



# Teenagers and NLP

Joe Cheal asks whether there should be an age limit to becoming an NLP coach

**D**oes NLP need a minimum age requirement? What is the ecology of a twelve year old becoming a master practitioner?

These questions are asked not as an intellectual exercise but from a recent concern raised after discovering that 12 year olds have qualified to Master Practitioner level in North America.

There are two issues here: firstly the teaching of NLP to children and teenagers and secondly the use of NLP with children and teenagers.

## 1) On the teaching of NLP to children and teenagers

It could be argued that exposure to an ethical field of psychology at an early age is a good thing. If children understood themselves and others better, perhaps there would be less anxiety and bullying. Perhaps if teenagers better understood their own motivators, there would be an increase in self esteem. Perhaps if they learnt how to manage their states more effectively, there would be less 'acting out'.

## Is NLP ecological for children and teenagers on a biological level?

Recent research reported by the National Institute of Mental Health (a US Federal agency for research) is "shedding light on how teens may process emotions differently than adults". In teens, the frontal lobe of the brain is not fully developed and doesn't develop until young adulthood. The frontal lobe is responsible for cognitive processing and other 'executive' functions including planning, ethical

decision making and response (state) control. When faced with a task of identifying emotions on peoples faces (an essential part of calibration), young teens performed poorly, activating the amygdala (a brain centre that mediates fear and other "gut" reactions) more than the frontal lobe. With low levels of ethical thinking and poor state control, what implications does this have if a twelve year old is practicing NLP on other twelve year olds in the playground at school?

## Is NLP ecological for children and teenagers on a social level?

Some aspects of NLP would be invaluable for children and teenagers, for example, reading and learning strategies. Perhaps an introduction to some of the metaprograms would aid tolerance and understanding. Some 'lite' form of state management might also be helpful, for example, changing the direction of the emotional spin and giving it a different colour.

However, where is the line to be drawn? What benefit can be had from teaching children the finer art of Ericksonian Hypnosis? Is it sound for a twelve year old to be performing 'change personal history'?

Most children and teenagers are wide open to social validation and peer conformity. The teenage years are the time of seeking independence and proving oneself. This is the time of establishing identity, sorting for same and sorting for difference. Perhaps such skills as hypnosis are too tempting not to abuse.

The ecology of NLP (which rely heavily on the presuppositions) is the one thing that prevents NLP from being misused and abused. Like any other skill, NLP is open to manipulation but as we are fond of telling people, it is not NLP itself that is manipulative; it is the way people use it. In the absence of tightly monitored external regulations, ecology is the one thing that keeps NLP healthy. Many adults find understanding the presuppositions of NLP challenging enough. It would take significant degree of maturity in a child or teenager to do the same.

## 2) On the use of NLP with children and teenagers

Surely, if a child or teenager is suffering from a phobia, it would seem right to help in the best way possible. Surely the benefits of doing a phobia cure outweigh any ecological issues?

Are some of the NLP processes okay to use with children and teenagers (whilst others are not)? What about hypnotherapy? What is the ecology of using trance work with children and teenagers? Again, where is the line to be drawn and who draws the line?

The issue here appears more complex than the teaching of NLP. On the one hand, there is much that NLP could offer in helping youngsters, but on the other hand, there is still the issue of cognitive and emotional immaturity and what impact might it have on the developing brain?

Perhaps anyone who wishes to use NLP with under 18s should be qualified specifically to do so and registered.