**Emerging Adulthood**

By Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

Clark University

Emerging adulthood has been proposed as a new life stage between adolescence and young adulthood, lasting roughly from ages 18 to 25. Five features make emerging adulthood distinctive: identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and a sense of broad possibilities for the future. Emerging adulthood is found mainly in developed countries, where most young people obtain tertiary education and median ages of entering marriage and parenthood are around 30.

**Introduction**

Think for a moment about the lives of your grandparents and great-grandparents when they were in their twenties. How do their lives at that age compare to your life? If they were like most other people of their time, their lives were quite different than yours. What happened to change the twenties so much between their time and our own? And how should we understand the 18–25 age period today?

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. The theory of emerging adulthood proposes that a new life stage has arisen between adolescence and young adulthood over the past half-century in industrialized countries. Fifty years ago, most young people in these countries had entered stable adult roles in love and work by their late teens or early twenties. Relatively few people pursued education or training beyond secondary school, and, consequently, most young men were full-time workers by the end of their teens. Relatively few women worked in occupations outside the home, and the median marriage age for women in the United States and in most other industrialized countries in 1960 was around 20 ([Arnett & Taber, 1994](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-23); [Douglass, 2005](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-7)). The median marriage age for men was around 22, and married couples usually had their first child about one year after their wedding day. All told, for most young people half a century ago, their teenage adolescence led quickly and directly to stable adult roles in love and work by their late teens or early twenties. These roles would form the structure of their adult lives for decades to come.

Now all that has changed. A higher proportion of young people than ever before—about 70% in the United States—pursue education and training beyond secondary school ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2012](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-15)). The early twenties are not a time of entering stable adult work but a time of immense job instability: In the United States, the average number of job changes from ages 20 to 29 is seven. The median age of entering marriage in the United States is now 27 for women and 29 for men ([U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-24)). Consequently, a new stage of the life span, emerging adulthood, has been created, lasting from the late teens through the mid-twenties, roughly ages 18 to 25.

**The Five Features of Emerging Adulthood**

Five characteristics distinguish emerging adulthood from other life stages ([Arnett, 2004](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-2)). Emerging adulthood is:

1. the age of identity explorations;
2. the age of instability;
3. the self-focused age;
4. the age of feeling in-between; and
5. the age of possibilities.

The years of emerging adulthood are often times of identity exploration through work, fashion, music, education, and other venues. Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of emerging adulthood is that it is the age of identity explorations. That is, it is an age when people explore various possibilities in love and work as they move toward making enduring choices. Through trying out these different possibilities, they develop a more definite identity, including an understanding of who they are, what their capabilities and limitations are, what their beliefs and values are, and how they fit into the society around them. Erik Erikson ([1950](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-9)), who was the first to develop the idea of identity, proposed that it is mainly an issue in adolescence; but that was more than 50 years ago, and today it is mainly in emerging adulthood that identity explorations take place ([Côté, 2006](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood%22%20%5Cl%20%22reference-6%22%20%5Co%20%22)).

The explorations of emerging adulthood also make it the age of instability. As emerging adults explore different possibilities in love and work, their lives are often unstable. A good illustration of this instability is their frequent moves from one residence to another. Rates of residential change in American society are much higher at ages 18 to 29 than at any other period of life ([Arnett, 2004](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-2)). 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](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood%22%20%5Cl%20%22reference-11%22%20%5Co%20%22)). 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](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood%22%20%5Cl%20%22reference-11%22%20%5Co%20%22)). 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](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-7), [2007](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-26)).

Emerging adulthood is also a self-focused age. 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](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-2)). 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](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-19)). 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 or not to get married.

Another distinctive feature of emerging adulthood is that it is an age of feeling in-between, not adolescent but not fully adult, either. When asked, “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” the majority of emerging adults respond neither yes nor no but with the ambiguous “in some ways yes, in some ways no” ([Arnett, 2003](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-1), [2012](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-4)). It is only when people reach their late twenties and early thirties that a clear majority feels 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](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood%22%20%5Cl%20%22reference-10%22%20%5Co%20%22)), Austria ([Sirsch, Dreher, Mayr, & Willinger, 2009](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood%22%20%5Cl%20%22reference-21%22%20%5Co%20%22)), Israel ([Mayseless & Scharf, 2003](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood%22%20%5Cl%20%22reference-14%22%20%5Co%20%22)), the Czech Republic ([Macek, Bejček, & Vaníčková, 2007](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood%22%20%5Cl%20%22reference-13%22%20%5Co%20%22)), and China ([Nelson & Chen, 2007](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-16)).

Finally, emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities, when many different futures remain possible, and when little about a person’s direction in life has been decided for certain. 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](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-5)). This optimism in emerging adulthood has been found in other countries as well ([Nelson & Chen, 2007](https://nobaproject.com/modules/emerging-adulthood#reference-16)).

**Conclusion**

College and other educational opportunities are important for emerging adults to help transition successfully to the next stages of their lives. The new life stage of emerging adulthood has spread rapidly in the past half-century and is continuing to spread. Now that the transition to adulthood is later than in the past, is this change positive or negative for emerging adults and their societies? Certainly, there are some negatives. It means that young people are dependent on their parents for longer than in the past, and they take longer to become full contributing members of their societies. A substantial proportion of them have trouble sorting through the opportunities available to them and struggle with anxiety and depression, even though most are optimistic. However, there are advantages to having this new life stage as well. By waiting until at least their late twenties to take on the full range of adult responsibilities, emerging adults are able to focus on obtaining enough education and training to prepare themselves for the demands of today’s information- and technology-based economy. Also, it seems likely that if young people make crucial decisions about love and work in their late twenties or early thirties rather than their late teens and early twenties, their judgment will be more mature and they will have a better chance of making choices that will work out well for them in the long run.

**References**

Arnett, J. J. (2012). New horizons in emerging and young adulthood. In A. Booth & N. Crouter (Eds.),*Early adulthood in a family context* (pp. 231–244). New York, NY: Springer.

Arnett, J. J. (2011). Emerging adulthood(s): The cultural psychology of a new life stage. In L.A. Jensen (Ed.), *Bridging cultural and developmental psychology: New syntheses in theory, research, and policy* (pp. 255–275). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Arnett, J. J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from late teens through the twenties*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Arnett, J. J. (2003). Conceptions of the transition to adulthood among emerging adults in American ethnic groups. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 100*, 63–75.

Arnett, J. J., & Taber, S. (1994). Adolescence terminable and interminable: When does adolescence end? *Journal of Youth & Adolescence, 23*, 517–537.

Arnett, J. J. & Schwab, J. (2012). *The Clark University poll of emerging adults: Thriving, struggling, & hopeful*. Worcester, MA: Clark University.

Arnett, J.J. (2007). The long and leisurely route: Coming of age in Europe today. *Current History, 106*, 130-136.

Côté, J. (2006). Emerging adulthood as an institutionalized moratorium: Risks and benefits to identity formation. In J. J. Arnett & J. L. Tanner (Eds.), *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century* (pp. 85–116). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press.

Douglass, C. B. (2007). From duty to desire: Emerging adulthood in Europe and its consequences. *Child Development Perspectives, 1*, 101–108.

Douglass, C. B. (2007). From duty to desire: Emerging adulthood in Europe and its consequences. *Child Development Perspectives, 1*, 101–108.

Douglass, C. B. (2005). *Barren states: The population “implosion” in Europe*. New York, NY: Berg.

Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York, NY: Norton.

Facio, A., & Micocci, F. (2003). Emerging adulthood in Argentina. *New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development, 100*, 21–31

Goldscheider, F., & Goldscheider, C. (1999). *The changing transition to adulthood: Leaving and returning home*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hatfield, E., & Rapson, R. L. (2006). *Love and sex: Cross-cultural perspectives*. New York, NY: University Press of America.

Macek, P., Bejček, J., & Vaníčková, J. (2007). Contemporary Czech emerging adults: Generation growing up in the period of social changes. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 22*, 444–475.

Mayseless, O., & Scharf, M. (2003). What does it mean to be an adult? The Israeli experience. *New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development, 100*, 5–20.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2012). *The condition of education, 2012*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://www.nces.gov

Nelson, L. J., & Chen, X. (2007) Emerging adulthood in China: The role of social and cultural factors. *Child Development Perspectives, 1*, 86–91.

Nelson, L. J., Badger, S., & Wu, B. (2004). The influence of culture in emerging adulthood: Perspectives of Chinese college students. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 28*, 26–36.

Phinney, J. S. & Baldelomar, O. A. (2011). Identity development in multiple cultural contexts. In L. A. Jensen (Ed.), *Bridging cultural and developmental psychology: New syntheses in theory, research and policy* (pp. 161-186). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Rosenberger, N. (2007). Rethinking emerging adulthood in Japan: Perspectives from long-term single women. *Child Development Perspectives, 1*, 92–95.

Saraswathi, T. S., & Larson, R. (2002). Adolescence in global perspective: An agenda for social policy. In B. B. Brown, R. Larson, & T. S. Saraswathi, (Eds.), *The world’s youth: Adolescence in eight regions of the globe* (pp. 344–362). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Sirsch, U., Dreher, E., Mayr, E., & Willinger, U. (2009). What does it take to be an adult in Austria? Views of adulthood in Austrian adolescents, emerging adults, and adults.*Journal of Adolescent Research, 24*, 275–292.

U.S. Bureau of the Census (2011). *Statistical abstract of the United States*. Washington, DC: Author.

UNdata (2010). Gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education. United Nations Statistics Division. Retrieved November 5, 2010, from http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=GenderStat&f=inID:68

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2011). *Human development report*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

**Learning Objectives**

* Explain where, when, and why a new life stage of emerging adulthood appeared over the past half-century.
* Identify the five features that distinguish emerging adulthood from other life stages.
* Describe the variations in emerging adulthood in countries around the world.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What kind of variations in emerging adulthood would you predict within your country? Would there be social class differences? Gender differences? Ethnic differences?
2. Looking at Figure 1, what contrasts do you observe between OECD countries and developing countries? Between males and females? What economic and cultural differences might explain these contrasts?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the author’s prediction that emerging adulthood is likely to become a life stage experienced worldwide in the decades to come? What factors are likely to determine whether this turns out to be true?

**Vocabulary**

**Collectivism**

Belief system that emphasizes the duties and obligations that each person has toward others.

**Developed countries**

The economically advanced countries of the world, in which most of the world’s wealth is concentrated.

**Developing countries**

The less economically advanced countries that comprise the majority of the world’s population. Most are currently developing at a rapid rate.

**Emerging adulthood**

A new life stage extending from approximately ages 18 to 25, during which the foundation of an adult life is gradually constructed in love and work. Primary features include identity explorations, instability, focus on self-development, feeling incompletely adult, and a broad sense of possibilities.

**Individualism**

Belief system that exalts freedom, independence, and individual choice as high values.

**OECD countries**

Members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, comprised of the world’s wealthiest countries.

**Tertiary education**

Education or training beyond secondary school, usually taking place in a college, university, or vocational training program.