

Emerging Adulthood

Participants are young adults, and this is a time to take on the responsibility and role of an adult. Expectations are higher as they should be. But they are babies at it. There is a big learning curve, and they are just taking steps away from childhood.

In industrialized countries, young people just out of high school and into their 20's are spending more time experimenting with potential directions for their lives. This new way of transitioning into adulthood is different enough from generations past that it is considered a new developmental phase – emerging adulthood.

Emerging Adulthood Defined

Emerging adulthood is the period between the late teens and early twenties; ages 18-25, although some researchers have included up to age 29 in the definition (Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood, 2016). Jeffrey Arnett (2000) argues that emerging adulthood is neither adolescence nor is it young adulthood. Individuals in this age period have left behind the relative dependency of childhood and adolescence, but have not yet taken on the responsibilities of adulthood.

“Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future is decided for certain when the scope of independent exploration of life’s possibilities are greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469).

Arnett has identified five characteristics of emerging adulthood that distinguishes it from adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2006).

It is the age of identity exploration. In 1950, Erik Erikson proposed that it was during adolescence that humans wrestled with the question of identity. Yet, even Erikson (1968) commented on a trend during the 20th century of a “prolonged adolescence” in industrialized societies. Today, most identity development occurs during the late teens and early twenties rather than adolescence. It is during emerging adulthood that people are exploring their career choices and ideas about intimate relationships, setting the foundation for adulthood. Emerging adulthood is an extended period of time for exploring who the young adult is and what he/she wants out of work, love, and life. Part of that exploration is attending postsecondary (tertiary) education to expand more pathways for work. Tertiary education includes community colleges, universities, and trade schools.

Arnett also described this time period as the age of instability (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2006). Exploration generates uncertainty and instability. Emerging adults change jobs, relationships, and residences more frequently than other age groups. Rates of residential change in American society are much higher at ages 18 to 29 than at any other period of life (Arnett, 2004). This reflects the explorations going on in emerging adults’ lives. Some move out of their parents’ household for the first time in their late teens to attend a residential college, whereas others move out simply to be independent (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). They may move again when they drop out of college or when they graduate. They may move to cohabit with a romantic partner and then move out when the relationship ends. Some move to another part of the country or the world to study or work. For nearly half of American emerging adults,

residential change includes moving back in with their parents at least once (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). In some countries, such as in southern Europe, emerging adults remain in their parents' home rather than move out; nevertheless, they may still experience instability in education, work, and love relationships (Douglass, 2005, 2007).

This is also the age of self-focus. Being self-focused is not the same as being “self-centered.” Adolescents are more self-centered than emerging adults. Arnett reports that in his research, he found emerging adults to be very considerate of the feelings of others, especially their parents. They now begin to see their parents as people not just parents, something most adolescents fail to do (Arnett, 2006). Nonetheless, emerging adults focus more on themselves, as they realize that they have few obligations to others and that this is the time where they can do what they want with their life. Most American emerging adults move out of their parents' home at age 18 or 19 and do not marry or have their first child until at least their late twenties (Arnett, 2004). Even in countries where emerging adults remain in their parents' home through their early twenties, as in southern Europe and in Asian countries such as Japan, they establish a more independent lifestyle than they had as adolescents (Rosenberger, 2007). Emerging adulthood is a time between adolescents' reliance on parents and adults' long-term commitments in love and work, and during these years, emerging adults focus on themselves as they develop the knowledge, skills, and self-understanding they will need for adult life. In the course of emerging adulthood, they learn to make independent decisions about everything from what to have for dinner to whether to get married.

This is also the age of feeling in-between. When asked if they feel like adults, more 18 to 25-year-olds answer “yes and no” than do teens or adults over the age of 25 (Arnett, 2001). Most emerging adults have gone through the changes of puberty, are typically no longer in high school, and many have also moved out of their parents' home. Thus, they no longer feel as dependent as they did as teenagers. Yet, they may still be financially dependent on their parents to some degree, and they have not completely attained some of the indicators of adulthood, such as finishing their education, obtaining a good full-time job, being in a committed relationship, or being responsible for others. It is not surprising that Arnett found that 60% of 18 to 25-year-olds felt that in some ways they were adults, but in some ways, they were not (Arnett, 2001,). It is only when people reach their late twenties and early thirties that a clear majority feel adult. Most emerging adults have the subjective feeling of being in a transitional period of life, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. This “in-between” feeling in emerging adulthood has been found in a wide range of countries, including Argentina (Facio & Micocci, 2003), Austria (Sirsch, Dreher, Mayr, & Willinger, 2009), Israel (Mayseless & Scharf, 2003), the Czech Republic (Macek, Bejček, & Vaníčková, 2007), and China (Nelson & Chen, 2007).

Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities. It tends to be an age of high hopes and great expectations, in part because few of their dreams have been tested in the fires of real life. In one national survey of 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States, nearly all—89%—agreed with the statement, “I am confident that one day I will get to where I want to be in life” (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). This optimism in emerging adulthood has been found in other countries as well (Nelson & Chen, 2007). Arnett (2000, 2006) suggests that this optimism is because these dreams have yet to be tested. For example, it is easier to believe that you will eventually find your soulmate when you have yet to have had a serious relationship. It may also be a chance to change

directions, for those whose lives up to this point have been difficult. The experiences of children and teens are influenced by the choices and decisions of their parents. If the parents are dysfunctional, there is little a child can do about it. In emerging adulthood, people can move out and move on. They have the chance to transform their lives and move away from unhealthy environments. Even those whose lives were happier and more fulfilling as children now have the opportunity in emerging adulthood to become independent and make decisions about the direction they would like their life to take.

The years of emerging adulthood are often times of identity exploration through work, fashion, music, education, and other venues.

The five features proposed in the theory of emerging adulthood originally were based on research involving about 300 Americans between ages 18 and 29 from various ethnic groups, social classes, and geographical regions (Arnett, 2004).