

When kids get life

[Family](#), [Children](#)



In the Frontline video “ When Kids Get Life” we were introduced to 5 cases in the state of Colorado where teenage boys had been sentenced to life imprisonment without parole. After watching the video I found myself struggling to have an objective opinion on the issue presented, mostly because of personal experiences being a victim of childhood abuse and also having a family member (my brother) murdered. I felt the video to be very one sided but I do find myself agreeing with the point the producers were trying to make. I feel that teenagers should have more opportunities at rehabilitation from crimes committed before the age of 21 then those criminals that are convicted after the age of 21.

I also feel strongly that when it comes to teenagers and violent crimes that great emphasis needs to be placed on the motive for the crime, for example if there was long term abuse or neglect as well as any substance abuse involved, and what kind of support if any the child has ever had in their lives. In my opinion the age at which a person should be given life imprisonment is 21. I developed this opinion for three reasons. The first being my personal experience, there were two men involved in my brother’s murder one man was 26 at the time and the other was just barely 18, neither man was sentenced to any long term prison time but of the two the 18 year old has shown greater signs of rehabilitation. I have also had a lot of exposure to the darker side of society and I have seen more improvement come from the younger ‘ criminals’ then I have from the older ones. My second reason is the overwhelming amount of scientific evidence regarding brain development and mental processes. According to the Time magazine article ‘ What Makes Teens Tick’ Dr.

Jay Giedd states that “ The very last part of the brain to be pruned or shaped to its adult dimensions is the prefrontal cortex, home of the executive functions. This area of the brain is the part that allows adults to weigh the consequences of their actions. A teenager may understand the principles of right and wrong but lack the ability to realize the ramifications of any wrong they might do. In another article by Lee Bowman of the Scripps Howard News Service Deborah Yurgelun-Todd of Harvard Medical School and McClean Hospital says that “[When] shown a set of people’s faces contorted in fear, adults named the right emotion, but teens seldom did, often saying the person was angry. Yurgelun-Todd and her team performed this test using the fMRI and discovered an amazing difference in the parts of the brain being used. The adults used both the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala to process what they saw and younger teens relied entirely on the amygdala while older teens (oldest being 17) showed a progressive shift toward using the frontal cortex My third reason is the hormone factor according to an article published by the American Bar Association. One of the hormones which has the most dramatic effect on the body in adolescence is testosterone.

Testosterone is closely associated with aggression; it increases tenfold in adolescent boy. Considering all of this information I feel that 21 would be a better age to consider legal culpability of a person. I do not feel that teenage offenders of violent crime should go unpunished but life in prison seems to be an excessive punishment for a teenager incapable of comprehending the consequences of his actions. My last issue to address is the circumstances by which an offender should receive life imprisonment. I feel that when it comes

to cases of long term abuse of any kind when a teenager is feeling pushed into a corner and the only way out is to 'kill or be killed' there will undoubtedly be a negative outcome. There is a long list of possible effects and none of them are positive anything from drug and alcohol abuse, to self harm, to suicide, to homicide. One researcher Phyllis L.

Crocker of Cleveland-Marshall College of Law wrote that "the nexus between poverty, childhood abuse and neglect, social and emotional dysfunction, alcohol, and drug abuse and crime is so tight in the lives of many capital defendants as to form a kind of social historical profile". According to Dr. Chris Mallett, Public Policy Director at Bellefaire Jewish Children's Bureau in Ohio more than 30% of death row juvenile offenders had experienced six or more distinct areas of childhood trauma with an overall average of four such experiences per offender. Mallett also found that such mitigating evidence was presented to juries in fewer than half of the offenders' trials. That fact I find astonishing I feel passionately that the motivation behind a teenager's violent act should play a very hefty role in the prosecution of any said act. The cases highlighted in the video 'When Kids Get Life' were very disturbing to me because several of the cases involved long term sexual and psychological abuse and it appeared that no one took that into consideration at the time of trial. In conclusion I feel that no violent crime should be excused however life imprisonment should be reserved for those over the age of 21, or for the truly psychotic individuals out there in society.

Any teenager that is convicted of a violent crime should be given prison time but then after a determined amount of time re-evaluate the person

psychologically and determine level of rehabilitation. I believe that people (even criminals) can change in both directions good and bad, and teenagers have an even greater capacity to change for the better if guided in the right direction.