

WHEN WILL  
MY  
GROWN-UP  
KID  
*GROW UP?*

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**Loving and Understanding  
Your Emerging Adult**

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JEFFREY JENSEN ARNETT, PH.D.  
*and* ELIZABETH FISHEL

WORKMAN PUBLISHING  
NEW YORK

*To Jeff's children, Paris and Miles, and  
to Elizabeth's emerging adults, Nate and Will*

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## INTRODUCTION

# Why This Book (and Why We're Writing It Together)

### *Elizabeth*

When my sons, Nate and Will, left for college on the other side of the country, I thought my child-raising days were over. No more family dinners, carpools, or weekends spent cheering at soccer games. But with their first phone calls home (“Should I take Economics 1 or Modern Poetry?” “How do you make lasagna?” “Do I have to separate lights and darks?”) and the hundreds of email exchanges that followed, I realized that I was not quite out of business yet.

This new stage of parenting was not as daily or hands-on as before (and it was often virtual), but the boys and I still had a vital relationship. During the college years and beyond, they would disappear for a while, then check in. They would want help making this decision or that. They would come home for vacations or after they graduated. They would have money woes, or need financial advice (or, more likely, a bailout). They would fall in love (fewer calls), then out of love (more moral support). They would look for jobs, not find them, then find them, and leave them. They would travel to the other side of the world but Skype to stay connected. And then they would come home again, if only for a while, to retrench before embarking on the next phase of their lives.

Although we were relieved that our sons remained part of the family even as they launched themselves into the world, my husband and I were often confused about how to be good parents at this stage. When the boys were little, all it took was an extra-large pepperoni pizza and a bunch of Jim Carrey videos to make them happy. Now nothing was that uncomplicated. Their moods were as variable as their tastes in rap

artists, blue jeans, and sushi. They could be fabulous company, full of humor and insights. But they could easily drift off to another planet, distracted or zoned out on their cell phones, checking email or surfing the Web for answers to life's big questions (or at least for their fantasy football scores). Their uncertainty about their life paths in turn stirred up our uncertainty about them. We often huddled behind closed doors and wondered, "Are they all right? Will they land on their feet? Is there something we should be doing to help them along?"

At dinner parties we compared notes with friends who had kids the same age. Most were similarly bewildered by their 20-somethings. Some were seriously concerned. One friend's daughter had opted out of college; without a circle of peers around, she was lonely and depressed. Another's son had changed his college major so many times that his parents wondered if he would ever graduate. Still another friend's son was living through a violent revolution in a far-off country and hadn't communicated in weeks. And another mother bemoaned her daughter's unemployed, live-in boyfriend and her son's choice to be a "manny" while writing his Great American Novel. "I could choose such perfect partners for them and such wonderful careers, if they'd just ask," she said with a sigh, only half joking. As if.

We also heard the anguish from parents in our circle who were coping with life-and-death issues and desperate to know how to cope with grown children's lives gone haywire: drug addiction, suicide attempts, bipolar illness with frightening outbursts of mania. The twenties are the years when certain mental health issues first become apparent, and the parents grappling with those problems were the most shaken and the most in need of support.

As we fretted about our kids there was one more topic that newly empty-nested parents discussed with equal passion: our own lives and how they, too, were suddenly full of uncertainty and flux. Raising kids had provided pleasure and meaning and structure for eighteen years or more, and now everything was up for grabs. Our marriages and friendships. Our finances and work lives. Our newly quiet households. What we did for fun. "I feel as if I've been at the center of the best party for twenty-five years," one friend said after the last of her three sons left

home. “And now it’s over.” It seemed ironic that we parents were asking ourselves the very same question our kids were asking themselves: “What do we do with the rest of our lives?”

How my friends and I wished we had a guidebook to turn to! We had consulted Dr. Spock, T. Berry Brazelton, and *What to Expect the First Year* when the kids were young. Now we needed a parenting book that would not only steer us through our children’s twenties but also shed light on our own lives.

### **Jeff**

I began interviewing young people in their twenties during the early 1990s, when I was just beyond that age myself and a developmental psychologist and junior professor at the University of Missouri. It seemed to me that my experience of the years between 20 and 30 didn’t fit any of the theories I had learned in psychology. It certainly wasn’t “adolescence,” even “late adolescence.” Adolescence is defined by puberty, going to middle school and high school, and having a daily life structured by the demands of school and family.

It didn’t seem like full-fledged adulthood, either. I thought of adulthood as a time of settling into grown-up commitments like marriage and parenthood, and that is not what my twenties had been about. I wanted to see what others’ experience of those years was like. I found that for most of the people I interviewed it was a time of exceptional freedom, flux, and uncertainty, as it had been for me. Before long I became convinced that the period from the late teens through the twenties was now a new life stage, neither “adolescence” nor “adulthood” but something in between and unprecedented. To fit these young people’s sense of being on the way to adulthood but not there yet, I decided to call the new stage “emerging adulthood.”

Comparing today’s emerging adults to their parents and grandparents at the same age, I was struck by how much had changed. In the past fifty years a revolution had occurred. People used to enter full-time work, marriage, and parenthood around age 20. Now it’s really true that “30 is the new 20.” Young people marry and become parents much later than in the past, and they stay in college longer and are more likely to go

to graduate school. Premarital sex and cohabitation have become typical (if not entirely accepted), so that it is no longer necessary to get married to have regular sex. The rate of marriage is down and the number of unmarried women having children is up. The lives of young women have changed beyond recognition. More women than men are getting college degrees, and they now have their own career ambitions. Rather than looking for a husband to support them, most women will be financially independent—or supporting their husbands and families.

From the beginning, the relationships between emerging adults and their parents was one of the areas that fascinated me most. Having studied adolescence for years, I knew it as a time of high conflict between parents and children. In contrast, emerging adults spoke of their parents with love and respect. They got along better with their parents in part because they went out of their way to avoid conflict, editing their conversations with parents to sidestep anything that might stir up trouble. But the shift was more positive than that. Emerging adults seemed to like and understand their parents far more than adolescents did. They were less egocentric than adolescents, and more able to see life from their parents' point of view. Many of them were horrified at how they had treated their parents just a few years before, and were eager to make it up to them.

### ***Elizabeth***

Although I'd spent all of my career writing books and articles about family life, being a parent to our 20-something sons took me by surprise. This decade was turning out to be even more of a challenge than the toddler or teen years. When to step in, when to step aside? Where to take a stand, where to give way? How to be involved but not intrusive, caring but not overwhelming, open about what we believed but not dogmatic? And how to help when grown children did not seem to be thriving at all?

When I first encountered Jeff's work on emerging adulthood, I felt that I'd finally found an explanation and a framework to help me understand this rocky new emotional terrain. Jeff had interviewed hundreds of 18- to 29-year-olds all over the country about exactly the topics that I was up against with my sons: the twists and turns through college; finding

love and looking for meaningful work; spiritual questions; and the nature of our relationship with one another.

I found Jeff's research at exactly the right time, too. Nate was just graduating from college and beginning to make his way into the world; Will was starting college and a new life three thousand miles away. Their worlds were filled with dreams and opportunities, as well as indecision, drama, and occasional chaos. Jeff's road map gave me hope and confidence: Being in constant flux is what emerging adults do, and understanding that reality immediately helped me relax as a parent.

When we met and decided to collaborate I felt we could create together exactly the guidebook I had dreamed of having. And with my sons—and eight nieces and nephews—still working their way through their twenties, I knew I would not run out of personal material.

### ***Jeff***

I've spoken to hundreds of parents about emerging adulthood in the past decade, and nearly every time parents approach me afterward and thank me for helping them understand where their children are at. Many of them have children who are struggling to find a place in the world, and just knowing what is normal comes as a great relief. They are comforted to know that it is common for 18- to 29-year-olds to have a period of years when the way forward is uncertain. And they find hope when they hear that nearly all emerging adults settle into the stable commitments of adulthood by their late twenties or early thirties.

I have thought often of writing a book for parents, knowing how enlightening and reassuring so many parents find the idea of this new life stage of emerging adulthood. Still, I hesitated. As a parent of 13-year-old twins, I know that I would prefer to take parenting advice about 13-year-olds from someone who has been the parent of a 13-year-old. I was reluctant to give advice to parents of emerging adults, even though I know a lot about how these young people view life and their goals, hopes, and fears.

When I met Elizabeth, I felt I had found the ideal collaborator. She is the mother of two children currently going through their twenties, so she's right in the middle of all the topics we are writing about in this



book. As a bonus, she is an accomplished writer and is knowledgeable about psychological development throughout the life span.

Now, after three years of working together doing in-depth interviews and an extensive survey with hundreds of parents around the country, we hope we've written a book that will serve as a helpful guide to parents as their children make their way through this fascinating, eventful, sometimes confusing and exasperating, often wonderful time of life.

We would sum up our message this way. Years ago, Dr. Spock counseled new parents, "Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do." This time, trust yourself *and* your children. They may careen or falter or dash forward only to fall back. But eventually, nearly all of them will find their way. We offer this book to help you find your way along with them.



# 1

## The Zigzagging Road to Adulthood

*When I was 22, I was engaged. At 23, I was married.  
We worked six days a week and banked every single penny  
to buy a house. My son spends every penny he gets.*

MOTHER OF A SON, 22

They sometimes seem like a new breed, the young people of the twenty-first century. In many ways they are following a much longer road to adulthood than their parents and grandparents did, and it's one filled with false starts and U-turns that may puzzle the older generations. Not so long ago, adulthood arrived right after the teen years. By age 20 or 21 most young people had finished their education and started working. They were married or about to be married, and were new parents or planning for parenthood. Their adult lives were basically set, and they had a clear road map for what the decades to come would be like.

Now, at age 20, adulthood is still a long distance away, barely visible way out there on the horizon, with a vast, uncharted territory to cross before it is reached.

Consider some of the changes that have affected the lives of young people over the past half century.

- In 1960, the median marriage age in the United States was just 20 for women and 22 for men; today it's 27 for women and 29 for men, and still rising. In Canada and Europe it is even higher.
- The entry to parenthood has followed a parallel path to marriage, with the average age moving from the early twenties to the late twenties, and for many even to the early thirties. The birthrate has declined steeply in the United States, from 3.5 children per woman in 1960 to 2.0 in 2010. Similar declines have taken place in Canada and Europe.
- In 1960 only 33 percent of young people attended college, and most of them were men; today, 70 percent of high school graduates enter college the next year, and most of them are women. It now takes an average of five to six years to obtain a “four-year degree.” All over the world, more young people are obtaining more education than ever before.
- Young Americans no longer settle into stable work shortly after high school. They change jobs an average of seven times from age 20 to 29. Most don't find a long-term job until their late twenties or beyond. This, too, is an international pattern.

One key reason for all these changes is economic. As the economy shifted from manufacturing to information, technology, and services, more education and training were required to fill the new jobs. Longer education and training led in turn to later marriage and parenthood. However, it's not only the economics of young people's lives that have changed in the past fifty years, but a wide range of attitudes, values, and expectations. Three upheavals shook America—and much of the world—in the 1960s and '70s and shaped the society we know today: the Sexual Revolution, the Women's Movement, and the Youth Movement.

Premarital sex used to be scandalous, and for young women risky, because of pregnancy fears, and disgraceful, if they were found out. Now, although their elders sometimes disapprove, for young people who have grown up in the aftermath of the Sexual Revolution with the freedom provided by contraception and the possibility of legal abortion, premarital sex is widely considered a normal part of a loving relationship. Similarly, cohabitation used to be “living in sin.” Now it's normal, and

most young people view it as an important precautionary or preparatory step before marriage, a way to get to know each other and make sure they're compatible.

Young women's possibilities for adult life used to be mostly limited to wife and mother; if they had a career—nurse, teacher, or secretary were the main options—it ended with the birth of their first child. Now, in the aftermath of the Women's Movement, few young women see their gender as an obstacle to any future they might choose. They are as likely as young men to be enrolled in medical school, law school, or graduate business school. Rather than relying on men to support them, and hence striving to find husbands as soon as possible, they want to have incomes of their own. Most still plan to be wives and mothers, but they have career goals as well, and they would prefer to wait for marriage and motherhood until they have made substantial progress toward those goals.

Most subtle of all—but perhaps most important—the meaning and desirability of adulthood itself have changed. For the young people of fifty years ago, becoming an adult was an attractive prospect, a sign of status and achievement. They could hardly wait to get there, and within a few years after high school, most did. They had the new marriage, the new baby, the starter house, the lawn, the car in the driveway. Today, in the aftermath of the Youth Movement of the 1960s, young people have much more mixed feelings about reaching adulthood. The value of youth has risen, and the desirability of adulthood has dropped accordingly. Today's young people expect to reach adulthood eventually, and they expect to enjoy their adult lives, but most are in no hurry to get there. In their late teens and early twenties they are wary of the stability it represents, because in their eyes, along with stability comes stagnation. They prefer to spend the early part of their twenties unfettered, having experiences that won't be open to them once the mantle of adult responsibilities settles on their shoulders.

Put all these changes together, and the result is that young people are no longer jumping from adolescence in their teens to a settled entry to adulthood in their early twenties. Instead, there is a new life stage in between adolescence and young adulthood. Jeff has studied this period extensively and helped define it, giving it the name *emerging adulthood*

in 2000, and by now the term is widely used by researchers in psychology and other social sciences.

It's not just the social scientists who have noticed that the road to adulthood is different today. Many parents can't help but notice how different the twenties have become since they were young. "I do think times have changed," reflects a mother we interviewed in her early fifties. "For us you went to school, you met someone, you got married." In contrast, her son is now 21 and seems in no hurry to commit to adult responsibilities. "He's very young for his age," she says. "I had a plan, but he's just 'whatever.'"

So if we can all agree the twenties have changed, what are they like now? What is going on in the lives of these grown-up kids? And how should parents respond? What can parents do to help their children navigate this exciting but sometimes perilous decade? What options do parents have if they see their children floundering rather than flourishing in the face of the many challenges of emerging adulthood?

This book is devoted to answering these questions. A new life stage for young people requires a new guidebook for parents, and we aim to provide that here. We explore how life has changed for 20-somethings today in every sphere: in college and after they graduate, falling in love and thinking about marriage, finding first jobs and getting established in careers, managing money and answering questions about faith. We look at what happens when young people experience bumps or serious roadblocks on the way to adulthood. And we examine the evolving relationship between you and your emerging adults—and how your own life changes just as theirs does.

The book is based on over two decades of Jeff's research and interviews with emerging adults, as well as ninety new in-depth interviews done by Jeff and Elizabeth with a diverse group of parents and emerging adults. (We have changed the names of all the parents and 18- to-29-year-olds we interviewed, as well as occasional details to protect their privacy. We refer to them by first name only. We refer to ourselves by our first names as well, but we use full names for the other experts we consulted.)

We also present insights from a 2012 national survey of over a thousand 18- to 29-year-olds, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults (CUPEA), which was directed by Jeff, who has been a professor of

psychology at Clark since 2005. In addition, we draw on the thoughtful responses from over four hundred parents all over the country to a survey we conducted online. Finally, we have incorporated the latest research by others who study emerging adults, as well as the advice of experts in psychology, education, career counseling, and financial planning who work closely with this age group. We combine the latest research, thoughtful guidance, and illustrative examples from real lives so that you will find valuable take-aways for your own families in these stories.

The results of all this research are complex—if only the challenges of parenting the emerging adult could be reduced to a simple piece of

advice like “burp after feeding”—but you’ll see that there is one theme that we’ll come back to time and again: how to *step back while staying connected*. The stepping back part is perhaps the more obvious of the two. By the time children reach age 18, parents have had a lot of practice at it. They stepped back a little the first time they dropped their child off at daycare or preschool, a little more on the first day of primary school, and steadily more with the first sleepover, the first date, and the first time driving the car alone. As their children pass through the late teens and twenties, most parents are happy to step back further, and they take satisfaction in seeing their children make decisions and rise to the challenges of education, work, and long-term love.

I remember finishing school and having my first job right after. A lot of it was boring. And I remember thinking, Oh my God, I went to all this trouble to get this education, and now I don’t like it! I didn’t think about other options. I’m not the only one who has had that experience; that’s why middle-aged adults advise their children to take their time. The parents have often asked themselves, Did I really make the right decisions? Did I really explore my options?

MOTHER OF A SON, 25

However, most parents also want to stay connected to their grown-up kids. Today's parents have cultivated close relationships with their children since the kids were very young. More than previous generations, they wanted to be not just parents but close friends to their children, with less of the parent-child hierarchy that they had experienced with their own parents. For the most part, they succeeded, and when their children grow up and begin to build their own adult lives, most parents want to stay emotionally close and keep the connection strong, while also giving emerging adults room to grow and stand on their own.

Connected is good—except when it isn't. During their children's twenties parents are likely to face—perhaps multiple times—the tricky question of how involved they should be in their emerging adults' choices and when it is wisest to step aside. All parents need to find their own comfort zone, but we'll provide guidance, examples, and some dos and don'ts from our research with families going through this stage of life.

And one other important thing: This is a book not only about emerging adults' development but about *parents'* development, too. A longer

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**Q:** *I have three kids in their late teens and early twenties, and all of them seem to have big dreams—be a movie director, create the latest technological sensation, own a restaurant—and no apparent strategy for reaching them. When does optimism become delusion?*

**A:** It's a pretty fine line! And it can be hard to tell the difference, especially with emerging adults. Their high hopes can be unsettling to their parents, who know the likely fate of youthful dreams, but it's best to see optimism as a psychological resource that allows them to keep getting up again after they get knocked down, as most of them will in the course of their twenties. At least they have goals; perhaps the strategies will follow. Most of them will have to adjust their dreams a bit—opening a restaurant is a notoriously tricky business—but hey, some of them may actually have the talent and spirit to make those dreams come true. You may yet be dining at your son's or daughter's café.

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road to adulthood for children means changes not just in their lives but also in their parents' lives. While their children are emerging, parents may find that they are reemerging. During their children's twenties, they finally have a chance to take a second look at their own lives and reassess not only their parenting role but their love lives, their jobs, their finances, and their dreams for the rest of their lives.

Yet the continuing needs of their grown-up kids may surprise parents and disrupt the process of turning toward their own lives and their own development. Parents may find themselves on duty longer than they expected, as daily hands-on parenting turns out to stretch past the 18 years they originally signed up for—perhaps 20 or 25 years or more. They may have to shoulder the financial support for their children for more years than they had planned, resulting in delays and disruptions in their own plans for retirement, for travel, or simply for achieving financial stability and security. Their health and energy may not be as good as it used to be when they chased after toddlers. They may also be pushed and pulled between their grown children's requests, both emotional and financial, and their aging parents, who also require more support and attention as the years go on. Yes, they may cherish their ties with both older and younger generations. But they may also feel impatience or frustration as that inner voice grows more insistent, asking, "When will I have time for my own life?" We'll explore these complicated questions of midlife development in Chapter 2, "Your Parallel Journey," and thereafter we'll discuss emerging adults' development and parents' development together in each chapter.

Let's begin by meeting some of the young people we interviewed whose lives illustrate the characteristics of emerging adulthood and the phases of this new life stage:

- Jake, age 21, is living in his parents' basement while working three jobs. He also attends community college, where he is studying criminal justice, and he sees more education to come. But he would like to be able to afford to move out on his own soon. Living at home makes him more dependent on his parents than he would like to be, and leads them to treat him more like a child than an adult. Though his mom

is crazy about him, his dropped wet towels and pigsty of a room are making her crazy in a different way.

- Kendra, age 21, married at 19 and divorced a year later. Now she is living with a new boyfriend, but they fight frequently. She is talking about moving back in with her mother, but her mother, who is enjoying being free of daily parenting duties, is not so excited about the idea. Kendra is working as a checkout clerk at Target but making only minimum wage; it is clearly a job that is leading nowhere. She is thinking about going back to school, but to study what, and with what money?
- Ted, age 23, made it through college despite many emotional crises. But in his first year of graduate school, he seemed to lose interest, first in his studies and then in everything else. He was eventually diagnosed with major depression. He had to drop out of school, get professional help, and start medication.
- Susan, age 26, works for a nonprofit organization promoting environmental issues. It is work she enjoys and hopes to do for a long time to come. Her love life is less settled than her career. She's never had a serious boyfriend, and this missing piece causes her some anxiety, especially now that her friends are starting to pair up and get married. Yet she is also enjoying the freedom of being unattached in her twenties: "I can sleep over at a friend's on a Tuesday night and it's my decision."
- Malcolm, age 26, just returned from Afghanistan after serving in the Navy and is in transition. He's thirty credits shy of completing his B.A., has already been married and divorced, and has two small kids. His mom worries about his psychological problems (depression and anxiety) and his overdependence on violent video games and porn, which began while he was stationed abroad.
- Alexandra, age 27, lives in a big city, where she is an assistant editor at a magazine. Her job is demanding, often requiring evenings and weekends as a publishing deadline approaches, but she loves it. She lives with three friends, and on evenings when she is not working they

are often in bars or clubs . . . and often drinking a bit too much. Her boyfriend of six months wants her to move in with him and is dropping hints about marriage. But she has lived with two other boyfriends, and it was painful and complicated to move out. Plus, she is not sure she loves him, and she's not sure she wants to give up her fun with her friends and all the other possible guys that might be out there.

- Karl, age 28, moved back in with his parents about a year ago. His parents describe him as having “no girlfriend, no job, no friends, and no motivation or ambition.” He spends most of his nights drinking and playing video games, and most of his days sleeping. When he works, it's part-time, and only enough to pay his bills. His parents think he's depressed, but he refuses their offers to pay for a therapist.

- Simon, age 29, had two longish relationships in his earlier twenties that didn't work out, and has had a bunch of odd jobs to support himself. But a couple of years ago, he entered a graduate teaching program, and now he's found his calling as a third grade teacher in an inner-city school. Around the same time, he met his soul mate, a young woman with a career in television production, and they just became engaged.

## The Five Features of Emerging Adulthood

With all this diversity, is there any way to make sense of the 18-to-29 age period? In the course of twenty years of research, Jeff has identified five features that describe this new life stage of emerging adulthood. The five features don't apply to all emerging adults, but they ring true for most of them.

1. *Identity explorations.* The emerging adult years are a time of exploring the big identity questions: Who am I? What do I really want out of life? And how do I fit into the world around me? To answer these questions, emerging adults try out various possible futures in love and work. These explorations can be exciting and motivating, and they can also be unsettling and overwhelming—both for the young people in question and for their parents. Sometimes exploring looks a lot like wandering, floundering, or even a failure to *grow up, for Pete's*

*sake*, in the eyes of exasperated parents. But for the most part, sorting through the varied choices that are becoming available to them helps emerging adults learn more about who they are and how they want to shape their adult lives.

**2. *Instability.*** Emerging adults may change college majors, jobs, living situations, and love partners with dizzying frequency. Parents sometimes wonder if their children will ever settle on something, *anything*, but in nearly all cases the instability of emerging adulthood is a temporary but necessary part of identity explorations. Remember, parents, almost everyone has a more stable life by their thirties than they did in their twenties.

**3. *Self-focus.*** Most emerging adults are not selfish, although they're often accused of this. Just compare them to what they were like as teenagers, and you'll probably agree they are more considerate of others than teens are, and better at taking other people's perspectives. However, emerging adulthood is a time of intense self-focus, in the sense that your grown kids are focusing on their own lives, especially on how to get the education or training to qualify for a good job and then how to find one. They have to be self-focused, in order to make their way into a competitive adult world, and they're free to be self-focused, because most have fewer daily responsibilities or obligations to others than they'll ever have again. Emerging adults may seem selfish to parents when they don't return calls or "click reply" as soon as parents would like—and sometimes they are—but their self-focus doesn't mean they don't love their parents. It's all part of learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person—an important goal in the emerging adult years.

**4. *Feeling in-between.*** Emerging adults don't feel like children or teenagers anymore, but most of them don't feel entirely adult, either. Instead, they feel in-between, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. And they have mixed feelings about the destination. Adulthood appeals to them for the stability it offers, and the rewards of marriage, children, and (they hope) a good job, but it also looks frighteningly

predictable. Parents should recognize the ambivalence their children may have about adult responsibilities. Still, it's OK to expect that emerging adults will take on some adult duties, such as handling their finances responsibly, making (and keeping) their own appointments, and contributing an adult share of household work if they have moved back home. They are capable of far more than what many parents often ask of them.

**5. *Sense of possibilities.*** Emerging adulthood is a time of remarkably high hopes for almost everyone, even if life is currently not going all that well (and often it's not). Most are not entirely content with life as it is, but they believe they are on the way to better times. In the national CUPEA survey, a remarkable 90 percent of emerging adults agreed that "I am confident that eventually I will get what I want out of life." No matter how dismal their love lives, most young people believe that eventually they'll find a "soul mate." No matter how dreary their current job, most believe they'll someday be doing work they love and that pays well. Parents may worry that their children expect too much, but they should realize that emerging adults are quite good at modifying their ideals once they test them in real life. There's no need to remind them that their bubble is bound to burst. They'll find that out soon enough, on their own.

## Launching, Exploring, and Landing

**E**merging adulthood covers the years between 18 and 29, and a lot happens during those years. Loving and losing love and finding it again; deciding on a direction in work and then realizing it's a dead end and forging ahead with a new focus; having memorable adventures (including some they may wish to forget); moving out of their parents' house, then sometimes moving back in again, and eventually setting up their own home. Most people are in a much different place by their late twenties than they were at age 18, so we have defined three phases within emerging adulthood: launching, exploring, and landing. The age ranges here are approximate, of course, but most people travel through all three phases to some degree.

*Launching: ages 18 to 22.* This is the entry phase of emerging adulthood, when there are important strides toward independence but still a lot of reliance on Mom and Dad. To begin with, few 18- to 22-year-olds are capable of entirely supporting themselves financially. Either they are in college and not working or working only part-time, or they are in the workplace full-time but in a job that is not adequate to support independent living. Emotionally, too, they still need a lot of support when they hit bumps on the road to the life they envision, as nearly all of them do. The launching phase is also the time when most grown kids first leave home, either to go to college or to live on their own. Some 18-year-olds leave home and never look back, keeping in touch with parents only occasionally thereafter. But most 18- to 22-year-olds will want frequent contact with their parents, by phone, text, Facebook, Skype, or whatever the latest technological marvel is, and if they're close enough they'll come home often for a good meal and some loving care. Gradually, over the course of the launching period, they learn to stand more on their own and they feel more comfortable about living independently.

*Exploring: ages 22 to 26.* By this phase most emerging adults have shaken off the insecurity and uncertainty of the launching phase. They have learned important lessons about making their own decisions and taking responsibility for themselves. They feel more confident in their ability to live on their own, and most have gained either the college credentials or the work experience to get a job where they can make enough to support themselves—although many will still need to make the occasional cash withdrawal from the Bank of Mom and Dad, especially when the overall economy is rocky.

They get more serious during this phase about exploring work options and deciding what they really want to do—and trying to match that with the reality of what is actually available to them. Parents may be surprised (and dismayed) to find that going to college was just a preliminary step in this process. Many 22- to 26-year-olds entering the workplace will end up doing something that has little relation to what they learned in college, and parents may despair about the not-so-small fortune they spent to enable their children to get a college degree. However, having the college degree makes a huge difference in getting a good job, even

if the connection to the actual work is not evident at first. Some young people in this phase decide to return to school in order to get further education now that they have a better idea of who they are and what field interests them most.

In love, too, the exploring period is a time for getting more serious. The days of college “hookups” are past. Hookups still take place, of course, but most 22- to 26-year-olds are looking for something more intimate and enduring. They are now searching for a “soul mate,” that special person who seems just right for them and makes the prospect of marriage seem welcoming and delightful.

*Landing: ages 26 to 29.* During the last years of their twenties, most emerging adults make the important choices that will form the structure of their adult lives in love and work. Most are either married or cohabiting by this time, and most of those who are not are hoping to do so before they reach the Age 30 Deadline, the age many have long had in mind as the outer limit of when they want to be married. The majority of grown-up kids in their late twenties have finished their education and are committed to a long-term career path. Most importantly, they are ready to make major decisions and take full responsibility for their lives.

Although the launching, exploring, and landing phases describe the typical sequence of development during emerging adulthood, you’ve probably observed that there is a lot of variability in the timing of each phase. Some emerging adults go straight from launching to landing and skip right over the exploring phase, because they know from early on just what kind of work they want to do or perhaps because they found their soul mate early. Others have a longer exploring period than usual and don’t really land until some time in their thirties. For emerging adults and their parents, these variations sometimes make it difficult to tell what is “normal” and what might be cause for concern. Be patient; we’ll have lots to say about that later.

## The Upside of a Later Entry to Adulthood

**H**ave you noticed how scornfully many people talk about emerging adults? There are so many negative stereotypes, particularly among adults in their fifties, sixties, and beyond: Young people are lazy,

they're selfish, they're worse than ever (and certainly worse than their parents' generation was at the same age). None of these stereotypes is true: They're not lazy, they're mostly working at crummy jobs for low pay or combining work and school; they're not selfish, they're remarkably generous and tolerant, as we'll see; and it's not true they're worse than ever. On the contrary, rates of alcohol abuse, crime, teen pregnancy, and automobile fatalities have all declined dramatically in the past 20 years.

Maybe one reason for the negative stereotypes of emerging adults is *fear*—the fear of parents and other adults that this generation of young people will not be up to the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood, not now, not ever. They see their grown kids undecided about which path to take, or declaring a path decisively and then abandoning it abruptly a few months later, and they worry, “Geez, won’t this kid *ever* get it together?” Parents are usually ready to focus again on their own lives after a 20-year hiatus devoted to parenting, and they feel their patience (and their wallets) being exhausted as yet another year passes

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**Q:** *My nephew, age 25, has been unemployed for about six months. Recently he had a chance for a job, but he turned it down, saying it was “not really what I want to do.” How do I make his parents see that the kid’s just lazy?*

**A:** Well, the kid may indeed just be lazy, but that conclusion would be a bit hasty on the basis of turning down a crummy job after six months of unemployment. There are advantages to being employed, even at a crummy job, such as, well, making money. But there are disadvantages, too. It would mean that he would have less time to look for a job that would be more appealing and that might have a more promising future. It would mean less time, too, for getting education and training to prepare for a better job. So don’t assume he’s lazy because he didn’t take the job. Eventually he might have to take a job, any job, just to support himself. But right now, if his parents are supportive, and with no one else depending on him economically, it might be wisest for him to focus on striving for a job that really engages him and that he could use to build a future.

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and their emerging adult is still emerging, still on the way to an ever-receding adulthood.

Knowing about the new life stage of emerging adulthood can reassure parents that the indecisiveness and instability they see in their children are not permanent traits but part of a temporary and transitional state that is entirely normal. Eventually nearly everyone does emerge into a more mature and stable young adulthood, usually by about age 30, with a more or less steady occupational path and a commitment to a life partner. Thirty may be later than parents originally expected, and later than they really prefer, but at least it's not forever. Unless there is some kind of major obstacle, such as a physical disability, a severe mental illness, or drug or alcohol abuse, young people almost always succeed in building a reasonably stable and satisfying adult life for themselves. It's not guaranteed, but it's highly likely.

But parents have more reasons to embrace this new life stage of emerging adulthood than simply knowing that it ends eventually. There is a lot of good news to tell about the years from 18 to 29 and how they help set the foundation for a happy and successful adult life. Just as the months of crawling prepare babies for a firmer footing when they finally get up and walk, so do the exploring, unstable, fall-down-and-get-back-up emerging adulthood years prepare a young person for the tasks of adulthood.

Perhaps most importantly, the extended years of emerging adulthood enhance the likelihood that young people will make good choices in love and work. The 28-year-old is a lot better prepared to choose a marriage partner than the 18- or 22-year-old is, having had far more years of experience with relationships and having gained far more cognitive and emotional maturity. The 28-year-old can also make a wiser decision about a career path than the 18- or 22-year-old would, having established a much clearer identity, that is, a much better sense of his or her abilities, goals, and opportunities. Sometimes 18- or 22-year-olds are unusually mature and can make wise choices in love and work even at this young age, but overall the prospect of choosing well is enhanced by waiting until at least the late twenties.

Experiencing emerging adulthood also makes young people better parents, eventually. Marriage is challenging, and building a career is

challenging, but—as all parents know—there is nothing quite so formidably challenging as caring for a child. Your needs simply can't come first anymore when there is a child who literally will not survive without the love, care, and resources parents provide. Especially in their early years, children stretch us to the limit of our physical endurance, our stress tolerance, and our financial resources. There is no doubt that the 28-year-old is better prepared for these demands than the 18- or 22-year-old is. Again, some people who become parents in their late teens or early twenties fill that role remarkably well, but overall, young people will be better parents if they wait until their late twenties or early thirties to take on guiding a new generation.

**Our daughter realizes that she is clearly later than we were in entering adulthood. This has caused her a great deal of stress. She feels that because we were married and independent at 20, she should be as well.**

**FATHER OF A DAUGHTER, 23**

Another reason for parents to celebrate this new life stage is that it gives their children a window of opportunity to have experiences they could not have had at younger ages and will not have the chance for once they've taken on enduring adult responsibilities—take a shot at that musical career, volunteer for a service project in a developing country, or just move to San Francisco or New York City for a year to hang out and have fun while waiting tables or working for a dog-walking service. At first glance, parents may not see these episodes of adventure as cause for celebration. They may think to themselves, and may say to their grown-up kids: “You could be going to grad school, or doing an internship, or starting to make progress in a career, or . . . something!” As parents ourselves, we sympathize with these concerns, but we advise parents to take the long view. In the words of one of the parents in our survey, “Why not prolong youth? It's already so fleeting.”

Adulthood will come soon enough, and once it does, youth never returns. We should admire emerging adults who are bold enough to take

on a youthful, once-in-a-lifetime adventure, not scold them for postponing adulthood for a year or two. Life is long today, lucky for all of us. If today's 20-somethings are likely to live to be at least 80 or 90 years old, why rush into adulthood at 18, 22, or even 25? Making the most of the freedom of emerging adulthood while it lasts will make for fewer middle-age regrets.

Emerging adulthood should also be embraced as one last chance for parents and children to be close before the kids become true grown-ups, preoccupied with the demands of career building, spouses, and child care. True, there are things parents won't miss later on, like urgent text messages at 3 a.m., persistent needs for cash, and jarring announcements of a need to move back home. Not a few parents may find themselves thinking wryly on such occasions, "How can I miss you if you won't go away?"

But miss them you will. Baby boomer parents wanted to be closer to their children than they had been to their own parents, and for the most part, they succeeded. Most parents today can talk to their grown-up kids as friends, about topics they never would have dreamed of broaching with their own parents. The long transition of emerging adulthood allows parents to enjoy the fruits of all those strenuous child-raising years from infancy through adolescence. It won't be long until you are no longer receiving their 3 a.m. text messages; instead, you'll be wondering why they haven't answered the text you sent three days ago. They'll fall in love; they'll find a partner who will become that person they rely on for support and nurturance every day, instead of you. It happens to almost everyone. So, if you're still seeing a lot of your children in their twenties, enjoy this special closeness one last time, and try to create a foundation of love and mutual trust that will endure in the decades to come.