



Emerging Adulthood

What is Emerging Adulthood?

“Emerging Adulthood” is a term used to describe a period of development spanning from about ages 18 to 29, experienced by most people in their twenties in Westernized cultures and perhaps in other parts of the world as well. It was initially defined by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, PhD from Clark University in 2000.

Arnett has studied this age group of twenty-somethings (a.k.a. “millennials”) extensively since then, focusing on understanding the timing and consequences of transitional events like:

- Leaving home
- Finishing education
- Finding employment
- Getting married
- Starting a family
- Redefining relationships with parents
- Pursuing love lives
- Shaping a career path
- Developing religious beliefs
- Having hopes for the future

How is this different from being a “full-fledged” adult?

Arnett recognized that traditional, typical markers of entering *true* adulthood (e.g., leaving home, getting married, having children, etc.) were changing. In his research, Arnett notes that interviewees in various regions of the United States, from a variety of ethnic groups and across social classes, identify the following “Big Three” criteria for adulthood:

1. Accept responsibility for yourself
2. Make independent decisions
3. Become financially independent



Origins and Historical Influences of Emerging Adulthood

According to Arnett, the conceptualization of Emerging Adulthood as a distinctly new developmental stage (between adolescence and adulthood) is a result of four societal changes that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s:

1. The Technology Revolution
2. The Sexual Revolution
3. The Women's Movement
4. The Youth Movement

As a result of these radical changes, the arrival of full-fledged adulthood has been delayed. Emerging adults are now pursuing longer and more wide-spread education, entering into marriage and parenthood later, and experiencing a longer transition to stable work. Due to advances in technology, college-aged individuals are more easily in contact with their parents; because of this, parents are increasingly able to engage in parenting practices well after their offspring have already left home. After college, and well into emerging adulthood, individuals are returning home and living with their parents at a higher rate than in the past. With the extension of parenting practices, individuals at this age are not *individuating* (i.e., accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, becoming financially independent) in a way that would define them as full-fledged adults.

Experiences Shared by Emerging Adults

According to Arnett, "To be a young American today is to experience both excitement and uneasiness, wide-open possibilities and confusion, new freedoms and new fears."

Arnett has discovered five characteristics that are common to people between the ages of 18 and 29:

1. **Identity exploration:** answering the question "who am I?" and trying out various options, especially in love and work
2. **Instability,** in love, work, and place of residence
3. **Self-Focus,** as obligations to others reach a lifespan low
4. **Feeling "In-Between",** in transition, neither adolescent nor adult
5. **Possibilities/Optimism,** when hopes flourish and people have unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives

Adapted from:

Arnett, J. J. (2014). *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties, Second Edition*. Oxford University Press.



Psychological and Counseling Services (PACS)

3 Garrison Avenue, Smith Hall - 3rd Floor, Durham, NH 03824

Tel: 603-862-2090 Website: www.unh.edu/pacs