Adolescence - Not Just a Phase, but an Opportunity…

‘We were all adolescents once – why do we find it so hard to understand them when dealing with our children one on one?’ asks Dr Don Cameron, echoing the puzzlement of many a parent. At the gathering of around 300 parents, educators and students, four panellists from very different backgrounds spoke to the issue of adolescent health and well-being at the recent Wesley College Institute colloquium. Conversation focussed on how to negotiate what is often a very turbulent time for young people as well as their parents.

The human brain grows throughout life, but has a particular spurt of growth during adolescence. Fascinatingly, the brain responds to the environment and the demands made upon it as it grows, ‘like a potter adding new clay’, explains Don Cameron, a neurologist and neuroscientist. Today’s children are growing up in a very different world to the one in which we grew up – and in response to this changed environment, their brains are different to ours when we were their age.

‘There is something going on in the human mind that is different, fascinating and very important of the human race,’ says John Abbott, a very experienced educator from the 21st Century Learning Initiative in the UK. His concern is that certain practices of schooling and overly protective parenting can have a damaging effect not only on the lives of individual adolescents, but on humankind itself. Although ‘the energy of young people scares the older people’, he urges that we strike a balance between affording young people freedom and taking responsibility for their safety and well being. He believes that if we didn’t allow young people to take risks during their adolescence, their brains will learn not to take any risks or to think differently at all. The old model of secondary schooling, which is a throw-back on the industrial era, is unsuitable in current times, John urges. Students do not learn by sitting passively while someone else tells them what to think.

For young Jessica Green, the many opportunities and challenges afforded by her alma mater Wesley College struck the balance between freedom and control. Challenges such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award demanded a level of risk-taking and adventurousness, with the knowledge that a helpful adult would support you as needed. Getting involved in a number of charitable activities and taking advantage of volunteer opportunities channelled her energies into productive avenues.

Parenting styles were another theme of the discussion. Michael Kuzilny, lawyer and former policeman, urged parents against being perfectionists. Instead, he believed parents should lighten up, spend time with the children, and let them know it is okay to fail. The importance of play and down time was also acknowledged – having time to spend that is not strictly monitored and accounted for was seen as very important for the brain to have opportunities to make creative connections.

The discussion, hosted by the Wesley College Institute for Innovation in Education, was fifth in a series of colloquia through which the Institute creates forums for public debate and discussion around important educational issues. Comedian and broadcaster Richard Stubbs, who moderated the evening’s discussion, not only relaxed the audience and the panellists with his wonderful humour, but astutely picked the important points for elaboration. Parents and educators left the venue feeling optimistic and energised, ready to have a more relaxed, playful and accepting relationship with their adolescent charges.