



Emerging adults: The in-between age

A new book makes the case for a phase of development between adolescence and adulthood.

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Starting in 1995, psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, PhD, interviewed 300 young people ages 18 to 29 in cities around the nation over five years, asking them questions about what they wanted out of life.

Despite stark differences in their social backgrounds and likely economic prospects, Arnett was struck by the similar answers he heard from his young respondents.

They shared a perception of "feeling in between"—knowing they were pulling clear of the struggles of adolescence and starting to feel responsible for themselves, but still closely tied to their parents and family.

They also reported pondering their personal identity, a theme that surprised Arnett, who thought most would have settled that question as adolescents.

Working from those interviews and examining broad demographic indicators, Arnett proposed a new period of life-span development he calls "emerging adulthood."

Arnett, a professor of psychology at Clark University currently teaching as a Fulbright scholar at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark, coined the term in his book *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road From the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

He describes emerging adulthood as the time from the end of adolescence to the young-adult responsibilities of a stable job, marriage and parenthood and has made it the subject of a new APA book, *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*, co-edited with Jennifer Lynn Tanner, PhD.

The book claims the phenomenon has only arisen in the past few decades in the United States in response to social and economic changes, and it urges continuing scholarship examining the nature of life and paths of development for emerging adults.

Five features of emerging adults

As Arnett describes it, emerging adulthood can be defined as an:

- **Age of identity exploration.** Young people are deciding who they are and what they want out of work, school and love.
- **Age of instability.** The post-high school years are marked by repeated residence changes, as young people either go to college or live with friends or a romantic partner. For most, frequent moves end as families and careers are established in the 30s.

- **Age of self-focus.** Freed of the parent- and society-directed routine of school, young people try to decide what they want to do, where they want to go and who they want to be with—before those choices get limited by the constraints of marriage, children and a career.
- **Age of feeling in between.** Many emerging adults say they are taking responsibility for themselves, but still do not completely feel like an adult.
- **Age of possibilities.** Optimism reigns. Most emerging adults believe they have good chances of living "better than their parents did," and even if their parents divorced, they believe they'll find a lifelong soul mate.

Arnett's research shows that emerging adults want a lot out of life—a job that's well-paid and personally meaningful and a lasting bond with a partner. Many might be headed for disappointment, he says, noting that most employers simply want someone who can get a job done and almost half of all marriages end in divorce.

"If happiness is the difference between what you expect out of life and what you actually get, a lot of emerging adults are setting themselves up for unhappiness because they expect so much," he says.

Larger trends at work

Arnett says emerging adulthood is tied to larger historical social trends in American society, noting that 50 years ago, the median age for marriage was 22 for men and 20 for women.

Now, the median age for marriage has climbed past 28 for men and edged above 24 for women.

One reason young people marry later is that a much larger percentage of young people attend some form of college, creating a longer transition time between adolescence and adulthood, Arnett says.

Before 1944 and the passage of the GI Bill of Rights for returning World War II veterans, only a small percentage of high school graduates went to college, an educational experience mainly reserved for men. Now, a majority of young people get some college experience in one form or another, whether it's a four-year residential school or a community college.

Moreover, women now make up a majority of college undergraduates, and many want to build a career before they marry and have children, Arnett says. The development of the birth control pill helped drive the change, Arnett says. Decades ago, young people got

married rather than face the risks of pregnancy outside marriage. Now, sexual relationships outside of marriage are accepted as natural by many people.

Some prosper; some struggle

Another marker of emerging adulthood is heterogeneity, says Arnett, in terms of the sheer multitude of paths young people can take and their widely varying levels of success.

Given some emerging adults' struggles, Arnett sees the need for greatly expanded societal efforts to help them navigate the transition into careers and family. He believes such efforts would pay off, given the self-awareness people develop in their 20s and their willingness to change.

"If you provide them with resources, they're much more likely to say, 'How can I improve my life?'" Arnett says.

He hopes the book and other efforts, such as the future development of a society for studying emerging adulthood, will build a community of scholars devoted to studying the period of development. Arnett and fellow scholars currently discuss ideas through the Emerging Adulthood Special Interest Group, established through the Society for Research on Adolescence.

The group organized two academic conferences exploring aspects of emerging adulthood and a third is planned for February 2007 in Tucson, Ariz. (see www.s-ra.org/easig.html).

The question of why some emerging adults do well, why some struggle and what can be done to help more make a successful transition is taken up by several book contributors.

Tanner, co-editor of the APA book and an assistant research professor in the School of Social Work at Simmons College, argues that the heterogeneity Arnett cites can be explained by the foundation laid in childhood and adolescence.

As she describes it, how well an adolescent makes the transition through young adulthood into adulthood and becomes a fully independent person depends in large part

on the right balance of the adolescent pushing for independence and parents and society giving the correct amount of support—not pushing too hard or holding back too much, she says.

Many emerging adults who face problems becoming independent have faced past challenges meeting developmental tasks for one reason or another, she says.

"There are enormous costs to young people who are not equipped to 'plug in' to adult roles and responsibilities," Tanner says.

Jean S. Phinney, PhD, a psychology professor at California State University, Los Angeles, writes on emerging adulthood's different features in ethnic-minority groups. Both for cultural and economic reasons, many young people from ethnic-minority groups tend to take on adult responsibilities earlier, contributing to the family income and taking care of siblings, sometimes at the cost of slowing down their own schooling, Phinney says.

During emerging adulthood, ethnic minorities have to deal with the larger culture and figure out their own identity in the context of the larger society. For children of immigrants, that can be especially challenging, she says.

"I think it can be harder for minorities who come from a culture where the expectations of what you should do are very strong," she says.

Another book contributor, Stephen F. Hamilton, PhD, a professor of human development at Cornell University, focuses on young people who can't afford college or who don't move into vocational programs. Many in that group languish in the low-paid jobs of the secondary labor market, bouncing from one low-skilled, dead-end job to another, Hamilton says.

"They end up doing this work their whole lives," he says.

Hamilton thinks there's a missing institution in American life—one devoted to helping young people join the primary labor market of decently paid jobs with benefits and a chance for advancement.

Useful words and phrases

to make the case (for)
what they wanted out of life
economic prospects, likely
economic prospects
to be struck by
to share a perception
to pull clear (of)
to ponder
to settle that question
to coin a (the) term

setting themselves up (for)
larger trends at work
median (statistics)
climbed past, edged above
GI Bill of Rights
to build a career
to face the risks
heterogeneity
sheer multitude
to navigate the transition

self-awareness
community of scholars
special interest groups
to plug in
to languish
bouncing from Y to Z
dead-end job
to end up
benefits