

Emerging Adulthood

At different stages of life, people face different tasks: a toddler needs to learn to walk; a four-year old must learn to play cooperatively with other children; a new parent must learn to care for a helpless infant; and a retiree must find a new role and purpose in life. During the college and graduate school years (roughly ages 18 to 28), individuals also have a set of developmental tasks to accomplish as they separate from their families and establish their own identities and lives. Psychologists refer to this period of life as *emerging adulthood*.

Jeffrey Arnett, author of *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, has written that “emerging adulthood is neither adolescence nor young adulthood, but is distinct from them both.” Emerging adulthood is a time of transition, a developmental bridge between adolescence and adulthood. Psychologist Daniel Levinson describes transitions as times in our life when one “ends the existing life structure and creates the possibility of a new one.” College students are all in the construction business, as it were, as they gradually design and start to build the adult structure of their lives, using both material from the past and newly found material.

However, most don't start out this construction project with a blueprint in hand. Instead, Arnett stresses, the key characteristic of emerging adulthood is that it's a period of exploration and change: students explore possible directions in life and often experiment with different roles, trying them on until finding one that feels like the right “fit.” It is during the college years that we first explore in earnest the various possibilities in love, work and worldviews and begin to make important first adult choices about career, lifestyle, love, leisure, morals, values, politics, and religion. Patterns established at this time of life often persist long into adulthood.

College is also a period of semi-autonomy; Arnett notes that “college students take on some of the responsibilities of independent living, but leave others to parents, and often live at home with parents some of time, and away some of the time.” As students move through the twenties they gradually become increasingly independent. It is useful to think of this process as a family task and transition as much as an individual one, as the family tries to “launch” the child out of the nest and out into the wider world on his or her own wings. This emancipation does *not* mean students need become emotionally distant from parents – Kenny (1990) stated that emotional closeness to parents “*should not be perceived as synonymous with dependency or as the antithesis of independence.*” Quite the contrary -- maintaining close relationships with parents during college is positively correlated with psychosocial adjustment, academic functioning, career maturity and autonomy.

However, psychological development is not inevitable. It is not merely maturation which will happen no matter what, in the same way physical maturation inevitably occurs. Rather, psychological development is either facilitated or inhibited by the relationships in which an individual is embedded. In other words, adult guidance matters; development is fostered when the student's environment provides a balance of challenge and support. As Mitchell puts it more poetically, “*the upward potential of youth is given wings by the encouragement, the wisdom and the leadership of adults far more than by any stirrings inherent in the adolescent's nature.*” College students still need parental involvement and guidance, which sensitive parents gradually taper as their child matures.

In summary, the goal of emerging adulthood is to emerge from the chrysalis of adolescence and transform into an adult. But what is an adult? In *Necessary Losses* Judith Viorst states that being an adult means being responsible and being responsible means making and keeping commitments. Adulthood involves taking responsibility for what you do and who you are and not blaming others. Research suggests that what makes individuals feel like adults is, in fact, accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and being financially independent. Career, marriage and parenthood are, counter-intuitively, consistently ranked at the bottom of the list. In short, being adult means having the freedom to choose. This, Viorst says is the “burden and the gift of adulthood.” It is this burden and gift that college bestows.

Vectors of Development During the College Years

In his classic book on college students, *Education and Identity*, psychologist and educator Arthur Chickering identified seven “vectors” of development during the college years. Each vector is a core developmental task of emerging adulthood. As you read them, keep in mind that even though these vectors are all interrelated and mutually influence one another, development doesn't necessarily proceed at the same pace in all seven areas at once. For example, someone may be further along on developing a sense of identity and purpose than on managing emotions, or vice-versa. Also, development is seldom a

straight line – more often, students take a step forward, a step back, two steps forward, another step back, etc. Finally, not all students proceed at the same pace. There are marked distinctions in how “mature” students of the same chronological age are, and significant differences between under- and upperclassmen.

1. Developing intellectual, social and physical competence.

Intellectual competence means acquiring knowledge and learning to think critically. Social competence refers to “people skills,” i.e. learning to communicate, cooperate and resolve conflict. Physical competence refers to gaining “strength, fitness, and self-discipline.” Competence leads to sense of confidence that one can handle a range of tasks, manage a range of social situations, and cope with what life throws at you.

2. Learning to manage emotions.

The task of managing emotions has two sub-tasks: First, *awareness* of one’s feelings: being open to the range of impulses pushing from within. Second, learning ways to appropriately *channel and release* those feelings, to delay gratification, and to tolerate some level of anxiety. Chickering states: “Some students come with the faucets of emotional expression wide open, and their task is to develop flexible controls. Others have yet to open the tap. Their challenge is to get in touch with the full range and variety of feelings and to learn to exercise self-regulation rather than repression” (p. 46).

3. Moving through autonomy toward interdependence.

In college, students take significant strides toward becoming self-sufficient and less dependent on others. They become less constrained by others’ opinions, and able to take and accept responsibility for their own actions. The development of autonomy also has two sub-tasks: *Emotional* independence entails becoming free of oppressive needs for approval and reassurance (be it from parents, peers, or others), a diminishing need for external supports, and a willingness to risk loss of support in order to be true to your values and/or pursue an important life interest. *Instrumental* independence entails the ability to set realistic goals and develop and implement plans to reach them; it is “the ability to organize activities and to solve problems in a *self-directed* way.” But independence is merely a way station en route to a further developmental milestone: the recognition and acceptance of *interdependence*. At first the pendulum swings away from teenage dependence on peers towards independence; eventually, the pendulum comes to rest in a more middle position between the two extremes. Chickering notes that “the need to be independent and the longing for inclusion become better balanced” and integrated, rather than in conflict with each other.

4. Developing mature interpersonal relationships.

The task here is to develop the capacity for healthy and positive relationships characterized by tolerance and reciprocity. Students develop increasing appreciation of differences, acceptance of flaws in both self and others, and a deepening capacity for empathy and mutuality. Emerging adults become more selective about friends and romantic partners, increasingly choosing others who are nurturing and bolster their self-esteem, who blend support and constructive criticism, who have their best interests at heart, and who share their values. There is a concomitant growing ability to make lasting commitments, resolve conflict and make compromises as part of such commitments, and to be patient with the inevitable ups and downs which occur in all relationships.

5. Establishing identity.

Identity has many facets: vocational, personal, social. Chickering likens this task to “assembling a jigsaw puzzle” -- the task here is to integrate different facets of oneself and one’s experiences and forge a self-image that is realistic, stable and has temporal continuity (i.e., extends backwards in time, moves through the present and into the future, there is a sense that it is the same “me” that was back there-and-then, is now, and will be in the future.) Establishing identity entails knowing the kinds of experiences and people one prefers and who is a “good fit” with one’s self. During emerging adulthood, students gradually bring into focus their vocational plans and hopes, avocational and personal interests, and interpersonal and family commitments. They begin to forge a sense of the balance they wish to strike among the three major life areas of work, self, and friends & family.

6. Developing purpose.

It is not by chance that Victor Frankl’s book *Man’s Search for Meaning* remains popular and relevant for generation after generation of college students, for a major developmental task of emerging adults is just such a search for meaning. Chickering observes that “many college students are all dressed up but do not know where they want to go. They have

energy, but no destination. While they may have clarified who they are and where they came from, they have only the vaguest notion of who they want to be.” A major task of emerging adulthood is to develop a core sense that one’s life has a meaningful purpose. Students begin to clarify the kind and degree of impact they want to have on the larger world. Chickering states that emerging adults become increasingly able “to be intentional, to assess interests and options, to clarify goals, to make plans, and to persist despite obstacles.”

7. Developing integrity.

Integrity means “adherence to moral or ethical principals.” To have integrity is to have congruence between your values and your actions: in popular parlance, to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. A task of emerging adulthood is to clarify one’s values and uses them to guide one’s actions. During the college years students question and examine inherited values, retaining and/or revising some, discarding others, and adding new ones. By the end of emerging adulthood, this bag of values is both more consciously understood and intentionally created. Typically, values first become more *humanized* – that is, less rigid and absolutist and more relativistic and contextual. Second, values become more *personalized*, the person develops a *personal code of conduct* reflecting one’s own assessment of moral and ethical issues, rather merely incorporating the values of earlier parental and authority figures. Correspondingly, implicit values become explicit as the young adult becomes more conscious of their own values while at the same time respecting others who have different values. Finally, a person develops *congruence* between belief and behavior, between values and actions, and is willing to pay a price for such congruence if need be – i.e., the young adult behaves and lives with increasing integrity.