

# Research suggests responsible parenting extends well into children's early adulthood.

By Catherine Armitage

For parents who think they can relax when their children finish the HSC and turn 18, neuroscience has some bad news.

New techniques for tracking brain growth show radical change extends into at least the mid-20s, suggesting responsible parenting should too.

Just as the first pictures showing a vulnerable isolated earth from the moon helped transform thinking about environment protection, lab pictures of young brains using functional magnetic resonance imaging are transforming thinking about adolescence, parenting and the right social settings for creating highly capable adults.

Ian Hickie is among the experts who say it might be time to rethink the ideas about youth independence from the 1960s and reset the clock on the accepted "coming of age" back to 21 instead of 18.

"It is not the time to simply abandon your kids and leave them to their friends and think everything will be fine," said Professor Hickie, of the University of Sydney's brain and mind research institute.

"The idea that they will grow out of it, that everything will be fine, may not be right. You can significantly enhance or cause harm throughout this period."

Brain maturation is a "very complicated, complex and dynamic process that goes through adolescence from puberty right through to the early 20s", he said.

Kia Fitzsimon's all-girl soul band Adira-Belle made the top 12 contestants in the latest series of the *X Factor* TV talent show. For the 17-year-old and her family, parents Thelma and Paul and brother Judd, 20, of Bondi, finding the right balance between freedom and guidance is a challenge, especially as Kia starts out in the notoriously tough music business.

"I prefer to be independent but with my music career, I still let (my parents) know everything, and they play a big part in all the decisions I make," said Kia, who has just finished her HSC. For her mother, it's all about communicating well and being "switched on to when they are maturing". "I am not hands on, but I hope she will want to involve me in what she is doing, and not feel as if she can't tell me what is going on," Ms Thames-Fitzsimon said.

A study tracking 250 Victorian youths aged 12 to 20 found accelerated growth in the pre-frontal cortex of children whose mothers showed positive, reinforcing parenting with them in a lab situation.

Sarah Whittle, senior research fellow at the Melbourne Neuropsychiatry Centre, says the pre-frontal cortex, involved with social interaction and self awareness and checks risk-taking behaviour, is a part of the brain that changes most dynamically during adolescence.

The question of when youths should be legally able to buy alcohol is reviving as a major social issue as a result of brain research. US studies have shown anatomical differences between the brains of youths who binge drink (defined as five or more drinks in a session) and those who don't. While it's yet to be proven that alcohol is the cause, "until we know better, I would be trying to minimise exposure to alcohol in the developing brain", said Kypros Kypri, professor of public health at the University of Newcastle. Drug and alcohol use appears to damage the cabling pathways that govern the brain's stop-go impulses, and there is concern "that damage may persist" leading to prolonged or permanent substance misuse issues, Professor Hickie said.

There are profound social challenges ahead in creating education and employment options that cater to the great variation in brain development between individuals of the same age as well as the "marvellous

differences" between 17- and 22-year-olds. Prolonging a high school setting with another four years at university should not be presumed to be the ideal option, he said.

"A lot of people benefit a great deal from being in an environment with older people, in an environment providing socialisation, challenges, skills based learning and trans-generational contacts," Professor Hickie said.

"Parents need to really think about what sort of kid do you have."

Source: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/research-shows-parenting-continues-into-childs-20s-20131116-2xnlm.html#ixzz2rf2kubK0>