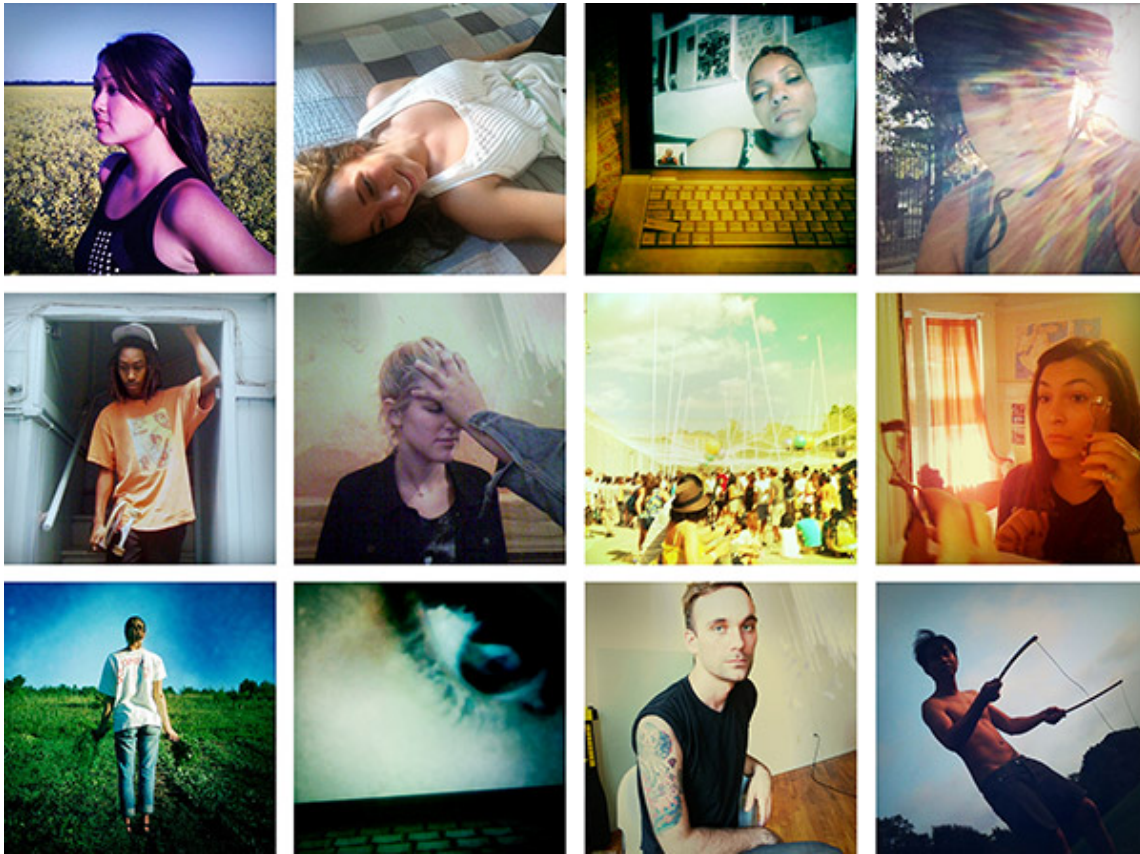


What Is It About 20-Somethings?



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We're in the thick of what one sociologist calls "the changing timetable for adulthood." Sociologists traditionally define the "transition to adulthood" as marked by five milestones: completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, marrying and having a child. In 1960, 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men had, by the time they reached 30, passed all five milestones. Among 30-year-olds in 2000, according to data from the United States Census Bureau, fewer than half of the women and one-third of the men had done so. A Canadian study reported that a typical 30-year-old in 2001 had completed the same number of milestones as a 25-year-old in the early '70s.

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The issue of whether emerging adulthood is a new stage is being debated most forcefully among scholars, in particular psychologists and sociologists. But its resolution has broader implications. Just look at what happened for teenagers. It took some effort, a century ago, for psychologists to make the case that adolescence was a new developmental stage. Once that happened, social institutions were forced to adapt: education, health care, social services and the law all changed to address the particular needs of 12- to 18-year-olds. An understanding of the developmental profile of adolescence led, for instance, to the creation

of junior high schools in the early 1900s, separating seventh and eighth graders from the younger children in what used to be called primary school. And it led to the recognition that teenagers between 14 and 18, even though they were legally minors, were mature enough to make their own choice of legal guardian in the event of their parents' deaths. If emerging adulthood is an analogous stage, analogous changes are in the wings.

But what would it look like to extend some of the special status of adolescents to young people in their 20s? Our uncertainty about this question is reflected in our scattershot approach to markers of adulthood. People can vote at 18, but in some states they don't age out of foster care until 21. They can join the military at 18, but they can't drink until 21. They can drive at 16, but they can't rent a car until 25 without some hefty surcharges. If they are full-time students, the Internal Revenue Service considers them dependents until 24; those without health insurance will soon be able to stay on their parents' plans even if they're not in school until age 26, or up to 30 in some states. Parents have no access to their child's college records if the child is over 18, but parents' income is taken into account when the child applies for financial aid up to age 24. We seem unable to agree when someone is old enough to take on adult responsibilities. But we're pretty sure it's not simply a matter of age.

If society decides to protect these young people or treat them differently from fully grown adults, how can we do this without becoming all the things that grown children resist — controlling, moralizing, paternalistic? Young people spend their lives lumped into age-related clusters — that's the basis of K-12 schooling — but as they move through their 20s, they diverge. Some 25-year-olds are married homeowners with good jobs and a couple of kids; others are still living with their parents and working at transient jobs, or not working at all. Does that mean we extend some of the protections and special status of adolescence to all people in their 20s? To some of them? Which ones? Decisions like this matter, because failing to protect and support vulnerable young people can lead them down the wrong path at a critical moment, the one that can determine all subsequent paths. But overprotecting and oversupporting them can sometimes make matters worse, turning the “changing timetable of adulthood” into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The more profound question behind the scholarly intrigue is the one that really captivates parents: whether the prolongation of this unsettled time of life is a good thing or a bad thing. With life spans stretching into the ninth decade, is it better for young people to experiment in their 20s before making choices they'll have to live with for more than half a century? Or is adulthood now so malleable, with marriage and employment options constantly being reassessed, that young people would be better off just getting started on something, or else they'll never catch up, consigned to remain always a few steps behind the early bloomers? Is emerging adulthood a rich and varied period for self-discovery, as Arnett says it is? Or is it just another term for self-indulgence?

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During the period he calls emerging adulthood, Arnett says that young men and women are more self-focused than at any other time of life, less certain about the future and yet also more optimistic, no matter what their economic background. This is where the “sense of possibilities” comes in, he says; they have not yet tempered their idealistic visions of what

awaits. “The dreary, dead-end jobs, the bitter divorces, the disappointing and disrespectful children . . . none of them imagine that this is what the future holds for them,” he wrote. Ask them if they agree with the statement “I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life,” and 96 percent of them will say yes. But despite elements that are exciting, even exhilarating, about being this age, there is a downside, too: dread, frustration, uncertainty, a sense of not quite understanding the rules of the game. More than positive or negative feelings, what Arnett heard most often was ambivalence — beginning with his finding that 60 percent of his subjects told him they felt like both grown-ups and not-quite-grown-ups.

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When people are forced to adopt adult responsibilities early, maybe they just do what they have to do, whether or not their brains are ready.

Cultural expectations might also reinforce the delay. The “changing timetable for adulthood” has, in many ways, become internalized by 20-somethings and their parents alike. Today young people don’t expect to marry until their late 20s, don’t expect to start a family until their 30s, don’t expect to be on track for a rewarding career until much later than their parents were. So they make decisions about their futures that reflect this wider time horizon. Many of them would not be ready to take on the trappings of adulthood any earlier even if the opportunity arose; they haven’t braced themselves for it.

Nor do parents expect their children to grow up right away — and they might not even want them to. Parents might regret having themselves jumped into marriage or a career and hope for more considered choices for their children. Or they might want to hold on to a reassuring connection with their children as the kids leave home. If they were “helicopter parents” — a term that describes heavily invested parents who hover over their children, swooping down to take charge and solve problems at a moment’s notice — they might keep hovering and problem-solving long past the time when their children should be solving problems on their own. This might, in a strange way, be part of what keeps their grown children in the limbo between adolescence and adulthood. It can be hard sometimes to tease out to what extent a child doesn’t quite want to grow up and to what extent a parent doesn’t quite want to let go.

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[Y]outh [or] emerging adulthood: whatever it’s called, the delayed transition has been observed for years. But it can be in fullest flower only when the young person has some other, nontraditional means of support — which would seem to make the delay something of a luxury item. That’s the impression you get reading [...] essays in *20 Something Manifesto*, an anthology edited by a Los Angeles writer named Christine Hassler. “It’s somewhat terrifying,” writes a 25-year-old named Jennifer, “to think about all the things I’m supposed to be doing in order to ‘get somewhere’ successful: ‘Follow your passions, live your dreams, take risks, network with the right people, find mentors, be financially responsible, volunteer, work, think about or go to grad school, fall in love and maintain personal well-being, mental health and nutrition.’ When is there time to just be and enjoy?” Adds a 24-year-old from Virginia: “There is pressure to make decisions that will form the

foundation for the rest of your life in your 20s. It's almost as if having a range of limited options would be easier."

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Dependence on Mom and Dad also means that during the 20s the rift between rich and poor becomes entrenched. According to data gathered by the Network on Transitions to Adulthood, a research consortium supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, American parents give an average of 10 percent of their income to their 18- to 21-year-old children. This percentage is basically the same no matter the family's total income, meaning that upper-class kids tend to get more than working-class ones. And wealthier kids have other, less obvious, advantages. When they go to four-year colleges or universities, they get supervised dormitory housing, health care and alumni networks not available at community colleges. And they often get a leg up on their careers by using parents' contacts to help land an entry-level job — or by using parents as a financial backup when they want to take an interesting internship that doesn't pay.

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The 20s are when most people accumulate almost all of their formal education; when most people meet their future spouses and the friends they will keep; when most people start on the careers that they will stay with for many years. This is when adventures, experiments, travels, relationships are embarked on with an abandon that probably will not happen again.

Does that mean it's a good thing to let 20-somethings meander — or even to encourage them to meander — before they settle down? That's the question that plagues so many of their parents. It's easy to see the advantages to the delay. There is time enough for adulthood and its attendant obligations; maybe if kids take longer to choose their mates and their careers, they'll make fewer mistakes and live happier lives. But it's just as easy to see the drawbacks. As the settling-down sputters along for the "emerging adults," things can get precarious for the rest of us. Parents are helping pay bills they never counted on paying, and social institutions are missing out on young people contributing to productivity and growth. Of course, the recession complicates things, and even if every 20-something were ready to skip the "emerging" moratorium and act like a grown-up, there wouldn't necessarily be jobs for them all. So we're caught in a weird moment, unsure whether to allow young people to keep exploring and questioning or to cut them off and tell them just to find something, anything, to put food on the table and get on with their lives.

Arnett would like to see us choose a middle course. "To be a young American today is to experience both excitement and uncertainty, wide-open possibility and confusion, new freedoms and new fears," he writes in "Emerging Adulthood." During the timeout they are granted from nonstop, often tedious and dispiriting responsibilities, "emerging adults develop skills for daily living, gain a better understanding of who they are and what they want from life and begin to build a foundation for their adult lives." If it really works that way, if this longer road to adulthood really leads to more insight and better choices, then Arnett's vision of an insightful, sensitive, thoughtful, content, well-honed, self-actualizing crop of grown-ups would indeed be something worth waiting for.