WHAT IS YOUR YOUNG ADULT THINKING?

BY JAKE HEALEY

It’s somewhat strange to us today, but the concept of adolescence hasn’t always existed. Though it’s now widely recognized as the life period between childhood and adulthood (usually the ages from 12 to 18), its academic recognition is a surprisingly recent invention. But just as researchers “invented” adolescence to better understand stages of human life, so too may the academic assimilation of another life period—emerging adulthood—be on the horizon.

Emerging adulthood is the period between the ages of 18 and 24, and scholars have begun to recognize it as “different in important ways from both adolescence and adulthood.” The topic has become increasingly common in scholarship, and four BYU professors are leading the national charge. Jason Carroll, Larry Nelson, Laura Padilla-Walker, and Brian Willoughby—all of BYU’s College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences and School of Family Life—are among the most prominent scholars in the world on the topic of emerging adulthood. Their studies have offered tremendous insight into the minds of emerging adults—what they think, what they dream, what they are worried about—and thus can help society at large, and specifically parents of those young adults, to better understand and interact with the demographic.

Emerging adulthood is a unique time of life, complete with its own set of challenges and struggles, and it is important for parents, teachers, employers, and others to learn about these issues. So what does the research of Carroll, Nelson, Padilla-Walker, and Willoughby reveal as the four primary concerns of this age group? They are: identity, parental involvement, sexual behavior, and morality.

ONE:

IDENTITY

How many young people graduate high school with their identity, values, and beliefs all firmly in place? The answer: not many—and that’s a good thing. Higher education and other aspects of life in emerging adulthood should prompt individuals to create and develop their own identities, a process which usually continues throughout one’s life. Padilla-Walker, Carroll, and Nelson characterized emerging adulthood as an "age of possibilities that involves heightened identity exploration and risk-taking," which can be both a good and a bad thing. While risky behaviors often increase with the unprecedented independence of emerging adulthood, the BYU scholars found that prosocial behaviors such as altruism and charity often increase as well, particularly in individuals who develop a healthy identity exploration.

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"One of the most notable features of emerging adulthood is the opportunity it provides for identity exploration, particularly in the areas of love, work, and worldviews," the scholars report, quoting scholar J.J. Arnett. "As a result of demographic shifts...some emerging adults, particularly those who are able to attend college instead of beginning full-time employment, marriage or parenthood roles...have few responsibilities compared to later in the lifespan. This allows for ample time to question values, laws, beliefs, norms, or standards...to engage in experimentation with possible roles." The more autonomy emerging adults have during their identity searches—who they are, what they value, how they find fulfillment in life—the more likely they are to internalize motivations to act positively and prosocially.
THREE:

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR/RELATIONSHIPS

While adolescence can be a stressful time because of the onset of puberty and sexual maturity, emerging adulthood often combines the completion of that process with newfound independence. This can result in a tremendous amount of sexual experimentation in the years of emerging adulthood—so naturally, sexuality is a prime concern among that age group. When an emerging adult is religious, as most BYU students are, pornography is also often a stress-inducing topic.

BYU professors have conducted a wealth of research on pornography usage among this age group and found that nearly 90 percent of emerging adult men have viewed pornographic material, as have roughly one-third of women. However, a far lower percentage of emerging adults view pornography use as acceptable, as Nelson, Padilla-Walker, and Carroll said in a recent study, "I Believe It Is Wrong But I Still Do It." Reservations regarding pornography are often religious in nature, and the resulting cognitive dissonance created by the discrepancy between belief and behavior often causes crippling guilt, depression, and sexual dysfunction. In addition, highly-religious emerging adults are far more likely to consider themselves "addicted" to pornography, which can create a sense of helplessness and even increase pornography usage.

This area of concern among emerging adults is not limited to sexual behaviors but expands to the potential effects of them. Willoughby and Carroll also found that the sexual behaviors of emerging adults usually play a profound role in influencing their views on cohabitation, marriage, and romantic relationships in general. Not only that but all manner of "behaviors during emerging adulthood are impacted by the orientation an emerging adult has toward marriage." They go on to say that emerging adults’ criteria for marriage readiness, perceived importance of marriage, and desired timing of marriage are likely related to how [they] plan and carry out their lives. In other words, emerging adults' views on sex and romance will almost certainly have a tremendous impact on the direction of the rest of their lives.

TWO:
PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

While the transition into emerging adulthood is typically marked by higher levels of independence and autonomy, parental involvement does not often drop off altogether. After graduating high school, many emerging adults still live with their parents, or are, at the very least, still financially dependent on them to some degree. Understandably, the new dimensions of the parent-child relationship can cause stress or worry for a child, but there can be effects on parents as well—not the least of which is "helicopter parenting," or the tendency to excessively hover over or control a child's life.

While relationships with parents typically improve during emerging adulthood, several regression analyses conducted by Padilla-Walker and Nelson established that helicopter parenting during this time period is "associated with lower levels of self-worth and higher levels of risky behaviors." In addition, helicopter parenting can have a significant influence on an emerging adult's beliefs about marriage. For instance, children who are parented in such a fashion will tend to believe that being single is more advantageous than being married and will therefore tend to delay marriage.

Emerging adults have greater success establishing themselves economically if their parents provide some financial assistance during the college years, as might be expected, but what might not be expected is just how much money a lot of young adults are getting these days. On average, parents provide an average of $38,000 to their child during the transition to adulthood. This could provide children with a welcome respite from the stresses and worries of this life period, but depending on parenting styles, it could have the opposite effect. For instance, if parents exercise control over children's life decisions through their financial assistance, or if they frequently remind children of their contributions in order to manipulate them, the child can experience tremendous mental tension.
Finally, the topic of morality is one that emerging adults tend to focus much of their energy and attention on. For emerging adults who are religious, their faith tends to dominate their moral worldview. Thus, morality and religion are often companions of thought in a young adult’s mind.

Nelson et al. point out that young adults in “industrialized countries . . . postpone entry into adult roles of marriage and parenthood” until the years of emerging adulthood and that “the quest for self-definition of one’s values and beliefs, including those in the religious or spiritual domain, ensues during the late teens and early twenties.” In other words, the introduction to the plethora of religious doctrines from which to choose (71% of emerging adults claim to be “certain” about their religious beliefs11) turns many emerging adults to questioning the validity of the faith they were raised in, sometimes leading them to a more nuanced faith, a different faith, or an abandonment of faith altogether. Millennials, today’s emerging adults, have turned from religion like no other generation previously recorded.12 “Given that young people are questioning the beliefs with which they were raised, it has potential implications for the parent-child relationship,” say Nelson and his co-authors in a study entitled “Religiosity and Spirituality During the Transition to Adulthood,” published in the International Journal of Behavioral Development.13