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## Junior Cafe Scientifique: Stimulating Young Brains



Teenagers with science on their minds assembled at the **Royal Institution** (Ri) this summer. Junior Café Scientifique was celebrating the success of this informal way of discussing science with scientists. And on the 9 July, the London network of Junior Café Scientifique was launched. Forty students, drawn from seven schools across the country, including Urmston Grammar Manchester, where the first cafe started in 2005, were present.

The Ri event followed the Café Scientifique model by exploring a subject that was directly relevant to its audience: 'The state of the teenage mind in the 21st century'. Baroness Susan Greenfield, Director of the Ri, was joined by two other neuroscientists, Stephanie Burnett (UCL) and Ashish Ranpura (UCL), to discuss the current thinking on how brains mature and develop.

True to the Café Scientifique model, the talks were short and technology free, making the science personal and conversational - not a PowerPoint slide in sight. Café Scientifique has a reputation for tackling science head on. As Ashish Ranpura explained that "this is not a shop window for science; we want to show how science works in practice". Subjects for discussion are often controversial and the teenage brain is no exception.

"Will the mind of your generation be totally different to the past generations?" asked Baroness Greenfield, initiating the discussion. The casual observer was left with no doubt

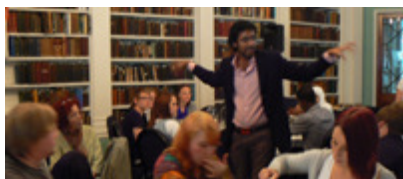
that these teenage synapses were firing on all cylinders. Questions and comments flowed thick and fast covering areas such as: multitasking, right/left brain bias, nurture versus nature, influence of age, sex, life experiences, computer usage and music on brain function. "Encouraging students to think on their feet, to interject and to listen to what others are saying is very important", says Baroness Greenfield.

As the discussion was reluctantly brought to a close, students were not the only ones that found it stimulating. One of the neuroscientists, Stephanie Burnett, commented on the "sense of renewed enthusiasm" for her subject such opportunities provide. "Working away in your little area of science, you get caught up in the detail and you forget how amazing what you're doing is and the whole picture it fits into. It's just brilliant to be able to talk to people who are fresh, in an environment where people feel comfortable to put their ideas forward" she said.

Encouraging other scientists to follow her example may be one of the challenges ahead for the Junior Café Scientifique network, but the Ri is planning on making Junior Café Scientifique a regular event. As Baroness Greenfield identified "it helps to embed science in our culture, by exposing students to real life scientists and allowing them opportunities for discussion of science in a less formal and relaxed atmosphere that they may not otherwise have in the classroom".

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