

Emerging Adolescence

Name

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We can often hear people talking about how different today's young people are from those in 70s or 80s. Actually, there has always been a gap between generations, but the last one seems to be the most noticeable. What makes people around 20 years old different from their related age groups from the 80s is the way young people undertake duties that are believed to be a sign of becoming an adult. In other words, today's young people get a job later in life, still live with their parents until they are 30 or older, and get married and have children later, as well. So, why are today's young people accepting responsibility later in life?

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a psychology professor at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., is leading the movement to view people in their 20s as a distinct life stage, which he calls "emerging adulthood" (as cited by Henig, 2010). He says what is happening now is analogous to what happened a century ago, when social and economic changes helped create adolescence — a stage we take for granted today but one that had to be recognized by psychologists, accepted by society, and accommodated by institutions that served the young. Arnett claims that similar changes at the turn of the 21st century have laid the groundwork for another new stage, between the age of 18 and the late 20s. Among the cultural changes he points to that have led to the "emerging adulthood" are: the need for more education to survive in an information-based economy; fewer entry-level jobs after initial completion schooling; young people feeling less urgency to marry because of the general acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation and birth control; and young women feeling less urgency to have babies, given their wide range of career options and their access to assisted reproductive technology in the event that pregnancy is desired beyond the most fertile years.

Arnett argues that just as adolescence has its particular psychological profile, so does emerging adulthood: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and a rather poetic characteristic he calls "a sense of possibilities." A few of these, especially

identity exploration, are part of adolescence too, but they take on new depth and urgency for individuals in the 20s. The stakes are higher when people are approaching the age when options tend to close off and lifelong commitments must be made. Arnett calls it “the age 30 deadline” (as cited in Henig, 2010).

Arnett insists that during the period he calls emerging adulthood, 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. He says that this is where the “sense of possibilities” comes in; they have not yet tempered their idealistic visions with 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” (as cited in Henig, 2010). 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, and a sense of not quite understanding the rules of the game. More than positive or negative feelings, what Arnett hears most often is ambivalence — beginning with his finding that 60 percent of his subjects told him they felt like both grown-ups and not-quite-grown-ups (Henig, 2010).

In conclusion, the differences that exist between people who are in their 20s today compared to several decades ago can be explained by an emergence of a transitional life period called “emerging adolescence.” We cannot say for certain whether it is a negative or positive tendency, but it is a result of circumstances young people have to face in a contemporary society.

References

Henig R.M. (2010). What is it about 20-somethings? *The New York Times*.

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