

## 2009 Special Issue

### 1 THE FIRST YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL

*It's all about the freshman, at least in this issue of The Practical Parent. Michael was recently interviewed by an East Bay high school journalist about the challenges of being in the first year of high school. We covered a wide range of topics, trying to sort out the stereotypes of freshman immaturity from real differences among class levels, based on brain development. We hope you enjoy a portion of that interview presented here!*

### 3 ASK MICHAEL...

*Is it AD/HD or is he just not trying hard enough?*

*Sex between student and teacher?? Where are the boundaries?*

*For Parents, Educators and Mental Health Professionals Who Care About Teens*



#### FEATURE ARTICLE

## The First Year of High School

*I was recently interviewed by a high school journalist on the topic of being a freshman. I decided to reprint a portion of that interview here, as educators begin their second month of working with their new freshman classes, and parents begin to understand the challenges for their first-year sons and daughters.*

### How do freshmen feel when they first enter high school?

Usually, a mixture of excited and scared...with an emphasis on "scared." But the whole deal about being a first-year student and being in high school in general is the sort of unspoken code that you're not supposed to show how scared you are and how lost you feel. I can't tell you how many first-years used to show up in my office feeling really upset and thinking that they must absolutely be the *only* person feeling overwhelmed, stressed or just lost about how to keep up. In fact, that person was probably the *fifth* person that day saying the exact same thing.

Also, how you feel about beginning a new school in general is influenced by so many different factors such as: Are you going to a school that you wanted to go to? Are your friends going to the same school? Is this a "new" school for you, i.e., did you move to the school from out of town or did you know about this school and always plan to go there because your older sibling went there or do you know people who went there before? Did you have trouble in middle school? Do you even *like* school? Did you recently leave behind a group of friends? There are so many things that help determine how you feel when you first enter high school, and whether your first year is mostly exciting, scary, worrisome or traumatic has to do with things that some parents, teachers, administrators and even students themselves don't adequately appreciate. It's tough being a first-year student, I think.

*(Continued on page 2...)*




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## The Freshman Year *(continued from page 1)*

**Medically-speaking, are freshman brains more undeveloped than those of seniors, for instance? If so, how does this influence their behavior?**

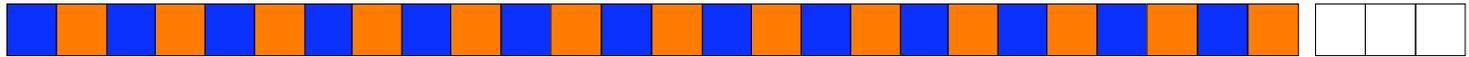
Well, yes. Most first-year students are 13 or 14 years old and since brain development requires time, it is just true that most 17-19 year-olds are more mature, from the perspective of brain development, than most 13-14 year-olds. This difference in brain maturation influences a ton of things. The brain develops, in general terms, from the back of the brain to the front of the brain. The frontal lobes (or what is called the prefrontal cortex) are areas of the brain primarily active during (what neuroscientists call) “executive functioning” tasks. Executive functioning includes important abilities such as: the ability to plan and strategize in advance for events on the more-distant horizon; the ability to put off immediate reward and gratification for future gain; the ability to multitask and still keep long- and short-term goals in mind; the ability to weigh different choices and use good judgment; the ability to troubleshoot, in advance and on-the-fly, and a host of other functions that an “executive” running a large organization would need to have. One way of defining maturity, from the perspective of brain science, would be to say that maturity is a *relative* state of brain competence reached when the *connections are made* between the more centrally-located brain functions having to do with emotion, rewards, pleasure and memory and the prefrontal cortex, so that our feelings, our memory of what to do, and our ability to organize our experience and not just do what feels

good in the moment is *maximized*. For girls, the maturation of the brain is fairly complete by 24 or so, and for guys, this maturation occurs by about one year later. Yes, that’s right. From the perspective of brain development, maturity doesn’t really occur until about 25! This process of making connections between the limbic system (the center of our emotions) and the prefrontal cortex takes a long time, and requires lots of experience and usually lots of mistakes. So, that’s another way of saying, yes, of course, younger folks have less well developed brains. That’s not because young = stupid. It’s because young = not enough time. On the other hand, as any honest adult will tell you, living a long time doesn’t automatically make you wise, kind or mature in other senses of that word.

**What are some positive qualities of the freshman student that other students might not have?**

Great question. Freshman can be really fearless, despite their insecurities. You might think, “what the heck, nobody really knows me here...I can re-invent myself?” You get the chance to try new friends, new looks, new attitudes, new clubs, sports and activities that you might not have tried out in the past. Now this is what sometimes gets freshman the reputation of being “flaky” or changeable. But this is an incredibly positive opportunity—that you sort of get “permission” to try on lots of different roles and approaches to your life in order to find out what really works for *you*. Freshman are natural explorers, and it’s a great thing when they exercise this ability.





## Parents and Teens Ask Michael...

Dear Michael,

I have a 15 1/2 year-old son who was recently diagnosed as having AD/HD. We also just learned that he's been smoking pot a lot more often than we thought (even though he was originally pretty open about his pot use). Lately he seems to be uninterested in just about everything, though, including school, sports and the things that he used to really enjoy. We're not sure that he ever really liked school much but his grades have been dropping and he spends most of his time playing video games, by himself. He's really smart and sweet—or he used to be, anyway—but lately it seems like he doesn't want to do anything. Is this the AD/HD or is he just not trying hard enough? Do we need to push him more and force him to do more?

*Unfortunately, your son sounds like about half the high-school aged males in my practice. There is a very complex relationship between AD/HD, motivation and drug and alcohol use. I'm also including extensive video game use in that equation because extensive use of video games and screen time, viz., use of television watching, internet and things like this often function like drugs or medication for the young adult with AD/HD. For one thing, the ability to "zone out" helps relieve some of the constant worry about not living up to expectations, and can sort of "turn down the radio" in the head of someone who probably worries a lot about the ways in which he might be disappointing himself and others. Ongoing use of pot can contribute to decreasing motivation (in part, by increasing activity in the brain's motivational system around seeking and using the drug, rather than through other pursuits which don't give the student anywhere near the same "pleasure" or reward.) Your son is not lazy. He is struggling with the long-term effects of feeling really out of sync with others academically and socially that are part and parcel of having AD/HD, whether hyperactive or inattentive type.*

*I believe that your son wants to make you happy and please you, but he's probably low on hope that he can do that, and pretty unsure about his own abilities. It is a well-known strategy for boys in this situation to give up on themselves and give up on finding pleasure in anything other than drug use and video games. Some researchers have described AD/HD as a disorder of motivational systems in the brain. I don't know if this will ultimately prove to be true, but we do know that AD/HD and decreases in motivation do go together, for a variety of reasons. Please consider not forcing him to do more, but help him figure out if he's given up on himself too early, perhaps by seeking the aid of a counselor/therapist very well trained in working with issues of AD/HD and drug use. This may not even prove to be enough help for him, but it's a start.*



Hi Mr. Simon,

I just read about that teacher in Lafayette who got arrested or something for having sex with a student. It's basically weird because the students at my school are all talking about it, but the teachers don't really want to talk about it. Some of us are kind of arguing about whether this is actually a big deal or not. There seems to be lots of gray area about whether teachers and students should be close or how close is too close. Teachers tell us personal stuff about their lives all the time during class. I mean, where are the lines between what's too much and not too much closeness between teachers and students in high school?



*I've been reading about this particular case about the male teacher who was charged with having "Unlawful Sexual Intercourse" with a female student. There aren't too many details available at this point, so I don't want to specifically comment on the case, but I can say that the issue of unclear boundaries between teachers and students comes up very frequently. The bottom line though is that the relationship between teacher and student is a special one—a **fiduciary** relationship—meaning that one of the persons in the relationship (the teacher) has more power than the other (the student) and therefore the person with more power has ethical and legal obligations to act in the best interest and for the welfare of the other person (the student). The consequences of a teacher having a sexual relationship with a student can be extremely significant, long lasting and negative, from legal, ethical and psychological points of view.*

*(Continued on page 4...)*

We receive far more letters than we can ever answer...so please don't take it personally if you don't get a personal response. All submissions for "Ask Michael" should go to: Michael@practicalhelpforparents.com



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## Parents and Teens Ask Michael *(Continued from page 3)*

*Sexual or any other kinds of boundary violations usually end up hurting the person with less power. For example research on female graduate notes that when female students feel pressure, harassment or sexual attention from their male mentors or teachers, they overwhelmingly react by withdrawing from the academic situation and abandoning many of their own goals. If a teacher in high school, for example, spends an inordinate amount of time with one student over all other students, that teacher risks charges of favoritism, grade manipulation or the perception that the relationship is sexual, coercive or beyond the bounds of a normal student-teacher relationship. It's also important to remember that since adolescents and adults think differently, there is always a risk that sexual attention or inappropriate boundary crossings may be misinterpreted by the student. For example if a teacher hugs a valued student, the teacher may be thinking, "wow, I'm so proud of her, I really think she's great" but the student may be*

*thinking, "wow, he really likes me, I wonder if he is attracted to me...he seems to not mind if I'm around a lot and he's always touching me; I think he wants me." Teachers have an obligation to get training on and think about boundaries—when they share personal information, spend a lot of time with a student, have any kind of physical contact, make remarks about how a student looks or about what they're wearing—and try to understand that all of these types of interactions can easily be misinterpreted. Boundary violations can result in worry, fear, misunderstanding, academic withdrawal, the appearance of favoritism and a host of other unintended consequences. It is always up to the teacher to keep these things in mind and act in the best interests of the student, not their own interests. A teacher's personal needs should be negotiated with partners, families, administrators and therapists, not with students. Personally, I believe that high school students and teachers can be friendly, but they shouldn't be friends. ☒*

### *About Our Organization...*

Founded by adolescent specialist Michael Y. Simon, MFT, a high school counseling director, noted speaker/educator and psychotherapist in private practice, Practical Help for Parents provides real-life solutions as you parent, support and understand the teens and pre-teens in your life. PHFP offers informative, entertaining, research-based

workshops for students and parents, keynotes and presentations to high school and middle school parents, teachers and administrators; access to online Practical Help Tips, articles, web resources and; program development and consultation to mental health professionals, policymakers and schools/school districts. ☒

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