

Preparing Young Adults for Work Life

Do you remember the scene in the movie *The Graduate*, Dustin Hoffman as Benjamin Braddock lying on an inner tube drifting around a swimming pool with his head submerged? It is a wonderful cinematic image symbolizing how aimless this young man is feeling having just graduated from college but uncertain about his future. He is not ready for adulthood. When his father's business partner and friend says he has one word of advice for him "plastics" he thanks him politely yet feels no comfort from his confused state of trying to figure out his future.

The transition to adulthood has always been a challenging one. These days, that transition to adulthood is more complex and is taking longer than it did for parents, who went through it 30-40 years ago. Today's young adults are stretching the transition to adulthood on the following five indicators of independence:

1. length of time to complete post-secondary education,
2. financial independence through full-time employment,
3. living independently by leaving home permanently,
4. living in a common law partnership or marriage and finally
5. having children

In fact, the transitions of today's young adults are both delayed and elongated. They are delayed, because young adults take more time to complete their first major transition (leaving post-secondary school), thus postponing all subsequent transitions. It is elongated, because each subsequent transition takes longer to complete and stretches the process from their late teens into their early 30s. In contrast, parents of today's young adults, the 1970s cohort, packed more transitions into the years from their late teens to their mid-20s and fewer stretched into their early 30s.

It is important for parents of young adults to recognize that our 'children' will take on average 3-6 years longer to launch into adulthood than we did. This will occur, despite the elimination of grade thirteen. By age 35, today's women on average have accomplished the same developmental tasks as their mothers and are more educated. Men at age 35, on the other hand, have done less than their fathers had by this age. This is likely due to differing labour conditions in the 1970's there was full-time "promise of a lifetime" employment. Whereas today's young adults face a less secure work environment offering more part-time work with fewer benefits. Especially among young men, this is a contributing factor to delays in the transition to adulthood and family formation. (Statistics Canada, **Warren Clark** 2008, *Canadian Social Trends*.)

So, if the transition to adulthood is delayed and elongated for our young adult "children", we must be careful not judge them by our own "when I was your age" frame of reference. This is not easy as parents. We have invested so much effort, time and money all these years to help them become independent. It requires great emotional patience and, for some, more financial support. We may need to adjust our expectations.

This elongated transition also challenges us to examine what is normal and what needs our attention. What are beyond normal struggles for our young adult children at this time? Are they really lost and directionless, lacking the skills to succeed or is this confusion a normal stage of self discovery and learning?

Signs a Young Adult is Struggling in the Transition to Work-life

According to Dr. Mel Levine author of Ready or Not, Here Life Comes, here are some of the signs that your son or daughter may need some assistance in navigating the transition to adulthood.

- Reluctance to bid farewell to adolescence such as adolescent “coolness” attire, attitudes and behaviours rather than retaining the positive memories and giving up the restricting immature adolescent values.
- Disinterest in the lives of adults and their activities. No interest in being a ‘student’ of adulthood. It may take the form of angry rebellion or it could be more passive alienation.
- Falling from “idol” status as a teenager such as the star High School athlete, exceptionally gifted student or extremely popular party-er.
- Attraction to pursuits which fail to mesh with their abilities
- Lack of awareness of their own cognitive abilities or limitations including those with learning disabilities and ADHD
- Absence of self awareness, social awareness, ability to learn from experience, and social skills
- Chronic feelings of anguish and questions about their own self worth
- Being ill-equipped with a durable work temperament having been immersed in a culture that reinforces instant rewards rather than patient sustained mental effort.
- Trouble making a commitment to a single area of interest and instead gravitating toward a steady flow of diverse distractions

How Parents Can Communicate Best to Assist Young Adults

Don't:

- **Preach or lecture** – it is an ineffective way to convey your ideas and alienates young adults
- **Criticize or accuse** – It is not an effective way to influence and can damage confidence
- **Let your them know you're disappointed in them** – You are the one they want to impress, so your disappointment could ruin their self-esteem and motivation

"Traditionally, early adulthood has been a period when young people acquire the skills they need to get jobs, to start families, and to contribute to their communities. But because of the changing nature of families, the education system, and the workplace, the process has become more complex. This means that early adulthood has become a difficult period for some young people, especially those who are not going to college and lack the structure that school can provide to facilitate their development"

—Frank Furstenberg, Chair Network on Transition to Adulthood

Do:

- **Be tolerant and patient** – The transition takes longer for all young adults these days for reasons mentioned above and many others. Also some people take longer to settle into a career.
- **Offer advice** – try to give advice when requested or when they are receptive. Make sure it is realistic, well informed and not moralistic. Admit when you don't know something and suggest how they can get better advice from another adult.
- **Be a Sounding Board-** Listen and help review options with them as a low-key consultant
- **Protect when needed** – be careful not to convey that you do not trust their judgement. Share your wisdom through life lessons you learned by mistakes made.
- **Show respect for their current lifestyle** – It is critical that no matter how disappointed you may feel as a parent that you demonstrate love and concern for them as a person with their own individuality. Cutting them off eliminates your influence in the future
- **Seek Counselling when needed** – No point in struggling alone when there may be some benefit in sorting through some issues between you and your child either together or separately.

Financial Support – 66% of young adults 19-29 depend on their parents and loans. Partial subsidy of your young adult's education and other work-life preparation activities is good if you can afford it. Make sure that they also contribute a reasonable portion through summer and part-time employment. Total financial support destroys incentive, and promotes dependency.

Living at Home – This is often necessary for financial reasons because of high housing costs. It can also be supportive for a young adult. However, it is wise to forge a new more adult to adult relationship. For example perhaps the young adult could contribute in money or “in kind” duties for rent. Often young adults leave and return to live at home again several times. This “come and go” is a common phenomenon these days for over 20% during ages 22 to 35. It is best seen as a part of getting on their feet economically and psychologically as the process of establishing a different kind of closeness with parents. It is best not to think about it or convey the view that it is a “failure to launch” into adulthood.

Additional Growth Experiences for Young Adults - Throughout the ages, young adults have been mentored, apprenticed, guided, trained and socialized by significant adults and activities outside the family circle. We may have come to rely on post-secondary educational institutions to provide the necessary structure and activities for the transition of young adults. The larger social, religious or business community can also help out during this transition to adulthood. Activities like military training, community service work, business internships, travel adventures to other cultures and countries are a few of these enriching and valuable opportunities for work life preparation.

It is a good idea to help young adults look beyond the family and to explore and pursue these types of valuable life learning endeavours as well. Parents can play an important role in using their own social network of friends, neighbours and work associates to help find opportunities for their young adult son or daughter.

Like Dustin Hoffman's journey in *The Graduate*, the transition to adulthood includes mistakes and misadventures. In the end, Dustin dramatically rescues his true love Katherine Ross from marrying the wrong guy. When he drives away in his convertible sports car with her, still wearing her wedding dress, one is left with no sense of what will happen next in his life. However, one is has a distinct feeling that Dustin Hoffman, like most young adults, has learned a lot about himself and some important lessons about life along the way.