Give juvenile offenders the second chance that they deserve

Have your children ever made a mistake? And if so, have they had the chance to learn from it?

As a pediatrician and child advocate with The Children's Agenda, much of my life's work has been to ensure the best possible developmental paths for our children. In this spirit, we are proud to support New York's “Raise the Age” campaign.

Currently, New York is one of only two states that prosecute youths younger than 18 in the adult criminal justice system. Each year, almost 50,000 16- and 17-year-olds are arrested. In 2010, nearly 2,200 of these arrests were in the Rochester metropolitan area.

So who are these kids? Mostly non-violent offenders: Here in Rochester, 88 percent are arrested for misdemeanors and nonviolent offenses. This is likely their first big mistake. And they are young.

The adult system isn't the place for them.

As a doctor, I am interested in the brain science behind this. At 16 or 17, the adolescent brain is still developing and will continue to do so until age 25. Research shows that teens are both more impulsive and less aware of the consequences of their behavior. (Any parent can attest to this.) But young brains are also more flexible than ours, more receptive to change. Youths are more likely to grow out of delinquent behavior with the right kinds of interventions.

This is exactly what our juvenile justice system is there for: to act as a wake-up call and to give children the support and resources they need to “break the cycle.” Some teens will need treatment options, and others may end up incarcerated.

But dumping them in the adult system only ensures the cycle will continue. Young people placed in the adult criminal justice system are rearrested at a rate 34 percent higher than youths retained in the youth justice system. Eighty percent of youths released by adult prisons will reoffend, often for more serious crimes. The adult system doesn't scare children out of a “life of crime” — it prepares them for it.

There's a clear alternative to the current model. It's gaining momentum here in New York, with a broad coalition already in support. Let's raise the age to 18.

Jeff Kaczorowski is president of The Children's Agenda, based in Rochester.