



The Proper Care and Feeding of Emerging Adults

Parenting Strategies for Launching Kids into Adulthood, Part 1

By [Stephanie Lievense](#)

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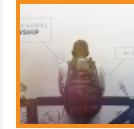
Bugs are a big deal at our house, and this time of year my boys and I love to observe butterflies in each of their life stages. From caterpillar to chrysalis to adult butterfly, we marvel at the magnificence and beauty of the transformation.

As a researcher of emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 29), I can't help but connect the radical change taking place within the bug-house in my laundry room to the equally-radical change experienced by families as adolescents emerge into adulthood.

"Emerging adulthood" has been recognized as a separate developmental life-stage for more than a decade. The economic shift from manufacturing jobs to careers in information, technology, and human services has prompted a greater number of emerging adults to spend more time and energy on secondary education. **1** Many emerging adults have more choices than ever before. They may find themselves continually searching for the absolute "perfect fit" when it comes to career, marriage, or parenthood. **2** These elements stretch out the time between adolescence and adulthood, creating an in-between stage that can last from seven to ten years, usually from age 18 to somewhere between ages 25 and 29. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a leading researcher in the field, coined the term *emerging adulthood* and proposes five features that distinguish it from either adolescence or adulthood: **3**

- 1. It is the age of identity exploration:** Emerging adults may frequently try on different identity possibilities as reflected in shifting interests, hobbies, styles, career goals, romantic partners, and even religion.
- 2. It is the age of instability:** Unbound by parental rules and expectations, but not yet committed to a career, spouse or family of their own, emerging adults often feel as though nothing in their life is stable.
- 3. It is the self-focused age:** The developmental objective to reach full adulthood (defined by emerging adults as financial independence and self-reliance) results in an inward focus as emerging adults attempt to make sense of who they are and where they fit in the world.
- 4. It is the age of feeling in-between:** Emerging adults, while "adult" in physicality and often in lifestyle, are not likely to experience the traditional markers of adulthood like marriage, children and a stable career until they are well into their twenties or thirties. They are "adult" in many aspects of their lives, but unable to define themselves as "husband/wife," "father/mother," or by a specific career. The most socially recognized relational epithets they hold are "student" or "son/daughter," keeping them in between adolescence and adult status.
- 5. It is the age of possibilities.** Most of the defining categories of the emerging adult's life are undecided, and therefore still rich with possibility. Will he get married or not? Will she stay in the same town or move away? When? Who? Where? Emerging adults face countless possibilities.

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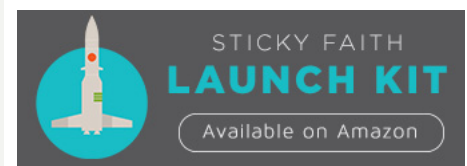
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So what does this mean for parents and mentors? How can we best support emerging adults and stay connected? Let's look at three common big questions about emerging adulthood and their implications for parents and mentors who want to stay in healthy relationship with the newly winged.

QUESTION #1: What is happening in there?

Emerging adults are emerging from the physical changes of adolescence, finding themselves in a fully-formed adult body, and often living away from home for the first time. This is a season of major identity development, particularly in the areas of work and love. Arnett asserts that identity exploration in these areas now takes place *not* in adolescence as in decades past, but during emerging adulthood. ⁴

So what kind of work are emerging adults looking for? The most recent research shows that a large majority (86%) of emerging adults believe it is important to them to have a career that does some good in the world, and that it is more important to *enjoy* their job than to make a lot of money (79%). Moving from one job to another, going back to school, or "taking a year off" are some of the ways that emerging adults develop their professional identities.

As emerging adults wrestle with what to do with their lives professionally, they are also stretching their wings romantically. Of today's emerging adults, nearly 80 percent report being involved in some type of romantic relationship. But what are they looking for? Consistent with their search for work, emerging adults are taking time to find a partner they *really want*.

Between 1980 and 2009, the U.S. median age at first marriage increased from 24.7 to 28.1 among men and from 22.0 to 25.9 among women. ⁵ Eighty-six percent of emerging adults believe that their marriage will "last a lifetime," and they are taking time to choose the right partner. ⁶

Strategy #1: Be Patient

Our butterfly care-sheet warned us that the young butterfly would emerge with soft, folded wings that would not be ready for flight. We were to wait patiently for two hours while the butterfly stretched and strengthened its wings. The instructions were very specific about one thing: "*During this time you must be careful not to touch or jiggle the habitat and you should not try to touch the newly emerged butterflies.*" What!? Don't touch or jiggle? But it is so hard to just *watch*! Isn't there some way to make this whole thing go faster?

Similarly, parents of emerging adults can feel frustrated or impatient with the slow progress of their young adult's development. It can be tempting to "jiggle the habitat" with unsolicited advice about career directions or love interests. Parents might feel that by urging or encouraging their emerging adult to choose a direction, they are supporting their child.

In fact, just the opposite is true. In a 2007 study, researchers concluded that the more emerging adults felt controlled by their parents, the more difficulties they experienced in establishing committed choices. ⁷ Even more discouraging, they were less likely to identify with or feel certain about choices that they *did* make. Many parents feel compelled to *increase* their use of psychological control when their children explore different life alternatives in a broad fashion, further hindering their child's ability to make a commitment.

Tips for staying connected:

1. *Refrain from "jiggling the habitat."* Let your emerging adult come to you when he or she is ready for advice or counsel. Allowing time and space for young adults to sort out their choices will serve you both.
2. *Be curious about your emerging adult, but avoid interfering.* When they share details about their upcoming choices and commitments, help them to discover *their* wants and needs, not yours. One way to do this is to ask three types of open-ended questions, nuanced to the particular context:
 - "What elements of that job offer excite you?"
 - "What are your concerns about possibly moving away?"
 - "How do you feel about this transition?"

The objective is to open up space for the young adult to explore their ideas and become more confident in the decisions they are choosing for themselves.

Up to this point we have talked about what an emerging adult *is*, and where he or she is trying to *go*, but what can you as a parent or mentor do to facilitate the actual launch into the world of adulthood? In the second part of this article we will explore some of the ways emerging adults seek adult status and how you can support them. We will address how to know when your emerging adult is ready to fly, ways to acknowledge that new status, whether to follow or stay behind, how to be flexible during the launch, and finally how to keep your sanity in the midst of the transition.

Action Points

- Have you seen some of the "symptoms" of emerging adulthood in your family? How does reading about this life stage and its characteristics help normalize what you've experienced?
- With your own emerging adult, initiate a conversation about the challenges and opportunities they see playing center stage in these years. Then wonder aloud about what kinds of support and what kinds of space they'd find helpful from you as a parent.
- Share this article with a friend who also has a child in this life stage, or who has lived through it, and get together over



coffee to discuss what this looks like in your families. Ask for their honest input in how your parenting might be "jiggling the habitat" or hindering growth.

1. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, and Joseph Schwab, *The Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults* (Worcester: Clark University, 2012).
2. The Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults is the first comprehensive national survey of the lives of emerging adults. Researchers interviewed 1,029 18-29 year olds about their experiences. ↪
3. Barry Schwartz, "The Paradox of Choice," http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice.html, (July, 2005). ↪
4. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2004). ↪
5. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (2000): 469-80. ↪
6. U.S. Census Bureau 2011, <http://www.census.gov> ↪
7. Arnett, *The Clark Poll*, 15 ↪
8. Micael D. Berzonsky, et al., "Parental psychological control and dimensions of identity formation in emerging adulthood," *Journal of Family Psychology* 21, no. 3 (2007): 546-550. ↪

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KC · 7 months ago

Good information. I currently have a daughter, with these very same two emerging issues. Great take aways on the open-ended questions, to help them learn to make decisions for themselves. My husband and I are guilty of 'jiggling the habitat' lately, so I think this article gives encouraging perspective.

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The Proper Care and Feeding of Emerging Adults

Parenting Strategies for Launching Kids into Adulthood, Part 2

By [Stephanie Lievense](#)



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We are bug lovers at my house, and this was the first year my six-year-old son was able to patiently watch the entire emergence of our butterfly from her chrysalis. In past years the process was just a little too long to keep his attention. Similarly, this article was just a little too long to keep most readers' attention so we broke it in half (not recommended for chrysalises).

The [first section](#) provided basic information about the traits and needs of the newly-identified species "emerging adult." Emerging adults are between the approximate ages of 18 and 29 and are considered by developmental psychologists to be in a unique life-stage that is neither adolescence nor adulthood. We explored some of the ways parents and mentors can support their emerging adults as they transition into adulthood. One of the major areas of focus was on the need for parents to be patient as their emerging adults stretch their wings and get ready to fly.

In this second part, we will look at what's ahead for the flight-ready and how parents can provide an adequate launching environment. Watching the emerging creature struggle to make sense of his or her new adult "self" is difficult, but perhaps even more difficult for parents is wondering how and when to help their adult child really take off. The following questions, strategies and tips will explore this part of the process.

QUESTION #2: How will we know that she's ready to fly?

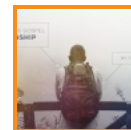
The emerging adult's need to be both autonomous and dependent can strain family relationships, but it is a normal part of the transition to adulthood. Emerging adults recognize two elements as the most necessary to claim adult status: 1

1. Accepting responsibility for yourself
2. Becoming financially independent

Unfortunately, financial independence often proves difficult for emerging adults to achieve. Forty-five percent of emerging adults receive either occasional or regular financial support from their parents. Seventy-four percent of those surveyed in the most comprehensive study of this age group reported they would rather live independently of their parents, even if it means living on a tight budget.

While becoming financially independent is clearly an important marker of adult status, research also shows that some financial support from parents *improves* emerging adults' chances of success in the transition to adult roles. 2 Living at home or receiving financial support from parents can allow children to pursue education and training required for jobs in

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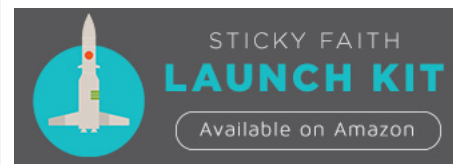
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today's market, increasing their chances for long-term financial stability.

Finding the balance between adequate support and over-support becomes a delicate dance for parents. A recent study in the *Journal of Family Relations* found that when parents *exceed* the developmental needs of their child, the result is lower quality parent-child communication and a greater sense of entitlement in young adult children. ³ In other words, helping too much can actually backfire in ways that damage both your relationship and their ability to launch.

Strategy #2: Acknowledge Emerging Adult Status

Formally acknowledging your child's adult status despite financial dependence on you can be an empowering exercise. A 2000 study called this formal recognition "the blessing." ⁴ Bestowed upon the emerging adult soon after his or her transition out of adolescence, it marks the parent's acknowledgement that the child has progressed to a more equal position with the parent. The blessing can recognize any number of aspects of adulthood, but in this particular study the following three were most prevalent:

- Recognition of the child's decision-making ability,
- demonstration of respect for the child, and
- recognition that the child had transitioned through a rite of passage (moving out, going to college, etc.).

This can be challenging when the emerging adult is still living at home and may be fully financially dependent. The blessing can be something that is given through a ritual, a conversation, or a series of discussions and actions over time. In an open discussion, parents can formally acknowledge decision-making ability and successful transitions the child has made, and then explore ways that the emerging adult can exist in the household in a more responsible and equal position with the parent. This might mean the emerging adult is in charge of certain home repair or meal preparation, perhaps a portion of living expenses, and their own personal luxuries (like a cell phone and its monthly bill).

Tips for staying connected:

1. Consider bestowing a blessing on your child. You can write a letter, host a special dinner, or plan a road trip. Be sure to build some formality or sacredness around the event.
2. Treat your child in a way that acknowledges the transition in your relationship. This might mean that you try to refrain from giving advice unless it is requested, or that you share aspects of your own vulnerability. Let your emerging adult know you as an individual, not just as a parent.

QUESTION #3: Should I Follow To Make Sure He's Okay?

College professors and administrators are reporting increases in the prevalence of parental interference in student academic performance. ⁵ Parents are calling professors to complain about grading, accompanying their emerging adults to graduate school orientations and even writing cover-letters for their hopeful adult children. These examples of over-parenting that exceed actual needs of the emerging adult hinder identity development and ultimately hinder launching.

In her book *A Nation of Wimps*, psychologist Hara Estroff Marano examines the effects of parental interference. She states, "Intrusive parenting undermines children in the most fundamental ways. It spawns anxious attachment to the children, setting them up for lifelong fragility." ⁶ Marano highlights the importance of letting emerging adults struggle some to find their own way. The path may pose more challenges to the emerging adult without parental over-involvement, but the emerging adult learns a great deal about his or her self-efficacy.

According to researcher Chris Segrin, "One of the apparent consequences of parents attempting to solve all of their children's problems and to assume responsibility for their child's well-being well into adulthood is that the child never develops a strong belief in his or her own ability to solve problems and achieve goals. This low self-efficacy is understandable in that the child would have little experiential basis for such beliefs." ⁷ In other words, adult children who have *never been allowed to really fail* and then learn from those failures aren't able to handle the inevitable blunders of adulthood.

Strategy #3: Be Flexible

Riding the winds of emerging adulthood with your child (and staying connected) over the gusts of autonomy and dependence will require you to be very flexible. As we released our butterfly into the wild, I had to continually remind my son that he should not try to catch her. I assured him that she would come back to visit, and that since we have a butterfly-friendly garden we would likely see her again.

Likewise, parents can best serve their college-bound or workforce-entering emerging adults by being a stable secure base, while also giving their children plenty of room to find their own way. Remaining flexible as the balance of your child's needs gradually move more toward autonomy will allow your relationship to develop both closeness *and* independence, the gold standard in family cohesion. Your calm non-anxious presence at home, and confidence in your child's ability to navigate his college or workforce experience, will offer him the best chance at success and encourage continued connection with you.

Tips for staying connected:

1. Sit down with your emerging adult and discuss the changes that have taken place. Reassess what you are both hoping



for in your relationship in the years to come. In what ways does your adult child still need support? In what ways does he or she want to try things out independently? Where would you like to see more independence or decision-making developed?

2. Talk about the inevitable times when you or your child will feel that the relationship is out of balance. How will you address the situation? What are some positive and proactive ways to connect with one another and make adjustments?

Keeping Your Sanity in the Midst of Transition

Unlike emerging adults, caterpillars come with a how-to manual for successful launching into butterflies. As your emerging adult wriggles out of the chrysalis of adolescence and prepares to take flight, use these final ideas to help *you* stay grounded:




1. **Get Another Opinion:** Talk with a close friend or trusted mentor who is also a parent. Ask them what they see in your relationship with your young adult. Are there areas for growth?
2. **Talk About the Elephant in the Room:** Talk with your emerging adult about your desire to stay connected while also providing structure and space for their growth into full adulthood. Explore together what areas feel balanced and what areas might need readjusting. Revisit this conversation every six months or so.
3. **Work on Yourself:** This is a great time for you to take a step towards your own growth and explore parts of your life you may be missing. Why not take that dance class you've been putting off, try your hand at a new hobby, or even treat yourself to a season of therapy? If you are married, this season also allows all kinds of opportunities for new growth in your relationship with your spouse. Your well-being is the best gift you can give your emerging adult.

Action Points

- Among each of the sets of tips above, which seem the most natural for you? Which feel least comfortable? Start with what feels doable as a first step toward negotiating the changes in your relationship with your emerging adult child.
- For the harder steps, talk with a friend about why these seem hard for you, and ask for input or ideas.
- If you feel like you've already been stumbling through some of these areas with your emerging adult, have an honest conversation with him or her and acknowledge some of what's not been helpful in those patterns. Work to renegotiate a way of relating that helps both of you move forward in healthy ways.

Further resources:

- [Anxiety in the In-Between Stages of Our Lives: Healthy Strategies for Coping with Transitions](#), by Rhett Smith for Sticky Faith
- [Out of the Nest: Tips for Successfully Launching Your Kids Into College](#), by Rhett Smith for Sticky Faith
- Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (SSEA) <http://www.ssea.org/>
- The Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults http://www.clarku.edu/clarkpoll/pdfs/Clark_Poll_Peer%20Inst.pdf
- Website for Jeffrey Arnett <http://www.jeffreyarnett.com/articles.htm>

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2. William S. Aquilino, "Family relationships and support systems in emerging adulthood," in J. Arnett & J. Tanner (Eds.), *Emerging adults in america: Coming of age in the 21st century* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2005), 193-217. ↪
3. Chris Segrin, et al., "The Association Between Overparenting, Parent-Child Communication, and Entitlement and Adaptive Traits in Adult Children," *Family Relations* 61, (April 2012): 237-252. ↪
4. Christopher A. Bjornsen, "The blessing as a rite of passage in adolescence," *ADOLESCENCE*, 35 no.138 (Summer, 2000): 357-363. ↪
5. Hara Estroff Marano, *A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting* (New York: Random House, 2008) ↪
6. Hara Estroff Marano, *A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting*, 31. ↪
7. Chris Segrin, *Family Relations*, 238. ↪

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