**Should the Science of Adolescent Brain Development Inform Legal Policy?**

By Laurence Steinberg

In recent years, findings from studies of adolescent brain development have influenced debates about a wide range of policies affecting teenagers, from the constitutionality of the juvenile death penalty or sentencing juveniles to life without the possibility of parole to whether states should raise the legal driving age or rethink policies that permit minors to obtain an abortion without parental consent. This lecture examines whether, in what ways, and to what extent burgeoning research on adolescent brain development should influence legal policy. I begin with an overview or the major changes in brain structure and function that take place during adolescence, noting that there is unequivocal evidence that substantial changes in both occur during the second decade of life. I then discuss what we do, and do not, gain with respect to our understanding of adolescence from neuroscience beyond what we already know (or could know) from behavioral science. After applying this analysis to the specific case of adolescent criminal culpability, I consider how developmental neuroscience might inform questions concerning the drawing of legal age boundaries more generally. I conclude that brain science can, and should, inform debates about how adolescents should be treated under the law, but that brain science is less relevant, and therefore less important to most policy discussions, than is behavioral research.