

EMERGING ADULTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR PARENTS

by Jacob Goldsmith, Ph.D.

Young Americans are waiting longer than ever to get married (Wang & Parker, 2014). They are working more and different jobs as they seek out the right career path (Arnett, 2000). They are spending longer in a sometimes messy, unstable period of transition to adulthood. Families play a key role, providing support of all kinds for longer and longer periods of time (Wightman et al., 2013). Parents can be understandably confused by the process.

The overarching goal of emerging adulthood, to transition out of the family of origin and into a (relatively) stable adult identity, is the same for the current crop of emerging adults as it was for their parents and grandparents. What has changed, radically, is the length of time that young people spend making the transition. With that change comes great possibilities — emerging adults have the time and space to create for themselves a well-defined identity, and to

develop deep self-understanding before committing to career and marriage. Of course, that potential opens the door for significant anxiety if things don't feel like they are going according to plan, and as developmental instability drags on for years, or even a whole decade.

For a generation that made its own transition to adulthood over a relatively short period of time, modern emerging adulthood looks very different, and the line between normal and problematic development is not always clear. Parents who understand the state of emerging adulthood are in a better position to help their emerging adult children successfully navigate this crucial life stage, and in doing so lay the foundation for a healthy parent-adult-child relationship. This paper outlines Jeffrey Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, highlights potential problems that emerging adults and their families may encounter, and suggests some general guidelines for what parents can do to help.



WHAT IS MODERN EMERGING ADULTHOOD?

Jeffrey Arnett (2000), the leading theorist and researcher in the psychology of emerging adults, defined emerging adulthood as a demographically-distinct (from both adolescence and adulthood) life stage, beginning at age 18 and lasting into the mid-20s or beyond. The overarching goal of emerging adulthood, to transition out of the family of origin and into a (relatively) stable adult identity, is the same for the current crop of emerging adults as it was for their parents and grandparents. What has changed, radically, is the length of time that young people spend making the transition from adolescence to adulthood. That longer transition appears to be a consequence of social, economic and cultural changes.

With the longer transition comes great possibilities — emerging adults have the time and space to create for themselves a well-defined identity, and to develop deep self-understanding *before* committing to career and marriage. Of course, that potential opens the door for significant anxiety if things don't feel like they are going according to plan, and as developmental instability drags on for years, or even a whole decade.

What defines *modern* emerging adulthood? Arnett (2004) identified five key psychological themes that distinguish it from other stages of life: identity exploration; instability; self-focus; feeling “in-between”; endless possibilities. Understanding those themes is crucial for both emerging adults and their parents as they navigate a period of intense growth and insecurity.

First and foremost, emerging adulthood is a period of intense *identity exploration*. This includes developing adult identities and capacities related to love (how a person wants to bond, connect and commit to others) and work (what career suits a person's interests and skills) as well as generally clarifying worldviews and beliefs. To achieve this development, and because they have fewer social constraints, emerging adults typically spend more time focused on themselves — their own needs, wants and development — than at any other time in life. This is normal, and not in and of itself problematic. This intense *self-focus* is a part of the growth process, and can be treated accordingly.

With identity exploration comes a high degree of *instability*. This may include the natural psychological or emotional insecurity that comes with intense growth and self-development — trying to figure out who you are and who you are meant to be is a confusing process. It also includes very literal instability in work- and living-situations, with emerging adults tending to move and change jobs more frequently than in the past.

Along with this instability is a sense of being stuck *between two worlds* — adolescence and adulthood. As with instability, this may take a very literal form, with emerging adults having some adult responsibilities while still being deeply connected (financially, emotionally, etc.) to parents. Adolescents and college students often derive identity (as well as values and beliefs) from being a part of their families, from participation in sports or the arts, or from an area of study. After college these things can quickly disappear,

without obvious replacements, leading to a sense of being stuck between the identity that was lost, and some future identity to be determined.

Finally, Arnett (2004) describes emerging adulthood as an age of *infinite possibilities*. The long, deliberate launch into adulthood provides ample opportunity for mindful exploration and development of self, which in turn allows for the development of relationships and a career that truly fit. With the opportunity of infinite possibility can come a great deal of pressure to figure things out just right.

WHAT CAN GO WRONG?

For many emerging adults and their families, the infinite possibilities of emerging adulthood can be a double-edged sword. Infinite possibilities can breed an attitude of pressure and perfectionism. Many emerging adults mistakenly believe that they must achieve deep self-knowledge before making any concrete decisions in life, and that achieving self-understanding, finding the just-right job or meeting the just-right person, will somehow make everything easier. Well-meaning parents reinforce these beliefs by saying things like “Find something you’re passionate about and you’ll be fine.” As a result, small missteps feel like big failures as opposed to learning experiences.

A long transition to adulthood can mean more time to develop emotional and relational intelligence, and to deepen self-insight. But it can also mean more time spent in a state of instability, or more time feeling lost or stuck. This instability can easily mutate into anxiety.

Anxiety, in turn, can be magnified by perfectionism, social comparison or beliefs about where *one ought to be* at a certain time in life.

The normal processes of emerging adulthood can feel scary to parents as well. Although it may be gratifying to see a child develop, in some cases, particularly for close-knit families, a child’s push to individuate can be confusing or even threatening. At other times, parents may have trouble telling the difference between normal and problematic instability, and may not know how or when to help.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Simply put, understanding what is normal (and what is not) can help emerging adults and their parents maintain closer, healthier relationships, and can make navigating this life stage smoother and easier for everyone. This includes accepting developmental instability, assuming role flexibility, modeling a healthy balance of connection and independence and knowing when to intervene.

Within Arnett’s model, instability is a normal part of development. Parents cannot remove the instability of emerging adulthood. Parents can inadvertently increase anxiety by implying that emerging adults are doing something wrong by taking so long to transition, experimenting with different jobs or relationships or by focusing so much on their own growth and development, when these are normal. Parents should instead reinforce the idea that experimentation (and even failure) can be a normal part of the process of

growth. They can provide empathy and guidance when the process becomes difficult or frustrating. If instability morphs into anxiety, however, parents may choose to step in and provide even greater support, including helping facilitate access to therapy.

To successfully navigate the transition to adulthood, then, emerging adults and their families must stay flexible and ready for change. Parents may find themselves pulled into different roles at different times. Sometimes parents simply need to play the role of listener, and sometimes they can get actively involved in problem-solving. Sometimes parents act almost like a peer, and at other times a coach or a confidant. Emerging adults can help by taking the lead in this process, being clear about what the support (or space) that they need, maintaining the flexibility to break out of old relationships patterns as they out-grow them.

Parents can further help emerging adults by tolerating some of the normal distance and separation that comes during this period. Overall, the developmental arc described by Arnett (2004) and others is from family closeness in childhood, through pushing parents away in adolescence and into emerging adulthood, and finally back toward a different kind of family closeness as an adult. Within this overarching pattern families may experience shorter periods or relative closeness and distance. The closer a family was during childhood and adolescence, the more parents may find themselves shocked (and even hurt) as their emerging adult children push away to differentiate. To form an adult identity, emerging adults must separate

somewhat from the family, and families can help by accepting this distance. Better yet, parents can help by modeling relationships in which it is acceptable to be both connected and independent.

Although the transition to adulthood is ultimately a move toward independence, emerging adults can benefit from maintaining deep ties to their families. Parents can be a knowledgeable, empathic source of feedback. For many families this connection comes, in part, in the form of financial support. Unsurprisingly, as the length of transition to adulthood increases so does the *duration* of financial support families provide (Wightman et al., 2013). However, rigorous analysis of historical data failed to evidence that parents' support of emerging adults was somehow *causing* increased dependence. In other words, there is no evidence that parents are necessarily hurting their emerging adults by providing financial support.

There are, of course, situations where support prolongs a problem, and situations where support alleviates a problem. Parents may struggle to define the line between *facilitating* development by contributing time, energy and money where it will be useful for growth, and *enabling* continued immaturity by "bailing out" with time, energy and money a floundering emerging adult who is making poor decisions. There is no black-and-white metric for determining whether support is facilitating or enabling. Families must rely on trust, open communication (knowing how support will be used) and boundaries (being clear about expectations for support).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, families must maintain open communication. This is the overarching key to navigating the complexity described above. Parents can and should be able to voice their concerns. Emerging adults can and should be able to ask for distance, for support, for closeness, in direct, appropriate ways. All of the above tasks are made easier when families can talk openly. Openness itself is a skill that requires practice *before* problems arise, so that it is in place if and when problems occur.

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