

When Will Americans in Their Twenties Grow Up?

Welcome to This Is America from VOA Learning English. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Jim Tedder. This week on our program, we look at changes in the lives of Americans in their 20s.

Young people legally become adults at the age of 18. They can vote and sign contracts. But adulthood is more than a legal definition. Many Americans do not really consider young people "adults" until they move out of their parents' home and start a career.

These days, people in their 20s are often criticized for delaying adulthood. Yet some researchers say this criticism may be misplaced.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett is a research professor of psychology at Clark University in Massachusetts. He studies people in their 20s — or "20-somethings." Mr. Arnett says 20-somethings today are different than their parents and grandparents were at that age.

"Now that people stay in education longer, they get married later, they have their first child later, the 20s are a period of really trying out different possibilities and moving from one thing to another."

As a result, he says, the 20s are no longer about settling down. Instead they are increasingly about exploring.

Today's 20-somethings are often called "millennials." They grew up around the time of the millennium in the year 2000.

Like other generations, millennials share some things in common. Millennials are staying in school longer and getting married later — the average age is almost 27 for women and almost 29 for men.

Some millennials lack full-time jobs, and many are living at home or getting financial help from their parents.

Are these adults?

The law says yes. In the United States and many other countries, 18 is the "age of majority." This means people are considered old enough to be held legally responsible for their actions.

But societies usually have their own definitions of adulthood, their own expectations for what being an adult means. The United Nations defines adulthood as a period of independence and, at the same time, responsibility to a community.

Journalists and researchers have been looking for new ways to describe the changes in the lives of the millennial generation. Some say today's 20-somethings are living an "extended adolescence." In other words, they are still like teenagers.

Others say they are having a "delayed adulthood."

The term “boomerang kids” is popular. That means young people leave their parents’ house but, like a boomerang thrown through the air, later return.

Research psychologist Jeffrey Arnett says these terms can suggest that many Americans are frustrated with 20-somethings.

“There’s a tendency at least in the United States for people to look at this negatively and to deplore it and say what’s wrong with them that they won’t they grow up?”

He calls the 20s a “special decade of life.” He says Americans should consider the positive aspects. For example, 20-somethings usually have a series of school and work experiences. They may have several serious romantic relationships. Or they might try living in different cities or even different countries.

“It’s the freest time of your life. It’s the one time of your life where you can get up and go basically anywhere you want and travel and experience new things, do a service project in some remote part of the world, or just experience the freedom of being on your own in your 20s.”

He calls this a time of “emerging adulthood.” In other words, 20-somethings are more mature than adolescents but not quite full adults. He says because emerging adults try so many things, they will ultimately make better choices about work, love and home.

Cheryssa Jensen might agree.

Cheryssa is 27 years old. She grew up in New Jersey, not far from New York City. She says she expected to get married right after college and to find a job near her parents. Instead, she joined an international exchange program called Up with People.

“We traveled the western part of the U.S. We went to a dozen different cities there. We went to Mexico and the Philippines.”

Her job also took her to Taiwan, Sweden and Denmark. After more than a year of traveling, she was not sure what to do.

“So I went back to New Jersey and I moved in with my parents for about nine months.”

Eventually, one of Cheryssa’s friends invited her to share an apartment in Washington. Cheryssa found a job at another nonprofit group and made new friends. She had a great life, she says. But she was not ready to settle down.

“Something was nagging at me, saying, ‘What else, what else can you do, what else can you do while you’re young?’”

So Cheryssa and a friend moved to Denver, Colorado, near the Rocky Mountains in the western United States. After almost a year, they decided they wanted to live closer to the ocean. So they moved across the country again, this time to Florida.

Now she is back in Washington. She is looking for a job and living temporarily with friends. She is not sure yet how long she will stay.

“Eventually I would like to have a family, and a more stable professional job long-term, but I don’t know, it’s really hard when there’s so many opportunities, there’s so much out there in the world to see and to experience.”

Cheryssa says all her exploring has helped her to understand herself better and to know what makes her happy.

Professor Arnett would probably call Cheryssa Jensen an “emerging adult.” She calls herself a “grown-up kid.”

Julia Shaw is 28, just a year older than Cheryssa, but very different in the way she has lived her life so far.

“Do you feel like an adult?”

“[Pause] Yes.”

After earning a bachelor’s degree, Julia moved to Washington and married her 25-year-old boyfriend from college. By that time he was in law school. Julia began her career as a writer and political thinker. She and her husband have stayed in Washington, and have lived in the same small apartment for the last two years.

Julia says many people are surprised that she is married and settled in one place. But she believes she is more free than many other people of her generation.

“I’ve seen a lot of articles about millennials, where their parents are paying for their phone bills. They’re sharing Netflix accounts. A lot of people still are on their parents’ insurance. Their parents even supplement their incomes, even people as old as me. That really wasn’t an option for us when we got married. We saw each other as the person that we rely on. We’re not driving home to see our parents. We’re not relying on them for everything.”

Yes, the 20s is an unstable decade, she says, because people are doing so many things for the first time. But she says marriage has made her life more stable.

Even though their stories are different, Julia and Cheryssa still have some things in common. Both say their families are proud of them. Both say they do not feel pressured by society to follow a particular path. And both say they are happy with their decisions.

The fact that both are female is probably also significant. Research psychologist Jeffrey Arnett says the decade of the 20s has changed especially for women.

The feminist movement and the introduction of the birth control pill in the 1960s gave young women more choices. Today, for the most part, American society allows women to be as independent as men. That means young women have more freedom to get married and start families if they choose, or continue their education, or begin careers.

Julia Shaw and Cheryssa Jensen have something else in common. They have not made a high-paying career their first priority. The Pew study of millennials found that only 15 percent of women and men say a job that pays a lot of money is most important to them.

Instead, most in the survey said the most important things to them are being good parents, having a successful marriage and helping other people.

Maybe one reason millennials are not so focused on high-paying jobs is because there are not very many available. Sarah Ayers is an economic policy analyst at the Center for American Progress. She says the high unemployment rate for millennials has already hurt them.

“Young Americans today have accumulated less wealth than their parents did at their age. One in four student loan borrowers is delinquent on their loans. And of course most of them can’t even think about beginning to save for retirement. So really this economy is not working for this generation.”

Sarah Ayers says the slow start for millennials also hurts society.

“When you have people who are not moving out of their parents’ home, obviously they are not signing up for cable [TV] packages, or buying new furniture and appliances. When you also have young people who are struggling to pay their student loans as many are, that’s money that they’re not putting into the economy elsewhere.”

Psychologist Meg Jay is also worried about the long-term impact of the easygoing lifestyles of many millennials. She gave a TED Talk called “Why 30 Is Not the New 20.”

In it, she says taking time to explore during your 20s is fine, but explore with a purpose. She advises millennials not to wait until 30 to try to start a career, choose a partner, have a family and become financially independent all at once.

She says she worries that 10 or 15 years from now, some millennials will find themselves in a midlife crisis.

“It’s realizing you can’t have that career you now want. It’s realizing you can’t have that child you now want, or you can’t give your child a sibling. Too many 30-somethings and 40-somethings look at themselves and at me, sitting across the room, and say about their 20s, ‘What was I doing?’ What was I thinking?”

Meg Jay says American society does not help 20-somethings by telling them they have an extra decade to decide what to do with their lives. She says 20-somethings should instead claim their adulthood and use the decade to build their futures.

Our program was written and produced by Kelly Jean Kelly. Tell us what being an adult means in your society. Post comments at learningenglish.voanews.com or on our Facebook page, at VOA Learning English.

I'm Jim Tedder.

And I'm Kelly Jean Kelly. Join us again next week for This Is America with VOA Learning English.