

Look before you leap: Teens still learning to plan ahead

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Although most teens have the knowledge and reasoning ability to make decisions as rationally as adults, their tendency to make much riskier choices suggests that they still lack some key component of wise decision making. Why is this so? Because adolescents may not bother to use those thinking skills before they act. That's the finding of a new study by researchers at Temple University that appears in the journal *Child Development*.

"The study's findings have important implications for debates about whether [adolescents](#) should be held to the same standards of criminal and other responsibility as adults," according to Dustin Albert, a PhD candidate at Temple who authored the study. "Research charting age differences in such capacities is increasingly being consulted for guidance on social and legal policies concerning adolescents."

The study tested a diverse group of 890 individuals between the ages of 10 and 30, using a computerized test of strategic planning and problem solving called the Tower of London. The test asks individuals to rearrange a stack of three differently colored balls to match a picture of a new arrangement, using as few moves as possible. Test takers have to plan ahead, using a sequence of actions to bridge the gap between the game board and the target board. The study also tested individuals on a battery of tasks related to reasoning, memory, and [self-control](#).

Older test takers did better on the tower test, showing greater ability to plan ahead and solve problems. On the hardest problems, mature

performance wasn't seen until at least age 22. Since solving the hardest problems on the [test](#) is known to make strong demands on the brain's frontal lobes and teens' frontal lobes are still maturing, this finding wasn't unexpected, according to the researchers.

Follow-up analyses suggested that when older individuals (those in their late teens and early adult years) did better on the tests, it was because of improvements in [impulse control](#), which may have allowed them to plan their solutions more fully before they acted.

"Late developmental improvements in problem solving may have less to do with getting smarter and more to do with a growing capacity to settle down and think things through before acting," according to Albert.

"Programs that target adolescents' still-emerging capacity to plan ahead, control their impulses, regulate their emotions, and resist peer pressure may help bolster youngsters' ability to make good decisions in the real world."

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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