – even when it doesn't seem like it
- To make the connection between growth, good mental health and the importance of sleep

Materials required

A short video clip that explains the amazing growth and development that occurs in the teenage brain, for example:

- Brain Development in Teenagers by Oxford Sparks: bit.ly/3iF2oeH 
- The Adolescent Brain by Dan Siegel and The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation: bit.ly/3mtkphb 

STEP 1

Teaching point:

Optional: corresponds with slide 2

Not all growth is easy to observe. We may at times feel like we're 'stuck' or not getting anywhere.

Introduce the theme of your assembly or session: This Children's Mental Health Week we are exploring the theme 'Growing Together'. Growth can take different forms. Physical growth is easy to see as we grow from babies to children, teenagers to adults. We might even experience growth spurts from time to time.

Another way that we can grow is emotionally. Things that upset us when we were younger may no longer overwhelm us as we grow and learn to cope with life's ups and downs. Challenges and set-backs can help us to grow and adapt. Trying new things can help us to move beyond our comfort zone into a new realm of possibility and potential.

Ask the students to think about a time when they've grown to be able to do something that they couldn't when they were younger. Don't just focus on academic, sport and musical achievements but include personal achievements too. This could include things like using public transport, joining a society, taking up a hobby or getting to school independently.

Step 1 (continued)

Or it might be something like staying overnight with friends, going on trips away from home, managing friendships or relationship difficulties, or even managing their emotional well-being. You might choose to share a personal example, and if appropriate and they feel comfortable to, you could also ask students to volunteer to share their examples with the group.

Emphasise that emotional growth is often a gradual and non-linear process that happens over time, and sometimes we might feel a bit 'stuck'. We can even feel like we are sometimes taking a few steps backwards – especially when we come up against a difficulty and feel overwhelmed. However, this is just a signal that reminds us of how much we need others in our lives to help us to keep growing. Ask the students to think about the people in their lives who help them to grow and flourish, even during challenging times. Again, if appropriate and they feel comfortable to, you could ask for volunteers to share their thoughts with the group. This could be a sports coach, their pet, friends, teachers, parents or carers, extended family, an online community, a faith-based group or youth club, people they share an identity, hobby, culture or interest with etc.

STEP 2

Teaching point:

Optional: corresponds with slide 3

Adolescence is actually a time when our brains are growing and changing rapidly – even though we might not always be aware of it. Due to our enhanced 'neuroplasticity', we have the opportunity to grow and develop in whatever directions we choose.

Ask the students whether anyone feels that they have ever struggled to develop and grow to do something they wanted to do? Point out that sometimes it might feel like we are not developing, when in fact we are. You may wish to use an analogy of a winter landscape where plants appear to be dead or dormant, but in fact are busily growing beneath the surface.

Play one of the video clips suggested in the materials box on page 1, or another example of your choice. Talk to the students about what they have heard. What stands out for them? Were they surprised by anything in the film?

You may wish to introduce and discuss the concept of 'neuroplasticity' – our brain's ability to modify, change, and adapt throughout our lives and in response to our experiences. With practice the brain's neural pathways strengthen, which is why students may find it easy to learn or memorise a TikTok dance, or pick up a new football skill. We do this more quickly and easily as adolescents, than we do at other stages of life.

Emphasise that there is so much going on in our brains during adolescence, and it is a really important time and exciting opportunity for growth and development.

STEP 3

Teaching point:

Optional: corresponds with slide 4

Growth doesn't have to be about developing new skills, it could be about making changes that will help us to feel better.

Ask the students to raise their hands if they made New Year's Resolution this year, then ask students and staff to volunteer examples. Notice whether the resolutions were about 'giving something up'. How many of us set resolutions about growing and developing? About making changes that will help us to feel better?

Show the diagram on the slide and ask students to consider the different ways in which they would like to grow and develop. Ask students to write their 'resolution' and consider what they will need to do to achieve it.

Remind students that in order to develop and grow, the brain needs lots of practice (as shown in earlier videos). So, we need to practice being brave at putting up our hand in class, willing to make a mistake, and be open to new experiences.

STEP 4

Teaching point:


Optional: corresponds with slide 3

Sleep is hugely important for our brain's growth and development.

Discuss the importance of sleep to support our growing brains during the teenage years. We may think of sleep as a time when we are doing 'nothing' – we may believe our bodies and brains are dormant as we lie in bed. However, really important stuff happens (see the notes on slide 3) whilst we are sleeping that helps us to grow and develop – our bodies and brains remain active and engaged during sleep.

Remind students that it is recommended that teenagers get between 8-10 hours of sleep EVERY night, but that this can be difficult to achieve as teens have such busy lives and a lot of pressure, for example, to keep up with what's going on, on social media. Teens also have a different (later) circadian rhythm (sleep/wake cycle) from adults so don't always want to go to bed early but then want to lie in when they need to be getting ready for school.

Ask staff and students to share their 'top tips' for a better night's sleep.

You may wish to re-familiarise yourself with the NHS guidance on teenagers and sleep beforehand: bit.ly/3uJN8CQ 

Ask students and staff to commit to making one small change to improve their sleep this week and to notice the impact on how they feel.

Step 4 (continued)



Optional follow-up activity:

Ask the students to research the teenage brain. A good place to start may be Nicola Morgan's book *Blame My Brain; The Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed*.

Ask your students to find an interesting and useful fact and return to the group and talk about the fact they found. Discuss with the group the implication of the fact for how they understand its impact on their growth and development during the teenage years.

OTHER WAYS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH WEEK



- 1 Hold a '**Dress to Express**' day to raise vital funds for young people's mental health bit.ly/3C9RAwM 
- 2 Tune in to our free '**Growing Together**' virtual assembly during your form or registration time [Available from Monday 7 Feb]
- 3 Watch our series of '**Growth stories**' featuring some famous faces, and even be inspired to create your own [Available from January]
- 4 **Share our tips** for parents and carers with your school community bit.ly/3C8wHC7 
- 5 **Spread the word** by sharing how you plan to take part on social media! Don't forget to use #ChildrensMentalHealthWeek

