

*This chapter outlines the major developmental challenges likely to affect overall well-being during adolescence and emerging adulthood and discusses the personal and social assets needed to facilitate a successful passage through adolescence and into adulthood.*

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## The passage to adulthood: Challenges of late adolescence

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THERE ARE MAJOR developmental changes and challenges associated with the period of adolescence, as youth acquire and consolidate the competencies, attitudes, values, and social capital necessary to make a successful transition into adulthood. Late adolescence and the period following, often referred to as emerging adulthood, have been noted as particularly important for setting the stage for continued development through the life span as individuals begin to make choices and engage in a variety of activities that are influential on the rest of their lives. As youth move into emerging adulthood around the age of eighteen (often on completion of high school), their choices and challenges shift to include decisions about education or vocational training, entry into and transitions within the labor market, moving out of the family home, and sometimes marriage and parenthood. Although early adolescence has received much attention by researchers as a period of major distress, recently late adolescence has become a period of concern among developmental researchers and youth advocates.

Demographic, sociocultural, and labor market changes have made the years between ages eighteen and twenty-five more transitional than in the recent past. Thirty years ago, the period of adolescence was considered to end somewhere between ages eighteen and twenty-two, at which point youth would choose between a small, easily understood set of options following high school: youth chose to move into college, the labor market, or the military and got married and had children during their early twenties. These well-defined pathways from adolescence into adulthood no longer exist for most social class groups.<sup>1</sup> This increased complexity and heterogeneity in the passage into adulthood make the late adolescent period more challenging than in the past, especially for non-college-bound youth and members of several ethnic minority groups.

It is essential to examine the influence of structural constraints on adolescents' choices and engagement in activities that promote future options and opportunities and trajectories. It is also critical to understand what assets and needs are essential for keeping youth on healthy, productive pathways into adulthood. As Erik Erikson asserted, tasks of adolescence are played out in a complex set of social contexts and in both cultural and historical settings.<sup>2</sup>

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## *Challenges*

The developmental tasks of adolescence that Erikson outlined include the development of a sense of mastery, identity, and intimacy. Others have added the establishment of autonomy, management of sexuality and intimacy, and finding a niche for oneself in education and work.<sup>3</sup> Eccles and Gootman elaborated on these tasks, identifying several more specific challenges: (1) shifts in relationship with parents from dependency and subordination to one that reflects the adolescent's increasing maturity and responsibilities in the family and the community, (2) the exploration of new roles (both social and sexual), (3) the experience of intimate partnerships, (4) identity formation at both the social and personal levels, (5) planning one's future and taking the necessary steps to

pursue those plans, and (6) acquiring the range of skills and values needed to make a successful transition into adulthood (including work, partnership, parenting, and citizenship).

By emerging adulthood, youth are increasingly independent, acquire and manage greater responsibility, and take on an active role in their own development. Eccles and Gootman go on to specify some primary challenges in this last stage of adolescence when youth begin to take on more demanding roles: (1) the management of these demanding roles, (2) identifying personal strengths and weaknesses and refining skills to coordinate and succeed in these roles, (3) finding meaning and purpose in the roles acquired, and (4) assessing and making necessary life changes and coping with these changes. Successful management of all these challenges depends on the psychosocial, physical, and cognitive assets of the individual; the social supports available; and the developmental settings in which young people can explore and interact with these challenges.<sup>4</sup>

### *Physical and biological changes*

During early adolescence, youth experience dramatic changes in the shape of their bodies, an increase in gonadal hormones, and changes in brain architecture. Another major biological change during this period between puberty and young adulthood is in the frontal lobes of the brain, responsible for such functions as self-control, judgment, emotional regulation, organization, and planning.<sup>5</sup> These changes in turn fuel major shifts in adolescents' physical and cognitive capacities and their social and achievement-related needs. During early adolescence, the primary task consists of managing these biological and cognitive shifts and the subsequent influences these have on behavior, mood, and social relationships. How youth cope with these changes will ultimately influence their well-being in later adolescence as multiple additional tasks are imposed on them.

### *Cognitive development*

Cognitive skill development over the adolescent years enables youth to become increasingly capable of managing their own learning and problem solving while also facilitating their identity

formation and maturation of moral reasoning. There are distinct increases in adolescents' capacities to think abstractly, consider multiple dimensions of problems, process information and stimuli more efficiently, and reflect on the self and life experiences.<sup>6</sup>

The successful development of these cognitive skills relates to youth's ability to be planful, an important skill for successful pursuit of educational and occupational goals.<sup>7</sup> It has also been linked with adolescents' greater investments in understanding their own and others' internal psychological states and the resulting behavioral shift in focus on their developing close and intimate friendships. As young people consider what possibilities are available to them, they are more capable of reflecting on their own abilities, interests, desires, and needs. Overall, youth are able to come to a deeper understanding of the social and cultural settings in which they live. In fact, research has found an increase in youth's commitments to civic involvement when such cognitive developments are coupled with prosocial values and opportunities to think and discuss issues of tolerance and human interaction with others. In a culture that stresses personal choice in life planning, these concerns and interests set the stage for personal and social identity formation and ultimately influence educational, occupational, recreational, and marital and family choices.<sup>8</sup>

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## *Achievement*

One of the key milestones for older youth is graduation from high school.

### *High school*

For some youth, adolescence continues to be a time for continued educational growth and success and promising goals and plans for the future. For others, adolescence is marked by major declines in academic performance, interest, and self-perceptions of ability and heightened risk for academic failure and dropout. Some researchers suggest that these declines are due to an "intrapsychic upheaval" as youth struggle to manage the simultaneous occurrence of multiple life changes.<sup>9</sup>

Other research has found that academic declines in interest and self-concept are a function of the mismatch between the school environment and the adolescent. Person-environment fit theory outlines how behavior, motivation, and mental health are influenced by the fit between the characteristics that individuals bring to their environments and characteristics of the environments themselves: whether individuals will fare well and be motivated depends on whether the social environment meets their needs. When school environments do not meet adolescents' changing needs, their academic motivation, interest, and performance will decline. Difficulties in early adolescence, with the transition into middle school, seem especially harmful, setting some youth on a downward spiral of low academic motivation and achievement throughout high school.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, in all Western societies, one of the most universal factors behind academic success throughout the entire educational career is socioeconomic background. For the United States, there is ample empirical evidence that socioeconomic status is the single best predictor of academic achievement from elementary school onward.<sup>11</sup> Schnabel, Alfeld, Eccles, Köller, and Baumert found that children from lower socioeconomic strata are not only less successful in high school, but they also have a significantly smaller empirical chance to move into a four-year full-time college education even after controlling for academic achievement and other psychological factors.<sup>12</sup>

The school continues to be an institution that provides youth a support network for positive development through emerging adulthood. However, youth first need confidence in their abilities, good social skills, high self-esteem, and good coping skills to manage the multiple challenges and stressors associated with the high school environment in order to gain the experiences and resources needed to pursue postsecondary education.<sup>13</sup>

### *Transition to college*

At completion of high school, about half of America's youth enroll in college, and the remaining half move into a variety of work and nonwork settings.<sup>14</sup> This difference in transitional trajectories involves very different experiences and challenges for youth on the

different tracks. Universities serve as social institutions that provide youth shelter, organized activities, adult and peer support, health care, and a various forms of entertainment. College-bound youth discover new-found independence: the college environment enables them to practice self-governance, individuation from parents, and freedom to direct their own lifestyle in a safe environment that delays many adult responsibilities.<sup>15</sup> As a result, college-bound youth have the opportunity to extend exploration of the self, develop new ideas, take advantage of multiple opportunities, and try out various lifestyles.<sup>16</sup> In essence, universities are social institutions that have become increasingly tailored to provide a sort of semiautonomy to assist the transition into young adulthood.

Although a college education has become increasingly important for ensuring a bright future, the transition into and persistence in college can be challenging and stressful. According to census data in 2000, only 52 percent of those enrolled in college are reported to receive their initial degree objective within five years.<sup>17</sup> Although research on college retention is in its early stages, some findings pinpoint factors that are especially important for college retention. The high dropout rates during college are related to such factors as unfamiliar academic expectations, changes in sources of social support, and social norms that encourage high levels of risky behaviors, particularly alcohol use.<sup>18</sup>

College enrollment and retention is especially challenging for low-income youth. Between entering college and graduating, low-socioeconomic-status (SES) students are at significantly greater risk of dropping out of college in comparison to their middle- to upper-SES counterparts.<sup>19</sup> Background factors such as minority status, SES, gender, and high school performance can influence commitment to college through their influence on students' integration into the social and academic structures of the institution. Therefore, along with the direct costs of college, other social and cognitive factors confounded with SES are also important to consider when examining attrition once a student arrives at college.

There are also youth who seem to be caught in the middle. They come from middle-income families but are well short of affluent.

Without qualifications for receiving support from the state and only modest help from their financially overextended families, these youth are often left to manage on their own. They often must juggle work and school responsibilities, which leads to a set of additional challenges and often to delays in attaining a college degree well into their late twenties and early thirties.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, high cognitive resources, prior knowledge, and financial security are not the only factors that help adolescents make a successful adjustment to college. Research has found that family support, adolescents' personal appreciation for education and learning (interest, value, aspiration), and high academic self-concept (belief in their own competence) are just as important for supporting youth's enrollment and persistence in college.<sup>21</sup>

### *School-to-work*

The other half of youth who do not enroll in some form of post-secondary education are not only deprived of educational and occupational advancements, but also the developmental moratorium of exploration and experimentation experienced by youth enrolled in college full time.<sup>22</sup> Approximately one out of seven youth drop out of high school, often working sporadically if employed at all, and many youth who do finish high school and move straight into work do not fare much better. There are not many institutional supports in the United States to help adolescents on this pathway, leaving them to manage the school-to-work transition almost entirely by themselves. The military and some volunteer programs have served as a few social institutions that provide a setting for youth to live, work, and learn. These programs are tailored to offer youth the opportunity to develop further skill and experience and heighten a sense of competence by providing sponsored independence: semiautonomy, expectations, and demands coupled with guidance, mentoring, and support. There are also some apprenticeships and training programs designed to provide supports.<sup>23</sup> However, most noncollege-bound youth do not find such supports and often end up floundering in the labor force in the hope of

finding secure, well-paying employment from their late teens through their twenties. The social structure is currently so ill designed to support such a school-to-work trajectory that it results in what seems a chaotic or haphazard entry into adulthood for these youth. Such important needs as housing and medical insurance cannot be afforded at typical starting wages for high school students or graduates, and these young people cannot easily establish financial independence and an independent household. Without a college education (or additional training through the military or an apprenticeship), it is extremely difficult to make such developmental transitions, especially for those who aspire to at least a middle-class job and middle-class lifestyle.<sup>24</sup>

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### ***Social relationships***

During adolescence, youth also must deal with changes in many of their social relationships, providing opportunities to develop and exercise their personal and social identities and further explore their autonomy.

### ***Family relationships***

Parent-child relationships are highly related to youth well-being, and maintaining strong ties to one's family is important for the adolescent and emerging adulthood years.<sup>25</sup> Along with school and work, the family is another institution that often provides youth with important assets for positive development. Families can give youth financial, emotional, and achievement-related support; provide social capital; and act as important role models.

Although families of origin function as a central safety net for many adolescents, they also function as a serious risk for others whose family lacks such supports. During early adolescence, there are increases in parent-child conflicts as children's needs for autonomy and independence increase and they show some resistance to family rules and roles.<sup>26</sup> In many Western cultures, some distanc-



ing in parent-child relationships is viewed as functional, helping youth to individualize from their parents, try more things on their own, and develop their own competence. Most of these conflicts do not concern core issues such as education, politics, or spirituality, but rather focus on minor issues such as appearance, chores, and dating. For most youth, family relationships generally improve as they move into the later adolescent years, although more serious conflicts between youth and their parents during the early adolescent years can result in more serious challenges for youth throughout adolescence.

Some youth are in family situations in which parents are unavailable, unable, or, in some cases, unwilling to provide the support their children need to make a successful transition into adulthood. These youth are often placed at high risk because of such factors as parent divorce, poverty, unemployment, death, or psychological estrangement of parents and their children.<sup>27</sup> For example, when poverty is coupled with living in a single-parent household as well as having a minority status, youth are at high risk for dropping out of high school, drug and alcohol abuse, smoking, violence, sexual intercourse, and gang-related behavior.<sup>28</sup> How families and youth manage late adolescence thus varies greatly by the resources available to them.

During adolescence, youth often establish strong relationships with adults in organized activity settings as well. Teachers, coaches, program organizers, spiritual leaders, and parents of friends all can serve as additional mentors who can help buffer the impact of poor relationships with parents or negative peer influences, as well as provide further social capital for achievement-related success.

### *Friendships*

The peer group has been found to be a powerful place for identity formation and consolidation throughout the adolescent period.<sup>29</sup> One of the most major changes during adolescence is youth's increasing focus on peer relationships as indicated by increases in both the time they spend with peers and their engagement in activities done with peers. In fact, peer acceptance and time spent doing

activities with peers commonly take precedence over academics during early adolescence and can result in an increase in problem behaviors if the youth are subjected to excessive peer pressure to engage in such behaviors. This may ultimately compromise youth's successful transition to adulthood.<sup>30</sup> However as adolescents get older and more confident in their abilities, social status, and own goals and values, the impact of peer relationships on behavior declines.<sup>31</sup>

### *Romantic partnerships*

During adolescence, peers also become romantic partners. Romantic relationships are speculated to play a role in identity formation during adolescence by connecting youth with their peers and providing them a sense of belonging and status in their peer groups. In addition, dating and romantic relationships during adolescence are positively related to feelings of self-worth, and longitudinal evidence indicates that by late adolescence, feeling competent in romantic relationships contributes largely to general feelings of competence.<sup>32</sup>

Although the development of romantic relations is another means for developing one's identity and exploring adult roles, such rising romantic and sexual interests during adolescence are also accompanied by an increase in risks of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Sexual behaviors increase dramatically during adolescence. A report from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health indicates that rates of sexual intercourse rise from 16 percent among seventh and eighth graders to 60 percent among eleventh and twelfth graders.<sup>33</sup> The rate of age-related increases in sexual intercourse is especially high among youth who are involved in extended romantic relationships and who see the benefits of sexual relations as high and the cost of sexual relations (including pregnancy) as low. Rates are low among youth who want to avoid becoming pregnant so they can achieve their educational and occupational aspirations. In fact, research suggests that having opportunities and aspirations for attaining prestigious education and career trajectories helps youth negotiate their romantic and sexual relations and their achievement-related roles.<sup>34</sup>

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## *Implications*

This chapter has outlined the major developmental challenges likely to affect overall well-being during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Some youth develop a set of personal assets that help them successfully meet these challenges and develop the skills, attitudes, values, and social capital they need for a successful transition into adulthood. Developmental theorists have identified several specific personal assets believed to be most critical for healthy development. These include having confidence in one's ability to achieve one's goals and make a difference in the world and strong desires to engage in important activities (intrinsic motivation), master learning tasks, and be socially connected. Youth also need to develop the ability to control and regulate their emotions, have a sense of optimism, and develop attachment to and engagement in at least one or two conventional prosocial institutions: schools, faith-based organizations, families, and community organizations, for example.<sup>35</sup> Murnane and Levy stress how such assets are also important for successful entry into the labor market.<sup>36</sup>

Although most youth have some of these personal assets to deal with the challenges at least somewhat effectively, many have not been given the same opportunities to acquire such assets and thus flounder throughout the adolescent and emerging-adulthood years. How can we design our social institutions and policies to better match adolescents' shifts in needs? How can we improve the personal skills and resources of today's youth so that more youth successfully navigate and manage the transition to adulthood? Out-of-school activity settings is one means by which youth may find the support and resources they need to help smooth their transition into adulthood.<sup>37</sup>

During early and middle adolescence, not only do almost all youth attend school, but many of these same youth also receive additional support from youth organizations. By late adolescence, these supports either diverge or disappear altogether. As youth develop, family conflict common during the early adolescent years decreases, as does susceptibility to peer influence. Biological systems stabilize, cognitive skills increase, and expertise in various domains grows. Both personal and social identity concerns increase,

especially those related to occupational, sexual, and ethnic identities. Therefore, programs and institutions developed to cater to the needs of older youth must map onto their growing maturity and expertise, the new courses they are taking in high school, their increasing cognitive capacities, their increased concerns about identity issues, and their movement toward adulthood.<sup>38</sup>

Community programs have the potential to provide a safe setting for youth to explore themselves, their interests, and their abilities in a wide range of activities and among a diversity of people. Such experiences can aid youth in dealing with issues regarding their social identity development as well as nurture tolerance and respect for diversity.

Community organizations can function to counteract the experiences in many schools that undermine adolescents' academic motivation and school engagement. These programs should therefore focus on nurturing youth's new cognitive skills and help youth form positive, realistic views of themselves in order to make well-informed decisions and plans. Especially for older adolescents, programs should stress future plans and support high educational and occupational goals. Not only will this help guide youth onto successful educational and career paths, but some interventions designed to help youth form and maintain high educational and occupation goals and reduce involvement in romantic relationships have been effective at lowering rates of unprotected sexual activity and unplanned pregnancies.<sup>39</sup>

Relationships are primary supports that help youth navigate adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Therefore, there is also a strong need for building and supporting family relationships and resources. As adolescents age, community programs can help facilitate positive, supportive relationships with both familial and non-familial adults in which youth can discuss important issues of identity and morality and future life plans and goals. Along with the importance of having young adult mentors for youth to look up to as ideal examples of successful transitions into adulthood, providing opportunities for these older adolescents to work with and supervise younger adolescents is just as important, giving older adolescents the feeling of being respected and that they are making an

important contribution. Finally, as pressure from peers to engage in problem behaviors increases throughout adolescence, there is a rising need for programs to create and support positive peer groups to help youth develop strong social and personal identities.<sup>40</sup>

Programs need to be developmentally appropriate by providing opportunity for increasing autonomy and allowing youth to participate in program decision making and leadership, as well as by exposing youth to intellectually and cognitively challenging material. Eccles and Gootman suggest that programs for older youth should involve (1) an educational element that helps youth prepare for college courses, learn about multiple cultures, and develop the skills to navigate across multiple cultural settings; (2) opportunities to mentor younger adolescents and take on leadership roles; and (3) aid youth in focusing on their educational and career goals through providing career-related experiences in a variety of occupational settings and career planning activities. In combination, such supports will help young people develop personal strategies of success.<sup>41</sup>

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