

The Ambiguity of Modern Adulthood



Growing up today is like sliding down a water flume. You're held tightly around the turns as you move; then all of a sudden you're ejected into the water.

Matthew, a college graduate, painted this picture in a frank discussion about what it's like being plunged into adulthood. He didn't think he was swimming but was staying afloat, and he was better off than some of his peers.

Matthew is extremely bright, semi-employed, and trying to enjoy life. He might look like he's floundering or may even appear to welcome taking time to grow up. Some might call him an "emerging adult" who is choosing to delay adult commitments and responsibilities. When I explained this concept, he said, "That's demeaning! I don't like the situation I'm in. I'm trying to make my way and be an adult. I don't need another obstacle holding me back to diminish my credibility."

The media and some researchers try to oversimplify how young generations are approaching maturity. But there are more complex explanations for some of the trends noted with the Millennial generation. Matthew is not taking time to figure life out; he and many others may not have an option. Many Millennials are feeling stuck or just trying to survive.

Why is this happening?

While some people choose to grow up at a more leisurely pace, this hardly explains an entire generation. There are structural

obstacles preventing young people from growing up. Consider education: we tell teens to go to college before they know what they want to do with their lives. Many graduate, not having much more figured out, and with a mountain of debt. They now must make enough income to pay off their student loans in a field they may not even like. Are jobs available to make a living and support debt payments? This leaves many young adults financially dependent. If financial independence is a mark of maturity, this is a structural obstacle hindering them from becoming "adults."

In an earlier era, figuring out your strengths and weaknesses and how you fit into the world happened in the teen years. Such "identity work" is now occurring much later in life — or not at all. There are a host of other psychological and sociological factors hindering identity development (J. E. Côté, 2000) that go beyond the scope of this article.

How do we deal with this?

This is a huge societal problem that has been mounting for decades and there is no quick solution. What can you do? The first step is to be aware of the complex road to adulthood in the Information Age. Have some compassion. Do not make assumptions or place labels like "emerging adult." Take a

genuine interest in getting to know some young adults. Invite one to coffee and ask good questions and listen to their story: "How did you choose to study ___? What's your dream? What's the hardest thing in your stage in life?"

Find people who do not work for you. You may learn something about your own Millennial employees. Make yourself available as a mentor. Many young adults want an older adult, who is not their parent or employer, in whom they can trust and confide.

Matthew had a full-time career and lost it because he was working with an unorganized start-up that provided unrealistic expectations and poor training. Matthew also abetted his own termination because he had some clear areas of weakness in professional relationships and communication, yet no one was mentoring him.

Generativity is the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation (E. H. Erikson, 1963). Mentoring young adults can bring you rewards and life you never imagined.

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