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2012 Poll of Emerging Adults [Thriving, Struggling & Hopeful]

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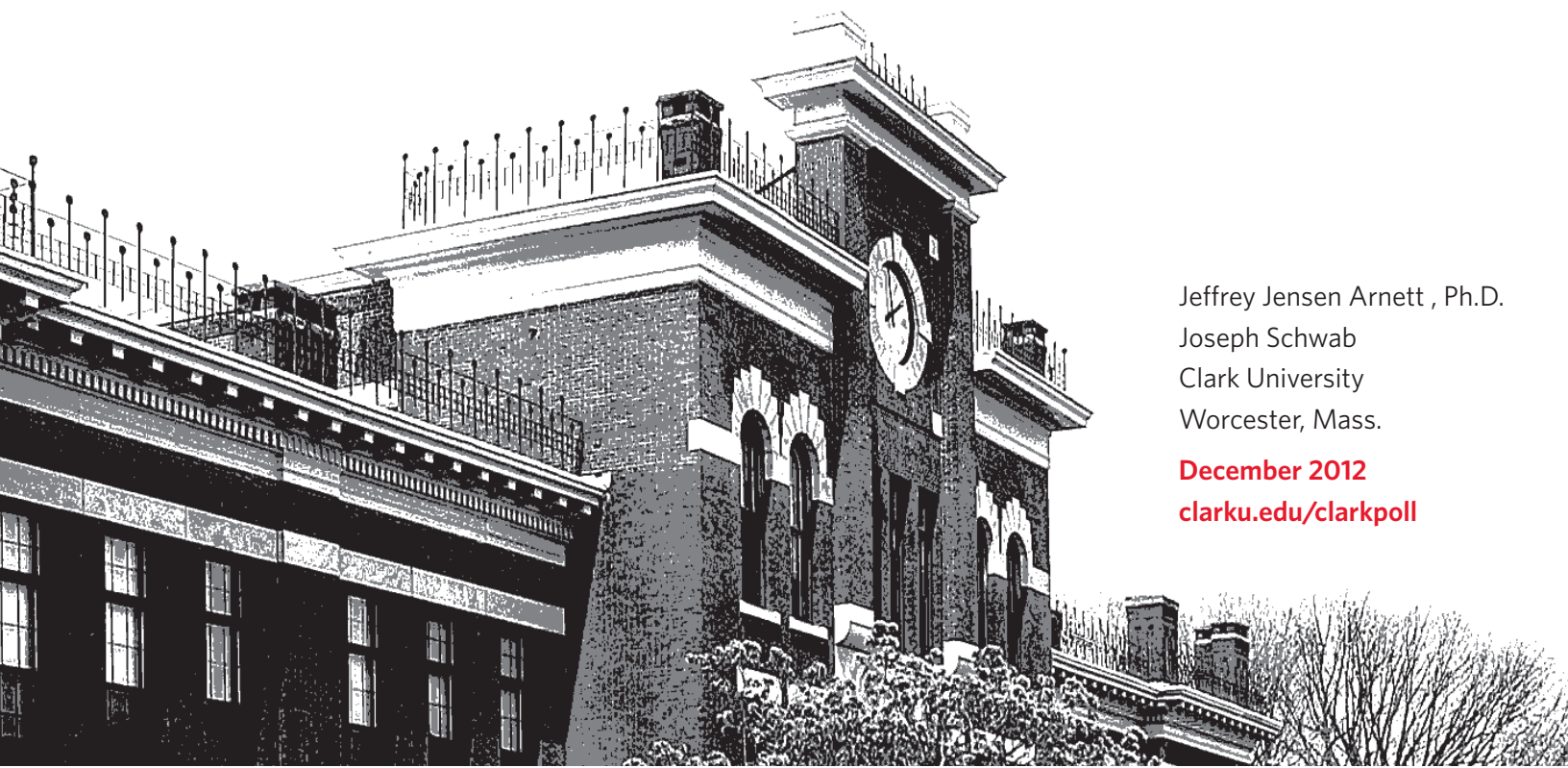
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THE
CLARK
UNIVERSITY
Poll
of Emerging
Adults

THRIVING,
STRUGGLING
& HOPEFUL

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett , Ph.D.
Joseph Schwab
Clark University
Worcester, Mass.

December 2012
clarku.edu/clarkpoll



Preface

A great deal of attention—most of it negative—is being paid to emerging adults (ages 18-29) in American society. We frequently hear that they are lazy, selfish, poorly educated, and both reluctant and ill-equipped to take on the responsibilities of adult life. We are told that they are, essentially, doomed: They are sure to have a less prosperous and enjoyable life than their parents did, given the depths of the 2008 recession that occurred just as they were trying to enter the job market and build a career. We are warned that they are clinging to an “extended adolescence” and never, ever want to grow up.

But are all these negative stereotypes actually true? With the first Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults (Worcester, Mass.), we intend to contribute data that can cast light on a wide range of questions regarding today’s emerging adults. In recent years, other research has made important contributions to understanding young Americans today. In fact, a whole new field of emerging adulthood has sprung up over the past decade, including a Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (www.ssea.org) and a new academic journal *Emerging Adulthood*. There have also been important reports by research organizations such as the Pew Foundation with its Millennials series. However, the Clark Poll is the first comprehensive national survey of the lives of emerging adults.

Why call them “emerging adults” and not “Millennials”? Research on Millennials has focused on generational differences, contrasting today’s 18- to 29-year-olds with other generations labeled Generation X, Baby Boomers, the Silent Generation, and the Greatest Generation. We agree that generational contrasts can be illuminating, but our focus is more on emerging adulthood as a life stage, not Millennials as a generation. In 2000, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett proposed that over the course of the past half century, a new life stage of emerging adulthood was created in between adolescence and young adulthood. The social and economic changes that contributed to the rise of emerging adulthood include the transition from a manufacturing economy to an economy based mainly on information,

“IT MAKES SENSE TO SEE EMERGING ADULthood AS A NEW LIFE STAGE RATHER THAN AS A GENERATIONAL SHIFT THAT WILL SOON SHIFT AGAIN.”

technology, and services; more and more young people pursuing longer and longer post-secondary education, to prepare themselves for jobs in the new economy; later ages of entering marriage and parenthood; and widespread acceptance (or at least tolerance) of premarital sex and cohabitation following the invention of the Pill in the 1960s. None of these changes is likely to be reversed in the foreseeable future, so for this reason it makes sense to see emerging adulthood as a new life stage rather than as a generational shift that will soon shift again.

If emerging adulthood is a new life stage, what are its distinctive features? Abundant research is now taking place on this question, and our report helps provide the answer. The answer is of more than merely academic interest. Potentially, it will influence how we regard today’s emerging adults and how much support we are willing to give them in our families and as a society. Not to give away the ending, but you will find in this report that emerging adults often struggle in the course of their long and sometimes perilous transition to adulthood. Yet, they are thriving in many ways, too, and they are remarkably hopeful about how their adult lives will turn out. Their optimism and determination should give the rest of us hope, too.

JEFFREY JENSEN ARNETT, Ph.D.

Research Professor of Psychology and Director
of the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Methodology of the Report	4
I. How Does It Feel to Be an Emerging Adult?	5
II. Views of Adulthood: On the Way but Not There Yet	7
III. Relations with Parents: Staying Close but Not Too Close	9
IV. Education and Work: Goals and Challenges	12
V. Love, Sex and Marriage: Old-Fashioned Dreams with a Modern Twist	15
VI. Social or Anti-Social Media?	17
VII. The Future: (Surprisingly) High Hopes	19

METHODOLOGY OF THE REPORT

Questions and requests for further information should be directed to Dr. Arnett: jarnett@clarku.edu

The Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults is based on 1,029 interviews of 18- to 29-year-olds, conducted by Purple Strategies, a survey research firm, from April 16 to April 26, 2012. Three methods were used to obtain participants: 529 interviews were conducted via the Internet, 400 via cell phone, and 100 via landline telephone.

All survey items were constructed by Jeffrey Arnett, in consultation with administrators at Clark and advisers at Steinreich Communications, a public relations firm. At Clark, the contributors were Vice President of Marketing and Communications Paula David and her team. At Steinreich, the contributors were Vice President Andrea Pass and her team.

The total sample was generally representative of the American population of 18- to 29-year-olds. Half the sample was male (51%) and half female (49%). In terms of ethnicity, 61% were White, 17% Latino/Latina, 12% African American, 5% Asian American, and 5% Other. Most were unmarried (76%) and had not yet had a child (71%). They were sampled from all regions of the country. One-fifth lived in the Midwest and one-fourth in the South, with somewhat fewer in the Northeast (18%) and somewhat more in the West (36%). Their socioeconomic backgrounds were diverse, as represented by mother's educational level: 29% high school diploma or less; 34% some college or vocational school; 37% four-year college degree or more. Their own educational achievement was similarly diverse: 21% high school diploma or less; 51% some college or vocational school; and 28% four-year college degree or more.

In preparing the report presented here, we conducted statistical analyses for all items by gender, age group (18-21, 22-25, and 26-29), ethnic group, and social class background (i.e., mother's educational level). When there were notable differences in these analyses, we included them in the report. However, we do not always state, for example, "no gender differences were found" for every analysis where there was no gender difference. If no group differences are reported, it can be assumed that no statistical difference was found.

CHAPTER ONE

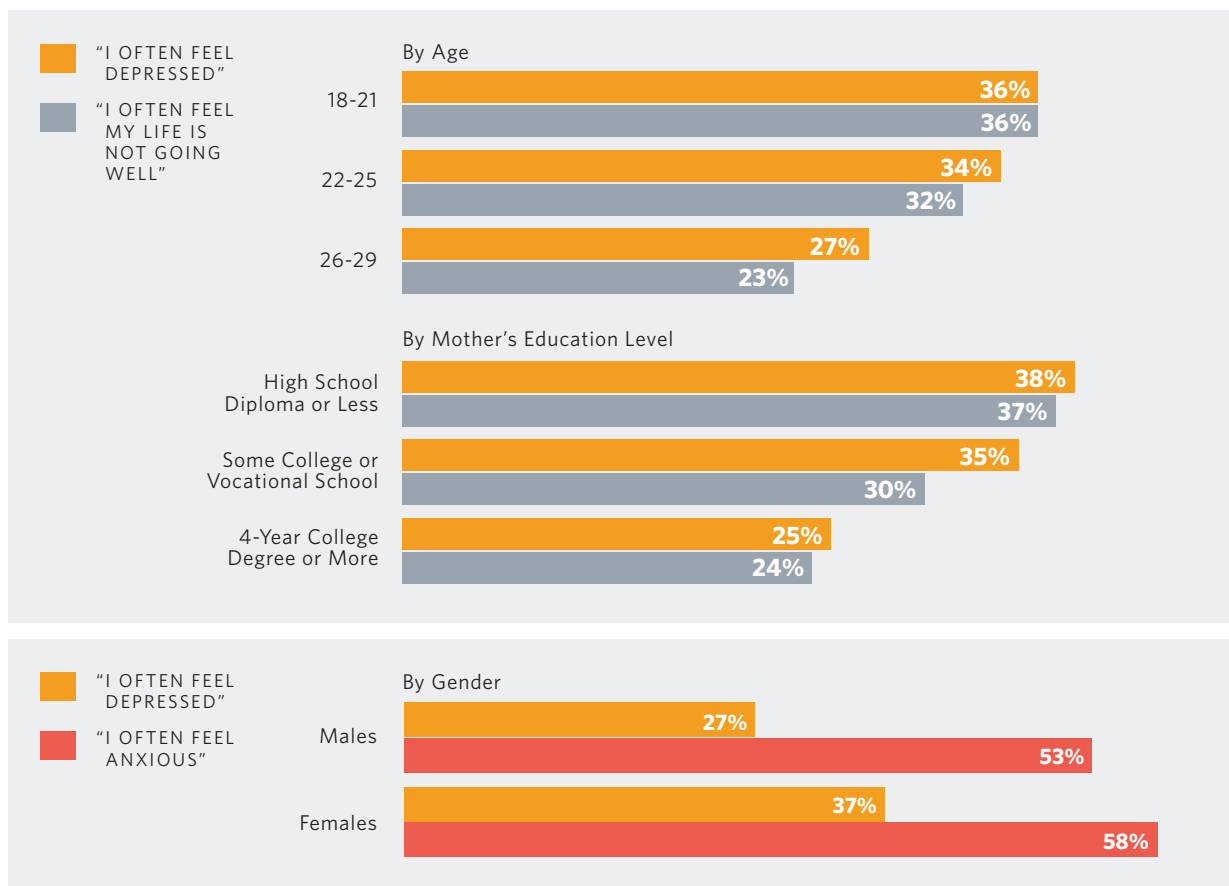
How Does It Feel to Be an Emerging Adult?

How do 18- to 29-year-olds feel about themselves and their lives today?

Is emerging adulthood a time of stress and gloom, or a time of fun and freedom? The poll results indicate that emerging adulthood is a fascinating blend of mixed emotions. Strong majorities agree that their current time of life is “fun and exciting” as well as a time when they have “a great deal of freedom.” Four in five are satisfied with their lives. On the other hand, majorities also agree that this is a stressful time of life and say they often feel anxious. Nearly one-third say they often feel depressed. Thirty percent agree that “I often feel my life is not going well.”

HOW DOES IT FEEL ?	% Agree (Somewhat or Strongly) with Each Statement	
	Statement	Percentage
	This time of my life is fun and exciting	83%
	This time of my life is full of changes	83%
	Overall, I am satisfied with my life	81%
	At this time of my life, I feel I have a great deal of freedom	73%
	This time of my life is stressful	72%
	This time of my life is full of uncertainty	64%
	I often feel anxious	56%
	I often feel depressed	32%
	I often feel that my life is not going well	30%

Negative appraisals of their lives are more common among emerging adults who are younger, among those who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (represented by mother’s educational level), and among females. Younger emerging adults are more likely to agree with the statements “I often feel my life is not going well” and “I often feel depressed.” Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are also more likely to agree with those two statements. Females are more likely than males to say they often feel anxious or depressed, a finding consistent with many other studies across the life span.

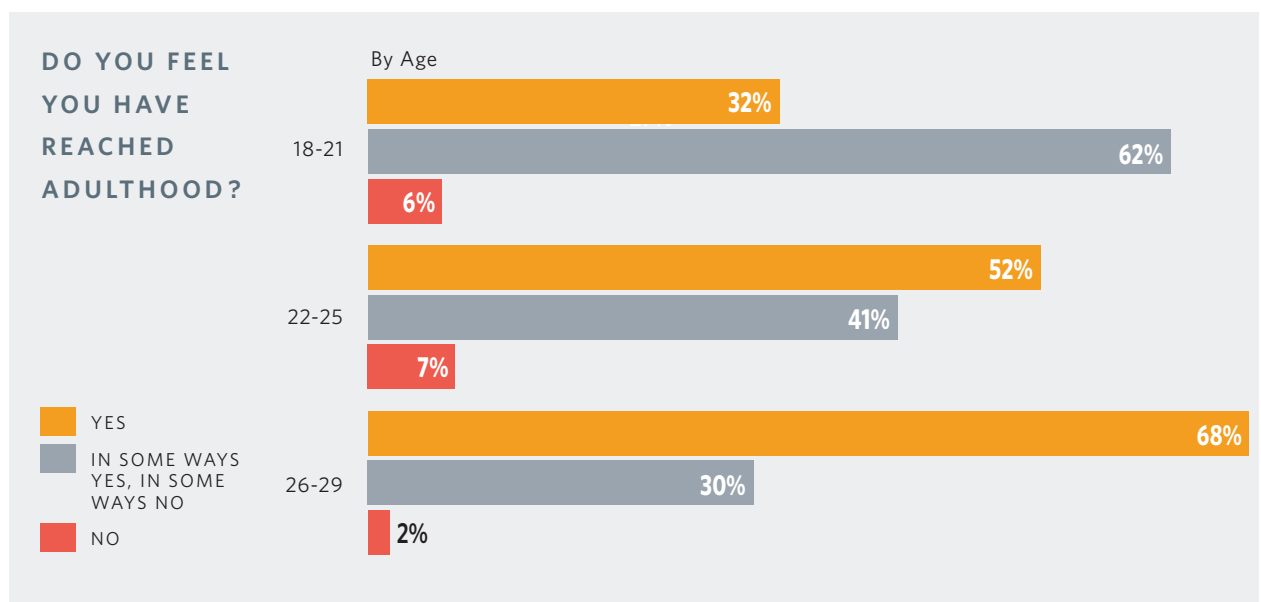


Their negative emotions may arise in part from the upheavals of the emerging adult life stage. Often emerging adults are struggling with big identity questions about who they are and how they fit into the world. Their lives are in flux as they try to make their way toward building a foundation for adulthood. In the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults, more than three-fourths (77%) of 18- to 29-year-olds agreed that “This is a time of my life for finding out who I really am.” Furthermore, 64% agreed that “This time of my life is full of uncertainty” and 83% agreed that “This time of my life is full of changes.” Younger emerging adults were more likely to agree that “This time of my life is full of changes,” which may explain why they also more often feel depressed and that life is not going well.

CHAPTER TWO

Views of Adulthood:
On the Way
but Not There Yet

Emerging adulthood has been proposed as an “in-between” life stage, a bridge from adolescence to a settled young adulthood. Is that how it feels to them? This sentiment appears to apply mainly to the youngest emerging adults. In response to the question “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” more than 60% of 18- to 21-year-olds feel that they have reached adulthood “in some ways yes, in some ways no,” but in the course of the twenties an increasing percentage answer with an unambiguous “yes.”



How do you know when you’ve reached adulthood? What criteria are most important? We gave respondents five options, including two traditional markers (finishing education and getting married) and three markers that are more gradual, and asked them to choose which one they regarded as most important for becoming an adult. “Accepting responsibility for yourself” and “becoming financially independent” ranked highest. “Finishing education” and “making independent decisions” ranked in the middle, and getting married was lowest of all, chosen by just 4%.

WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT FOR BECOMING AN ADULT ?	Which of the following do you think is MOST important for becoming an adult?	
	Accepting responsibility for yourself	36%
	Becoming financially independent	30%
	Finishing education	16%
	Making independent decisions	14%
	Getting married	4%

Marriage has traditionally been regarded as the ultimate marker of adulthood, historically and across cultures. So what has happened to it? Probably a number of factors contributed to its demise. Marriage used to mark, for most people, their first sexual relationship, but now it does not, with the average age of first sexual intercourse about 17 and the median marriage age in the United States at 27 for women and 29 for men. It used to mark, for most people, especially young women, the first time they lived with anyone outside their family, but it no longer does: the median age of leaving home is 18-19, nearly a decade before the entry to marriage. Marriage is still important, of course, and celebrated more expensively than ever, but it is not as dramatic a transition as it used to be and no longer signifies the entry to adulthood.

What matters most is accepting responsibility for oneself and becoming financially independent. These criteria have in common that they represent individual autonomy and self-sufficiency. In the view of today's young people, you have reached adulthood when you have learned to stand alone, without relying on others (especially your parents). Only then are you ready to take on commitments to others in marriage and parenthood.

Although they regard their current time of life as fun and exciting, most emerging adults believe their adult lives will be even better. Fifty-nine percent agreed with the statement "I think adulthood will be more enjoyable than my life is now." Only 24% agreed that "I think adulthood will be boring" and only 35% endorsed the statement "If I could have my way, I would never become an adult." The majority may see adulthood as providing a relief from the instability and stress of their current lives.

CHAPTER THREE

Relations with Parents: Staying Close but Not Too Close

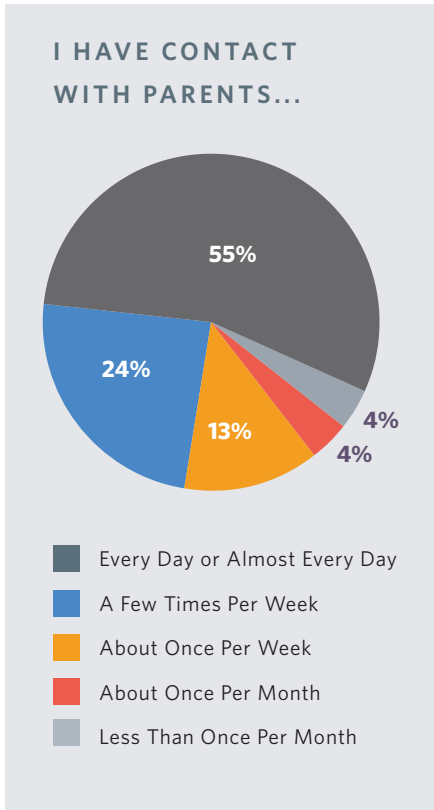
Emerging adulthood is a time when most young Americans move out of their parents' household, but this transition takes place gradually over the 18 to 29 age period. Among 18- to 21-year-olds, 47% still live with parents; by age 26 to 29, this proportion has dropped to 15%. Conversely, only 7% of 18- to 21-year-olds live with a husband or wife; by age 26 to 29, 38% do.

WHAT'S YOUR CURRENT LIVING ARRANGEMENT ?

Live with (%):

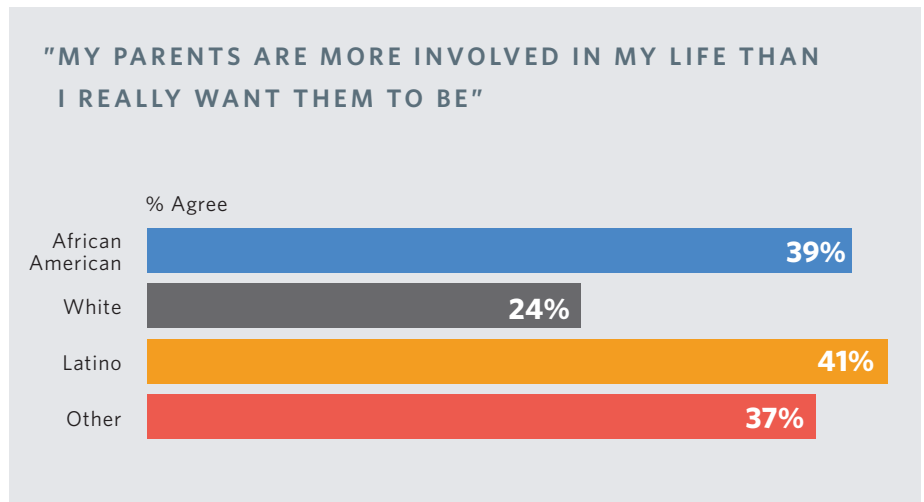
Parents	30%
Husband or wife	23%
Friends or roommates	16%
Alone	14%
Boyfriend or girlfriend	13%

Most emerging adults still have close relationships with their parents. More than half (55%) say they have contact with their parents via texting, email, phone, or in person every day or almost every day, and an additional 24% keep in contact at least a few times per week.

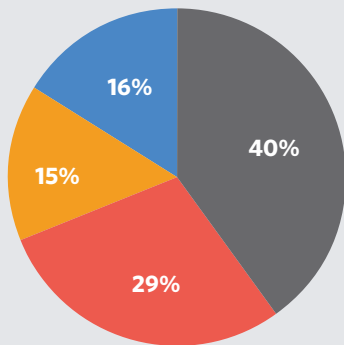


This frequent contact reflects relationships between emerging adults and parents that are generally close and harmonious. More than three-fourths of emerging adults (76%) say that they get along a lot better with their parents now than they did in their mid-teens. However, for a substantial proportion of emerging adults, their parents are a bit too close; 30% say that their parents are more involved in their lives than they really want them to be.

There are notable ethnic differences on this item, with more African American (39%) and Latino (41%) emerging adults saying their parents are more involved than they would like, compared to 24% of Whites. African American and Latino cultures both have long traditions of family closeness and mutual support, but many emerging adults in these ethnic groups find this to be a mixed blessing.



FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM PARENTS



- Little or None
- Occasional Support When Needed
- Frequent Support When Needed
- Regular Support When Needed

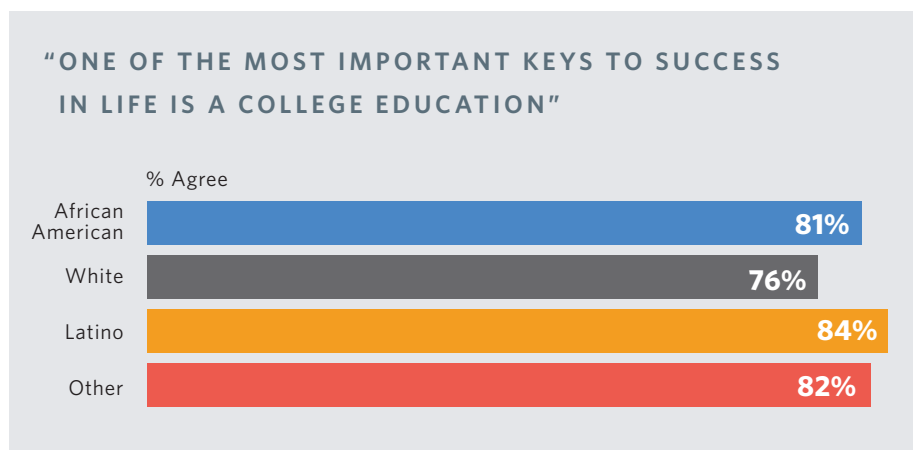
Although emerging adults are in frequent contact with parents and view their relations with parents positively, most have established a substantial amount of financial independence. In fact, 40% say they receive little or no financial support from their parents, 29% get occasional support when needed, and only 16% get regular support for living expenses. Parental support declines steadily with age. Among 18- to 21-year-olds, 28% receive regular support for living expenses, but by ages 22 to 25 this drops to 15%, and by ages 26 to 29 to just 6%.

Furthermore, nearly three-fourths (74%) of emerging adults say that they would prefer to live independently of their parents, even if it means living on a tight budget. Much as they might love their parents, they also prefer to have some distance from them, physically and emotionally, so that they are free to make their own decisions and run their own lives.

CHAPTER FOUR

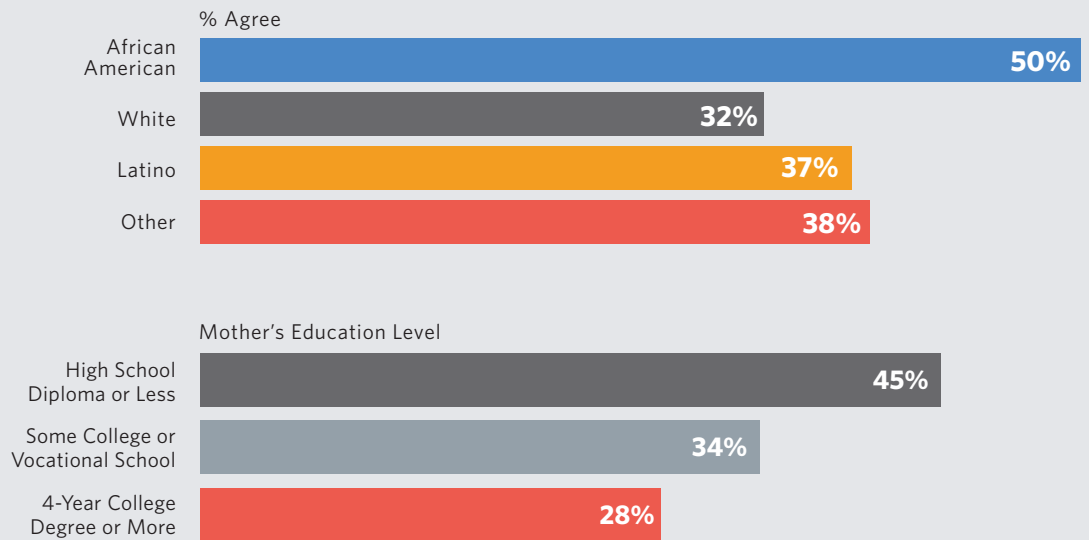
Education and
Work: Goals
and Challenges

Most emerging adults today continue their education beyond high school, with 79% of the Clark Poll participants having at least some college or vocational school experience. Twenty-eight percent have completed at least a four-year college degree. It is clear that emerging adults value higher education, with 78% agreeing that “One of the most important keys to success in life is a college education.” African American (81%) and Latino (84%) emerging adults are especially likely to agree with this statement, compared to 76% of Whites.



However, for many emerging adults the opportunity for a college education is limited by lack of resources. More than one-third (36%) agree that “I have not been able to find enough financial support to get the education I need.” Ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds play a major role in opportunities for higher education. One half (50%) of African American emerging adults have not been able to find enough financial support for their educational goals, as compared to 37% of Latino emerging adults and 32% of Whites. With regard to socioeconomic status (SES), nearly half (45%) of emerging adults from a lower SES have not had enough financial support to reach their educational goals, while 34% from a middle SES and 28% from a higher SES have had the same struggle.

“I HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO FIND ENOUGH FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO GET THE EDUCATION I NEED”

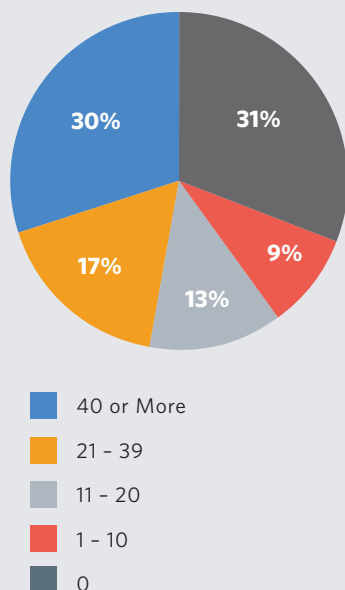


Despite valuing higher education, emerging adults are still optimistic about the future prospects for those without a college degree. Overall, two-thirds (66%) agree that it's possible to get a good job even if you do not have a college education. Although their optimism in this area may be a useful psychological resource given that many of them cannot afford the education they believe they need, it may also be seen as worrisome in an era when a college degree is more important than ever for career success. Over the past 40 years, wages for college graduates have risen, whereas wages for those with only a high school diploma have steadily declined.

"IT'S POSSIBLE TO GET A GOOD JOB EVEN IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COLLEGE EDUCATION"



HOURS EMPLOYED PER WEEK



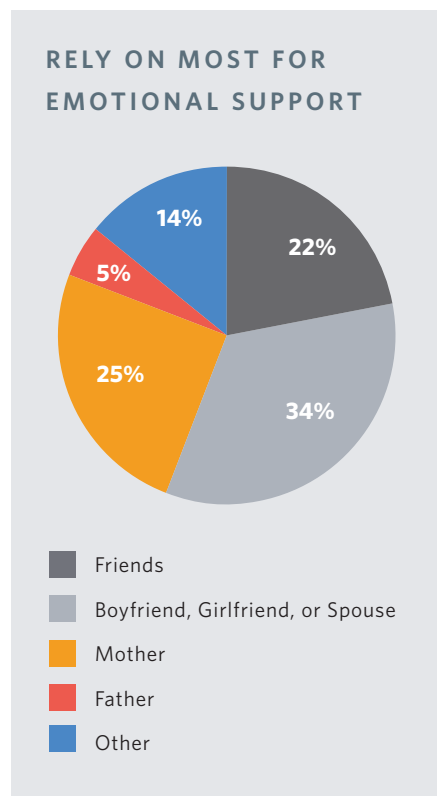
In addition to pursuing further education and training beyond high school, most emerging adults are also working. Nearly one-third (30%) of emerging adults are currently working full-time (40 hours or more per week), with another third (30%) working part-time (between 11 and 39 hours per week), and a final third (31%) not working at all.

Most emerging adults who are going to school are also in the labor force. Among part-time students, 84% are also employed. Even among full-time students, 70% are employed, and 59% are working more than 20 hours a week. Other research has reported that today's college students are more likely to be employed than their parents were in their student days, primarily because the cost of higher education has risen so much.

Some surveys have indicated that today's emerging adults place a high priority on making a lot of money, but the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults shows that other considerations come first. According to our results, 79% of emerging adults agree that "It is more important to enjoy my job than to make a lot of money," and 86% agree that "It is important to me to have a career that does some good in the world." Despite their optimism about the job that they hope to have, emerging adults today are having a bit of difficulty finding this ideal job, with nearly two-thirds (59%) agreeing that they haven't been able to find the kind of job they really want.

CHAPTER FIVE

Love, Sex and Marriage: Old-Fashioned Dreams with a Modern Twist



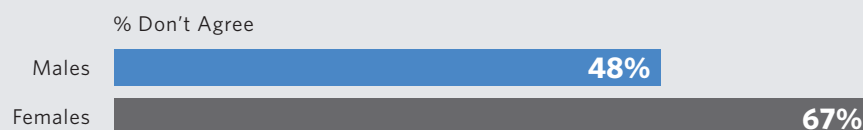
There is a lot of diversity in the relationship status of emerging adults. Twenty-three percent are currently married, mostly among the 26- to 29-year-olds, while 22% have a close boyfriend or girlfriend, and 10% are living with their partner. Only 8% describe themselves as being in a casual relationship and only 7% are occasionally dating. It is also important to note that there is a sizeable minority of emerging adults who are not in a current romantic relationship (29%).

With such an array of relationships, whom exactly do emerging adults rely on for emotional support? More than one-third (34%) rely most on a boyfriend, girlfriend or spouse. Friends are also relied on quite a bit (22%), but slightly more, 25%, rely most on their mothers. Fathers don't fare as well, with only 5% of emerging adults relying on them the most.

Of course, these patterns vary quite a bit according to whether emerging adults have a current romantic relationship. The majority of those who have a close romantic relationship—spouse, cohabiting partner, or close boyfriend/girlfriend—rely on that person most (59%). Those who don't have a close partner rely most on friends (35%) or moms (32%).

Given the media attention to “hooking up” among today’s young people, perhaps it will be seen as surprising that the majority have views on sex that are actually quite traditional. Less than half (42%) agree that it is OK for two people to have sex even if they are not emotionally involved with each other. There is an important gender difference here, though, as males agree much more with this sentiment (52%) than females do (33%).

"IT'S OK FOR TWO PEOPLE TO HAVE SEX EVEN IF THEY ARE NOT EMOTIONALLY INVOLVED WITH EACH OTHER"



Many emerging adults also believe in a traditional version of marriage and family life. More than two-thirds (69%) agree that couples should be married before they have a child. A vast majority also hold very optimistic ideals about marriage, with 86% expecting to have a marriage that lasts a lifetime. Most place a high value on having a happy family life and are willing to make personal sacrifices in order to achieve it: 60% expect that they will give up some career goals in order to have the family life they want. But there is a modern twist to this theme: although traditionally it is mainly women who have sacrificed their career goals for the sake of family life, in our sample young men were just as likely as young women to have this expectation.

CHAPTER SIX

Social or
Anti-Social Media?

Social media usage is seen as a young person's arena, but emerging adults have an ambivalent relationship with their electronic world. Half (51%) of emerging adults say they rely a lot on the support they get from friends and family through email, texting, and social networking websites, but nearly half (47%) sometimes feel like they spend too much time on social networking websites. Younger emerging adults (18 to 21) are more likely than older emerging adults (26 to 29) to derive support from electronic means, as well as to express concern that social networking websites take up too much of their time. Similarly, young women are more likely than young men to say they rely on electronic support from others (56% to 47%), but they are also more likely to express concern that social networking websites absorb too much of their time (54% to 40%).

"I RELY A LOT ON THE SUPPORT I GET FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY THROUGH EMAIL, TEXTING, AND SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES"



"SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE I SPEND TOO MUCH TIME ON SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES"



It appears that emerging adults see the utility in social networking while at the same time recognizing some of its drawbacks. A substantial minority (34%) of emerging adults admit that they feel anxious if they have to go more than a couple of hours without checking for electronic messages such as texts, emails, or Facebook posts.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Future:
(Surprisingly)
High Hopes

Life is not easy for emerging adults. They have an unemployment rate that is consistently double the overall rate. Those who do have a job usually make very little money for most of their twenties. Nearly all aspire to a college degree, but fewer than one-third have attained one by ages 25 to 29. Most move away from the comfort and support of the family home to take on the formidable task of finding a place in the world. It's not surprising, given these circumstances, that so many of them say they often feel stressed, anxious or depressed, as we have seen earlier in the report.

What may be more surprising is that, despite the many challenges of the emerging adulthood life stage, most of them remain hopeful that their lives will ultimately work out well. Nearly 9 of 10 agree that "I am confident that eventually I will get what I want out of life." Almost as many agree that "At this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible." And, despite frequent claims that they face a diminished future and will be the first generation in American history to do worse economically than their parents, more than three-fourths agree that "I believe that, overall, my life will be better than my parents' lives have been."

HIGH HOPES

% Agree

I believe that, overall, my life will be better than my parents' lives have been.	77%
I am confident that eventually I will get what I want out of life.	89%
At this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible.	83%

But is this optimism only for the well-off, the college-educated, the emerging adults who have all the advantages and so have every reason to believe life will smile on them? **On the contrary, emerging adults from low-SES backgrounds are, if anything, more optimistic than their high-SES counterparts.** They are more, not less, likely to believe that "overall, my life will be better than my parents' lives have been." This may be because they have seen their low-SES parents struggle through life, and, starting from this low baseline, they believe they have nowhere to go but up. In any case, clearly they do not believe that their low-SES backgrounds will prevent them from having the kind of lives they want.

“I BELIEVE THAT OVERALL MY LIFE WILL BE BETTER THAN MY PARENTS’ LIVES HAVE BEEN”



In another sense, perhaps it should not surprise us that emerging adults are so optimistic and hopeful. Despite the recent economic downturn, young Americans still live in the wealthiest country in human history in its wealthiest era yet.

And then there is the potent benefit of simply being young. As Aristotle observed of the youth of his time more than two millennia ago, “They have high aspirations; for they have never yet been humiliated by the experience of life, but are unacquainted with the limiting force of circumstances.” Despite all the changes in the world since then, it is still true that youth is a time of promise, a time when dreams are cheap, because no one knows yet how their dreams will turn out. Rather than scoffing at their naiveté, perhaps it would be wiser to see their optimism as a psychological resource that they can draw upon as they move through their emerging adult years. They start out with big dreams at age 18, and nearly all of them get knocked down a few times in the course of their twenties. It is their optimism, their self-belief, that enables them to get up again.

**SOURCES AND
SUGGESTIONS FOR
FURTHER READING**

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Also see Dr. Arnett's website, jeffrearnett.com, and the website of the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults, clarku.edu/clarkpoll.

THE
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