

Adjusting to the Changing Relationships with your Family

Adolescence was not recognised as a separate developmental stage until the late 1800s; before then, people as young as 13yo were considered adults. Psychologist G. Stanly Hall (1844-1924) was the first to coin this stage as being uniquely different.

Jeffery Arnett subsequently went on to describe the phrase “emerging adult” in 2000, which refers to the period between 18 – 25yo when young people enter a unique period of life. It is characterised by pursuing education, job instability, being unmarried and childless. To be an emerging adult today “is to experience both excitement and uncertainty, wide-open possibility and confusion, new freedoms and fears” (Arnett, 2004).

Historically, the completion of adolescence has been marked by gaining independent employment, getting married or leaving home, however, these indicators are no longer so clear as young adults often live at home longer and put off employment/marriage in the pursuit of tertiary qualifications or travel. This places pressure on the parent-child relationship, as this period of “semi-autonomy” has unclear limits about expectations, rights and responsibilities.

Leaving school and starting university can be embedded with many complex emotions; delight at graduating from school, nervousness about launching into the unknown, uncertainty about the academic and practical requirements ahead and perhaps even some guilt about moving away from your family and friends to start this journey.

Then when you arrive at university, the delight you felt about leaving school can suddenly diminish, as while you have more freedom, you might find yourself missing the confines and clear role you had in the school environment! To make this more complicated, you may find yourself struggling to adjust to the changing style of your relationships.

Families are complex and varied constructs, and regardless if you come from a blended, single parent, same sex or foster family, chances are your upbringing has had a profound impact on you. This becomes most apparent if you have experienced a dysfunctional or abusive family, or if you have been required to take on a parenting role.

If you live at college, when you go back home during holidays, how do you relate to your parents who haven't seen your growth and freedom, and who still might be directive in their parenting style? If you still live at home, how do you communicate your changing needs given they have developed rapidly? And how do your parents quickly adjust their parenting to respect your need for more space and independence? You may justifiably expect to have stepped out of the parental hierarchy now, however, how do you negotiate these emerging expectations so as to preserve/create positive relationships with your loved ones?

Communicate! Speak openly and respectfully about issues as they arrive - “I know I’m still your son/daughter, but I am used to making my own decisions now”. Similarly, remind yourself that their (sometimes irritating) advice is well intended, and comes from their greater life experiences. Communication is equally important during the trimester, as parents who are kept more up to date with your life when you are away or busy will have less need to bombard you with questions or instructions – if it’s hard to remember, consider designating a specific day and time when you will talk. Of course, the reverse can also happen, whereby your parents get so used to your independence that they might not recognise your need to be fussed over when you return! It’s all about striving for a healthy balance, and clear and open communication is at the centre of achieving this.

Walk the talk! If you want more responsibility and freedom, then earn it by being trustworthy, respectful and reliable. This includes being “independently helpful” – offer to do jobs without being asked and be mindful that your parents may have a certain way of doing things given it is *their* home (you moved out, remember?!). Consider if you could spontaneously cook a meal, do the grocery shopping, vacuum the house, mow the lawn or walk the family dog.

Educate them! You now have something of an understanding of the demands of study life (i.e. hours to be dedicated, complexity of academic tasks etc), however, if your parents haven’t studied, or it’s been a long time, be aware that they are unlikely to understand the limits of your time and might expect that you have all holidays to help them with odd jobs/sit and chat. Endeavour to explain the reality to them so you don’t get irritated by repeated requests to help with odd jobs or comments about your limited availability.

Be honest! If you are not coping at university, speak up. Remember that your parents are typically emotionally invested in your decision to study, and their help may be critical to overcoming early challenges. They can’t help if they don’t know. If you are worried about criticism, consider speaking with the Counselling Service to develop a solution that keeps you moving forward.

Plan time together! Even if you still live at home, the transition to university makes life busier, and so most parents value being a part of these new experiences. Planning some family time where they can get up to date with the changes in your life may help them feel included and reduce their concern about your ability to forward plan. Maybe you could have a family meal before you head back to college, or arrange some special time without your siblings around?

The good news: 66% of parents polled in a recent American study indicated that they “have more companionship with my child” during the emerging adulthood stage (Arnett, 2014). This correlated with a similar finding that emerging adults typically perceive an increased sense of connectedness to their parents upon leaving for college (Lefkowitz, 2005). The stats are therefore on your side to build a meaningful, more mature relationship with your parents, so make this time count!

If you require any additional assistance navigating these changing relationships, consider making an appointment with UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) by calling (02) 6773 2897.

References:

Arnett, J (2004). *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*. Oxford University Press.

Arnett, J (2014). *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*, Second Edition. Oxford University Press.

Lefkowitz E (2005). Things have gotten better: Developmental changes among emerging adults after the transition to university. *Journal of Adolescent Research*. 20:40–63.