

On the THRESHOLD



Terri Apter considers the pressures students are finding themselves under as they enter colleges and universities and how we might be able to assist them in sustaining themselves and their family relationships

Children make their way into adulthood in an environment shaped by geography, culture, politics and economics; yet we often incorrectly suppose that their trajectory is set by objective norms. As times change, so do the pace and shape of young people's development; but parents' and teachers' expectations often remain stuck in the past. A mismatch between outdated norms and current

circumstances results in tension and misunderstandings between young people and the significant adults in their lives. This is the condition today as young people reach the age of adulthood without meeting the expected markers of adulthood. How we perceive the new trajectory of development is crucial to whether we help or hinder young people's transition to adulthood.



For illustration purposes only; posed by models

Recent history of early adulthood

During the 1960s it was recognised that adult status was often attained even before the close of the teenage decade, so in 1970 the age of majority became 18 years in England and Wales, and 16 years in Scotland, rather than 21. Yet soon after this, changes in employment opportunities for young adults shifted the goal posts again. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s unskilled jobs were exported abroad, and expanding educational opportunities for young people raised employers' expectations for education qualifications, maturity and training of young employees. This might have enriched the transition to adulthood, but it also prolonged that transition.

The changing employment market and expanding educational opportunities coincided with rapidly increasing costs of housing in the UK that set up further impediments to leaving home. The average age of marriage and parenthood rose from 23 years for women in 1961 to 29 years in 2000. At 20 years of age, when sons and daughters are in legal terms adults, 64 per cent of men and 46 per cent of women in the UK are living with their parents¹.

Paradoxically, while there has been a great deal of media attention on the rapidity with which young children mature physically, and take on the social and sexual savvy of teenagers, young people at the close of the teenage years are increasingly unlikely to be ready to join the grown-ups on equal footing.

Separation bias

Many social commentators sound alarm bells over young people's delayed adulthood. For example, the sociologist Frank Furedi argues that contemporary culture caters to 'a posse of Peter Pans' – 'lost boys and girls hanging out on the edge of adulthood'². He argues that parents who permit their young adult sons and daughters to remain dependent on them, 'infantilise' them. This position is loudly echoed in Sally Koslow's recent argument that the culture of parental protectiveness has created the monster son or daughter who continues to depend on his or her parents beyond the age of majority³.

Alarm and criticism of young adults' dependence on their family and on other adults that teach, employ, counsel or mentor them, arise within embedded assumptions about the nature of maturity or what is involved in being a healthy, normal adult. Firmly established in psychological theory is the assumption that to be grown up, you have to be emotionally independent from parents. Adolescence, according to this embedded theory, is the time of life that sons and daughters achieve a psychological separation from the adults who have raised and guided them. Anna Freud⁴

referred to adolescence as a psychological version of parent/child divorce. Other well-known psychologists such as Erik Erikson⁵ and Peter Blos⁶ reinforced the model, arguing that to gain self-knowledge, young people had to cast off their childhood need for parents. A cultural myth arose that continued connection is a sign of immaturity.

While parents and commentators may be unfamiliar with the details of this psychological model, they incorporate it in their assumptions. For example, young adults who are unable to contribute financially to the household, are sometimes called 'parasite singles.' In the US, the term frequently used for this cohort is 'boomerangers', since they leave home for college or an internship or a short-term job, only to return again, living among their family as they did as children. In Italy, a common term for this cohort is even more pejorative: 'bamboccioni' or 'big dummy boys'. An assumption underlying these derogatory terms is that young adults' continued dependence on family is unnecessary, even abnormal, and a function of young people's laziness and their parents' laxity.

Thresholders: a new developmental phase

As a psychologist working with young adults in an educational setting, I wanted to explore the experiences of young people in transition to adulthood. Between 1994 and 2000 I interviewed 32 young people whom I followed from the age of 18 to the age of 24 years⁷. When the recession began in 2008, I wanted to assess how young adults might be affected, and I began a second study on a new cohort of 12 people who are now aged 22 to 23 years. This second study highlights how issues emerging in the first cohort have now become extensive and ingrained. It is important to understand young people's experience of this transition and to consider how we might assess what support is appropriate and what support might be counterproductive. Countless psychologists have studied the behaviour of children and teenagers, and outlined the parent/child conflicts and social pressures during these developmental phases, but there has been far less interest in the experiences of members of this group, who face an uneasy breach between their realities and their needs, on the one hand, and their hopes and expectations, on the other.

A central experience shared by the young people in both of my studies was of standing at the entrance to the adult world without feeling able to step across the threshold into that world. Ten years ago I coined the term 'thresholder' to identify this new phase of life. The society they are preparing to enter as adults requires a longer apprenticeship. Employers have higher expectations of education and training qualifications, and young people have to work longer to meet these

expectations. When they are lucky enough to find employment, they require resilience and flexibility; they can expect to change jobs and to retrain several times throughout their 20s. Their peer groups are likely to dissipate through the geographic mobility of their friends, and they often struggle with loneliness in a society that as a whole offers fewer formal and informal face-to-face networks⁸. Young people benefit from emotional and practical support from their families as they undergo further education and training, assess opportunities, and puzzle over opportunities and risks.

While self-sufficiency, independence and autonomy continue to be valued as indicators of healthy young adults, the pressures, challenges and uncertainties confronting young adults today make these unrealistic goals.

When parents or teachers or counsellors buy into the assumption that delayed adulthood is unhealthy, they may perpetuate thresholders' loneliness and self-dissatisfaction. Misled by the importance of emotional or financial independence, they may ignore the responsibilities valiantly accepted as thresholders work hard in higher education, intellectual reflection and explore ways to maintain the relationships that will help them thrive throughout adulthood⁹.

Meaningful support

Nearly all thresholders and their parents highlighted financial independence as a crucial marker of adulthood. This was a bias that could skew understanding of the range of parental support that could benefit young adults.

The difficulty parents have in providing financial help has increased over the past four years. Whereas once, parents might have taken out loans on their own homes to help provide support for a son's or daughter's home, this practice is less common. Nor can parents as easily offer financial support for further training and education, as the burden of taking out loans is increasing. And, with the job market shrinking, thresholders have less employment choice, and those short-term contracts and trial employments will have a more uncomfortable ending.

So it is important to focus on how much support parents can offer even when they cannot provide financial support. Just 'being there' has been found to be important^{7,9,10}. Perhaps more young people who continue to live in a parent's home, or return to a parent's home (some parents refer to these years not as the 'empty nest', but as a revolving door, as young adult children leave, only to return), will be appreciated as contributors to family income. The rent they pay to parents, which might have once been nominal, may now become a significant means of support, and this will help them feel effective, rather than diminished, in their dependence.

On the other hand, thresholders who take longer to find their adult feet, may no longer be so daunted by

comparisons with more fortunate peers among whom there are fewer hot shot high earners. In any case, the value attached to material success is on the wane, and the depressed housing market may in time become an opportunity for young people hoping to have a home of their own. The environments in which young people become adults may be changing, and with those changes will come different norms of development.

Assessing the arguments

One way of assessing whether being supported during this protracted transition is harmful or helpful is to revert to that age-old tool of psychologists – listening: listening to young adults' own experiences, and their assessment of needs and identification of significant sources of support.

Another way is to look at the conditions in which young people attain more or less satisfactory positions in young adulthood. These considerations allow us to focus on evidence rather than the ideology of emotional independence.

My studies show that thresholders benefited from parental support, and other large-scale studies confirm this finding¹⁰. Family support comes in various forms. Emotional support provides comfort and reassurance and diffuses negative feelings such as anxiety and depression. Practical support involves help with decision-making and strategy. Financial support was provided even by low-income families as they allowed a thresholder to remain at home beyond the expected age of departure and provided them with company and entertainment. With support from their families, young people were better placed to acquire the experience, training and confidence needed to thrive as adults. Continued parental support during this transition did not undermine the motivation to achieve greater independence. In fact, continued help, support, advice and companionship allows young people to explore various possibilities, to develop the skills that will serve them well throughout adulthood, and to feel supported in a society in which formal and informal networks are in other ways diminishing.

When we look back carefully on the old model of adolescence, which has much of value but which can now be seen to express counterproductive biases, we can see that thresholders were not unaware of the dangers in becoming independent at a time when they would benefit from support. Erik Erikson described one glitch in development as *foreclosure*¹¹. Here a young person speeds up the path to adulthood through a process of simplification. He or she sets aside exploration and experimentation, the long process of discovery as to where their preferences and talents lie, what beliefs are likely to ground them, and what goals inspire them; instead, they accept a ready-made version of adulthood. They foreclose on their potential to opt for clarity.

This is the danger being imposed on thresholders when parents, teachers and counsellors decline support and adhere to the myth that dependence on family impedes development. Over and over again it has been found that 'the least privileged young adults are those whose families cannot offer much support and assistance.'^{7,9} The myth of maturity has profound social and personal costs.

Brain function and maturity

I conclude with new research findings in neuroscience that add a fresh perspective to this heated debate over what young adults need. It seems that there is a physiological basis for the prolonged transition from adolescence to adulthood. New brain imaging techniques reveal physiological reasons why young people endure a threshold phase during which they display much cognitive maturity but require practical and emotional support from parents.

The human brain was once thought to reach maturity

at puberty, but no longer. Recent techniques in functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) allow neuroscientists to measure blood flow and cellular process in different parts of the brain. These reveal that brain development is much more prolonged than previously supposed. The brain has its own threshold phase.

Different areas of the brain grow at different rates, and peak at different times. The regions of the teenage brain that have attracted the most attention are the frontal lobes that form the front

half of each cerebral hemisphere. These areas regulate the functions that humans tend to do better than other animals. The front parts of these lobes are active as we carry out many of the processes necessary for cognition: concentration, attention, planning and prioritising. These functions involve impulse control, thinking ahead and responsiveness to others.

The amount of grey matter in these areas peaks at adolescence; but that, interestingly, is not the end of the story. This peak in the volume of grey matter actually makes the brain work less efficiently. This big brain of late adolescence and early adulthood, when there are more synapses in the brain than at any other time, is less good at thinking ahead, making plans and resisting the urge to act on impulse. The assumption is that during this phase of development, there are too many neural connections for the brain to work efficiently.

Towards the end of adolescence and over the course of early adulthood, grey matter shrinks, probably, it is thought, as a result of selective reduction of synaptic connections between cells. This is called 'pruning'. Brain regions involving impulse control and planning undergo protracted development until the age of about 24 years¹².

In addition to the selective reduction in grey matter, functional changes occur as the teenage brain develops into an adult brain. In teenagers, certain areas of the brain, especially the prefrontal cortex, show far more activity when thinking about intentions and emotions than do adult brains. Young people, with their distinctively non-adult brains, deal with self-consciousness and self-doubt, impulsiveness and risk taking, in distinctive ways¹³.

Behavioural signs of the brain's distinctive thresholder phase may be muted in a society that offers simple options, in which change has a slow pace, and where there is a narrow range of uncertainties. In today's society in which young adults are required to adapt to rapidly changing employment and economic situations, where their cognitive abilities and adaptability are tasked daily, the signs of their not yet fully mature brains may be more salient. It makes good sense for those adults who care for the wellbeing of thresholders to offer judicious support.

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