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# A Qualitative Exploration of Emerging Adults' and Parents' Perspectives on Communicating Adulthood Status

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### Abstract

In this study the authors examine parent - child communication in Emerging Adulthood. Thirty - seven college students and one or both of their parents completed written questionnaires assessing whether the parent had verbally communicated or did some action to acknowledge the Emerging Adult's maturity. Communication about changes in the parent - child relationship, as well as the Emerging Adult's decision - making abilities, obligations to the family, and financial responsibilities were also assessed. The responses to the open ended questions were qualitatively analyzed using grounded theory. The findings indicated that the Emerging Adults' and parents' responses were very similar, and the overwhelming majority reported that there had indeed been an acknowledgment from the parents to indicate Emerging Adulthood status, although this was not always verbally communicated; sometimes it was indicated through the parents' behavior. K

### Keywords

Emerging Adult, Parent, Adult, Family, Communication, Qualitative

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## A Qualitative Exploration of Emerging Adults' and Parents' Perspectives on Communicating Adulthood Status

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### Introduction

The developmental stage of Emerging Adulthood has been steadily gaining research attention as interest in early adulthood has shown that this stage of development is unique to stages such as childhood (Arnett, 2004). Emerging Adulthood is relatively new area of development in comparison to the study of childhood and even adolescence as a separate life stage. Therefore, it is important during this time to collect more information on what makes Emerging Adulthood a distinct stage of development, and also how to inform parents how to communicate with their children during this stage of development and change. This study will explore the ways in which parents and children communicate about this status of Emerging Adulthood and information from this study will assist both parents and young adults in navigating this stage of development.

### Literature Review

Emerging adulthood is a relatively new developmental concept that highlights the time period after adolescence, but prior to the independent adult stage of life. Developed by Arnett (2000), this time period is to be considered a unique stage of life, characterized by making independent decisions, taking responsibility and achieving financial independence. This time period has been outlined to occur from the late teens to early 20's, and is created to help people to understand the transitions and difficulties that are unique to this time period in our current society (Arnett, 2007). Since this is a relatively new area of research and relatively new theory of child development, there are few studies to explore what this time period means to individuals and to their parents

### *Parent-child relationships during Emerging Adulthood*

Even though there has been new attention on Emerging Adulthood as a distinct stage of development, there still is fairly limited literature available on the parent-child relationship during this phase of the lifespan. The existing cross-sectional research (i.e., Arnett, 2001) indicates that there does appear to be some stability in the parent-child relationship from adolescence through young adulthood. However, life transitions such as the young adult taking on full-time employment, getting married, and even cohabitating with a romantic partner were related to closeness, more support, and less conflict in the parent-young adult relationship. Interestingly, the young adults becoming parents themselves seemed to put a strain on their relationship with their own parent such that there were lower levels of emotional closeness, higher levels of conflict, and more control issues as reported by the parents (Aquilino, 1997). Similarly, studies have shown that parent-child relationships that have high levels of closeness can prevent teen pregnancy (Miller, Benson, & Gailbraith, 2001).

Stability in the parent-child relationship was also evident in another longitudinal study by Tubman and Lerner (1994) in which it was found that the affective, or emotional, relationship between child and parent remained relatively stable through late adolescence (16-17 years old) and young adulthood (through the 20's).

According to Kenny and Sirin (2006), who surveyed 81 pairs of Emerging Adults and their mothers, most Emerging Adults have a positive perception of their attachment to their parents. Turner, Sarason, and Sarason (2001) found that college students who felt accepted by their parents reported more positive psychological adjustment including lower levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness as well as higher levels of competence and well-being. Similarly, Leondari and Kiosseoglou (2000) found that securely attached college students in Greece reported greater levels of self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety and loneliness.

Besides parental attachment and acceptance, level of autonomy is an important aspect of the parent-child relationship during Emerging Adulthood. Luyckx, Soenens, Goossens, and Vansteenkiste (2007) surveyed 449 college students from Belgium and found that parents' support of autonomy versus psychological control lead to higher rates of students' adjustment to college. According to Renk, Roddenberry, Oliveros, Roberts, Meehan, and Liljequist (2006), who surveyed 263 college students 18-22 years old, topics of conflict between parents and their Emerging Adults children were reported to be over such things as material possessions, independence, and values.

Smollar and Youniss (1989) suggest that a sense of autonomy during Emerging Adulthood may develop from a transformation in adolescents' perceptions of their parents as "all knowing" and "all powerful" to regular people with similar equality of status and power in society. Through their interviews of 17 to 23 year olds, it seems this is more the case with perceptions of father and not as much for perceptions of mothers. Participants who were interviewed stated the following about their perception of their fathers: "I don't look to him as an authority person now;" "I no longer think of him as an ultimate being. I know he can be wrong sometimes but I still respect him;" "I don't think of him as god anymore. I still care for him and honour him." This study reflects some of the changes that may occur just before or during emerging adulthood, but still other research explores emerging adulthood as a discreet developmental stage.

### *Emerging Adult Studies*

There have only been a few studies to explore the content of Emerging Adulthood status, since this area of research is so new. In a study comparing 519 adolescents',

Emerging Adults', and Mid-life Adults' conceptions of the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2001), it was found that similar definitions of what it means to be an adult were given by the three age groups of participants (characterized as adolescents in their midteens, emerging adults in their late teens to early twenties, and mid-life adults). For example, "accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions, decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents and other influences, establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult, and financially independent from parents" (Arnett, 2001, p.134) were the most commonly mentioned criteria indicating that a person had reached adulthood. In all three age groups in the study role transitions such as "finished with education, employed full-time, settled in long-term career, marriage, and have at least one child" (p. 134) were ranked lowest as markers of adulthood.

In a follow-up study by Arnett (2003), conceptions of adulthood among American ethnic groups were examined, as the previous study mentioned above was conducted on a mostly White sample. The follow up study surveyed 109 Whites, 122 Blacks, 96 Latinos, and 247 Asians residing in the San Francisco area. "Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions, decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents and other influences, establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult, and financially independent from parents" (p. 67) were again were found to be the most common markers of adulthood among all four ethnic groups.

Some differences among the ethnicities were found; Black, Latino, and Asian participants were more likely than the White participants to endorse items related to (a) caring for a family, (b) complying with societal norms such as avoiding drunk driving, etc., and (c) role transitions such as finishing education, obtaining full-time employment, and getting married. However, it should be noted that role transitions were still ranked relatively low among all of the ethnic groups.

In 2006, Arnett and Tanner called for additional research specific to how parents communicate acceptance of their children's adulthood status, including "family obligations, control issues, and level of involvement parents and children have in each other's lives... [and] financial support" (p. 209). A strong argument was also made for using qualitative research methods to address the areas of research on Emerging Adulthood that have yet to be fully investigated.

To date, there is only one study known to the current researchers that has examined whether or not and how parents let their child know that he or she has reached some level of adulthood status. Bjornsen (2000) conducted a qualitative study calling this acknowledgement a "blessing" and "rite of passage" and an important part of development (p. 357). He had nearly 300 college students complete questionnaires asking questions such as "Was there a time when your parent did something to you that meant that you were 'all grown up' or had reached maturity?" "Was there a time when you *wanted* your parent to do something to you that meant that you were 'all grown up' or had reached maturity?" (p. 359). In his study it was found that a majority of the participants had either received or *wanted* to receive an acknowledgement of adulthood status from their parents.

Our study also uses grounded theory as a qualitative research method, but goes a step further in asking more specific questions about the communication between parents and their Emerging Adult children. Additionally, we developed a questionnaire not only for Emerging Adults to complete, but also for their parents to complete in order to examine the communication from both perspectives rather than just the Emerging Adult's perspective. Our experience in the field of counseling psychology, and specifically in human development, sparked an interest in this field of research and the goal of the study is to expand our understanding of this stage of development. This information can inform students

and learners in terms of understanding development, as well as inform potential clients in a counseling setting to understand the challenges of this stage of development.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Thirty-seven college students (18-29 years old; 84% female; 93% Caucasian) and one or both of their parents (34 mothers and 18 fathers) were selected for this study. They were selected for the study based on volunteer participation in a developmental psychology course at a local college. Participation was voluntary and questionnaires were only included if parents agreed to participate in the study as well. The study was approved by the college Institutional Review Board. The students and their parents completed the written questionnaires asking about their communication of Emerging Adulthood status. The questionnaires took approximately 60-90 minutes to complete for each participant.

### *Measures*

Separate versions of the Communication Between Parent and Emerging Adult Questionnaire were created for the college student and his or her parent. The questionnaires consisted of 10 questions. The first four questions asked for basic demographic information including gender, race, socioeconomic status, and age. The remaining questions were open-ended and related to five main themes regarding whether the Emerging Adult or the parent had openly communicated about the Emerging Adult's maturity, changes in the parent-child relationship, as well as the Emerging Adult's decision-making abilities, obligations to the family, and financial responsibilities. These questions were based on prior research that looked at unique features of the emerging adult developmental period (Arnett 2000, 2001, Arnett, 2004).

### *Procedure*

Data was analyzed using grounded theory approach. The data analysis chosen for this study was qualitative due to the limited amount of information in this area of research. Using a constructivist perspective, more data can be collected and analyzed by using participants' thoughts, feelings, and behavior without relying on forced selection. Using the systematic approach, originally designed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), data is coded line by line and then compiled into discrete categories. Once analysis been completed and analyzed, it is determined whether saturation point is reached. If there is not adequate repetition of concepts/categories, then further data are collected.

The data collected were analyzed across the five main themes of open-ended questions that were posed. These questions related to whether the Emerging Adult or the parent had openly communicated about the Emerging Adult's maturity, changes in the parent-child relationship, as well as the Emerging Adult's decision-making abilities, obligations to the family, and financial responsibilities.

The data from the questionnaires of both parents and their emerging adult were categorized into five discreet categories: acknowledgement of maturity, financial responsibility, decision-making, change in the parent-child relationship, and family obligation. The data was then discussed in the results section in two different parts: the parent's perspective and the emerging adult's perspective.

## Results

### Parent Data

#### *Acknowledgement of Maturity*

All of the parents identified a specific time when they recognized their child had become more adult-like. A few of the mothers mentioned that when their daughter experienced her first menstrual period or went to the gynecologist for the first time was when they expressed to her that she was now a “young lady.” Some other parents identified dating or having a first serious romantic relationship as an indicator of becoming an adult. Other things mentioned by some parents were noticing when the child was able to take responsibility for scheduling his or her own doctor’s appointments and managing their own medical prescriptions, including birth control pills. Willingness to physically approach a casket at a relative’s funeral was mentioned by one father as indicating his daughter’s transition into adulthood. Taking a vacation without family for the first time was also mentioned by a couple of the parents. One mother said, “I managed not to call the hotel every day to check on her and waited for her to call me - very hard!”

Several of the parents remembered their child getting their driver’s license or paying for their own car as a sign of adulthood. Several parents also mentioned graduating from high school as a marker of maturity. Some of the parents stated that becoming 18 or 21 years old were developmental milestones that led them to have conversations with their children about being responsible in making decisions. Other things parents did to let their children know they had reached Emerging Adulthood included: letting them have their own dog, letting them drive the family boat, trusting them to stay in the family home by themselves and to have friends over.

Some of the parents commented that they wished they had verbally acknowledged when their son or daughter had done something to indicate they had reached Emerging Adulthood status. One father said, “I don’t always say all that I am feeling about my child reaching maturity. But there was a time when she started earning her own money and taking care of her own needs. I should have said more about this to her. Proud moments should be shared more.” Similarly a mother commented, “There have been many times I’ve wanted to tell my daughter how much I respect her and the way in which she conducts her life. I’ve told her so on a few occasions yet I don’t believe she senses the depth of how I feel. I also don’t think she truly believes me.” Another mother said she recognizes that her child is an Emerging Adult, “but I was never sure it was the right time to say it.” Another mother said she has not directly stated anything but she assumes “they have always known how I felt.” One father stated that he did not acknowledge his daughter’s Emerging Adulthood until he heard her say “the deadly saying ‘Don’t treat me like a kid!’”

#### *Financial Responsibility*

Other events that parents reported as being indications of their children’s maturity were getting their first job and beginning to pay some of their own bills. The common types of expenses mentioned as being paid by Emerging Adult children included: cell phone, car payments, car insurance, gasoline, clothing, and entertainment.

When asked on the questionnaire if the parents had said or done anything to indicate that they expected their Emerging Adult child to take more financial responsibility for themselves, several of the parents said that it was their child who wanted to become more financial independent. One mother said about her daughter, “There were times when I had to

insist that she accept financial help.” Some of the parents indicated that they expected their Emerging Adult child to contribute to paying their own expenses, in some cases their full tuition, since they had begun college. Other parents indicated that they wanted to financially support their Emerging Adult children through college, but many of these parents did say that their child had at least a part-time job to help with some expenses.

One father said that when his son took a year off from college, he was expected to support himself during that time because he was not in school. Other fathers mentioned that they expect their daughters to contribute to household expenses after they graduate from college. One mother said, “When she graduates, I’m sure she’ll step into the real world- ready to flourish because of all of her experiences both at school and at work.”

Besides simply entering college, many parents perceived getting the first apartment as a marker that the Emerging Adult child would now pay for most, if not all, of his or her bills. A couple of the parents directly taught their children at that time to create a budget for themselves. Other concrete things that the parents reported doing to let their children know they believed they were now grown up included: buying them a car or offering to co-sign the car loan, giving them a credit card, or buying them a cell phone.

### *Decision-Making*

Several of the parents acknowledged that they allow their children to make their own decisions about their classes and social activities since entering college. Many of the parents said they tell their children that they are always available to have an open dialogue about issues needing to be decided on, but they expect the Emerging Adult child to make decisions for him or herself. Many parents also said they emphasized to their children how the decisions they choose to make will affect the rest of their lives. One father said, “You hope you taught them right from wrong when they were young. Now it’s time to put it to the test or [to] be their own person.” Another mother said about her daughter, “Being in her twenties, I expect her to make decisions about her life. I would love if she would share them with me, even if I don’t like them I’ll try to respect them.” Another mother commented that when her daughter came home from college over the summer, she had to “respect” that her daughter was used to making her own decisions, but the one exception was that “she let us know when she was going to be really late.”

Other parents expressed difficulty with letting their children make their own decisions. For example, one father said he had a son who unexpectedly eloped with his significant other and another son had bought a car “on a whim” that the father thought was too expensive for him, but the father did not emphasize his own concerns about these decisions, he stated that he simply accepted the decisions and remained supportive.

Some of the parents did not seem to allow their Emerging Adult children to make decisions for themselves. One mother said, “She still runs everything by me. We discuss it and come up with an agreement.” Another mother said, “I still struggle with this after many years of wanting to make most decisions for him.” One father said, “It’s difficult to let my daughter go and take responsibility for her actions. However, each passing year she shows more signs of being a mature young adult, I can watch from the sidelines.”

### *Change in the Parent-Child Relationship*

When asked, some of the parents had not noticed a change in their relationship with their child now that he or she had become an Emerging Adult. Other parents commented that their relationship with their son or daughter had changed when they began their first serious



relationship or moved in with their boyfriend or girlfriend. One father said, “When he had his first relationship with a girl he seemed less talkative and more private.”

Several of the parents reported that their relationship with their Emerging Adult child had grown closer. A few of the fathers commented that now their children could talk about “common” interests and “as an equal”. Many of the mothers also indicated positive changes in communication, but the mothers commented about being able to “share more private stories to establish a more grown up relationship.” One mother said, “It wasn’t until she left to live away and she began calling me to tell me about her day or to confide in me did I realize that she looked to me for friendship.”

### *Family Obligations*

When asked about obligations to the family, nearly 1/3 of the parents stated they have not indicated to their Emerging Adult children that obligations to the family had changed. A few of the parents indicated that now their Emerging Adult children had more responsibilities to the family. Specifically, additional chores around the house and running errands for the family in their car were mentioned. In addition, several of the parents mentioned that they expected their Emerging Adult children to remain involved with family, including such things as visiting grandparents on their own.

Other parents commented that their children did not see the family as often as they would want, but that they accepted this as their establishing “independence”. Specifically, some of the parents recognized they had to accept that their Emerging Adult children might choose to spend summer vacations with friends rather than family. Other parents recognized their child’s need to balance time spend with their family and their boyfriend or girlfriend’s family if they were in a serious romantic relationship, or to make decisions primarily with their fiancés (rather than their parents) if they were engaged. One mother stated that when her own mother died, she felt a “generational shift” in the family. “I took on my mom’s position, and she (her daughter) took on mine.” Another mother said, “When... [my] daughter had her first child...[I] leaned over and told her she knew what love at first sight was, and I would always feel that with her.”

## **Emerging Adult Data**

### *Acknowledgement of Maturity*

There were only two Emerging Adult-Parent pairs in which neither the Emerging Adult nor the parent recalled that the parent had overtly acknowledged their child’s Emerging Adulthood status either verbally or through some action of the parent. The overwhelming majority of the sample of parents and college students agreed that the parents had done something to indicate Emerging Adulthood status. Several of the Emerging Adults reported that their parents letting them go to college was an indication to them that the parent had acknowledged their adulthood status. When their parents told them they had to get a job or when they moved out on their own were also frequent indications of their parents accepting their Emerging Adulthood status. Other indicators included being allowed to have a car or have a boyfriend sleep over; being trusted to go grocery shopping for the family’s groceries; or being expected to do their own laundry. One Emerging Adult said, “When they (parents) began to listen to me” was when she felt they acknowledged her adulthood status. Interestingly, some of the Emerging Adults also mentioned that it was what their parents “didn’t say” (no longer said) that acknowledged their adulthood status. For example, “It was more of a gradual thing. They started trusting me with more the older I got.”

Only a few of the Emerging Adults indicated they wished their parents had communicated achievement of adulthood status on occasions when they did not, such as when they wanted to go out with friends and extend their curfew or when they experienced major life events such as beginning menarche; getting a driver's license; graduating from high school; beginning college; getting a new job; or wanting to get married. For example, a female college student said, "I always wished they had said something to me letting me know they thought I was 'all grown up' but I think that only happens in movies." However, another female college student said she did not want her parents to acknowledge her as an adult, "I don't like the thought of being grown up and taking on more responsibility!!"

### *Financial Responsibility*

Many of the Emerging Adults indicated paying for a car and/or car insurance as something that their parents expected of them due to their Emerging Adult status. Other things like paying student loans, cell phone, or credit card were also mentioned as being required of them because their parents considered them to have reached adulthood status. In most cases, the parents were said to have directly communicated to the Emerging Adult that they were expected to take on at least part of their finances. However, one female college student indicated that her financial responsibility was more implicitly indicated, "When my first credit card bill came in the mail, my mom handed the bill right to me and walked away."

### *Decision-Making*

Many of the Emerging Adults indicated that their parents had communicated to them that they no longer needed their permission for certain things and could now make decisions for themselves. These included making decisions about college, how late to stay out, what to do about a boyfriend, and having more freedom in general. One female Emerging Adult commented that, "When it came time to decide which apartment to rent, my parents gave little input and said I should, they hoped, be capable of making informed decisions."

### *Change in the Parent-Child Relationship*

Some of the Emerging Adults noticed that something had changed in their relationship with their parents relating to their adulthood status when their parents "gave them a speech" about having to handle things on their own, such as money. While many of the respondents indicated that they grew closer to their parents in Emerging Adulthood and some saw their parent as becoming more of a friend to them. For example one female college student said, "My relationship with [my parents] got stronger as I grew up... [we] didn't argue about petty things [anymore]." Another female college student said, "My mom became more of a friend than a mother and would talk to me more like a friend." "I was able to get advice rather than a lecture...we were able to talk on the same level" was a response from another college student.

### *Family Obligations*

Several of the Emerging Adults indicated that their obligations to their family had become less, and they were no longer required to be at family dinners, some holidays, or with extended family for events. For example, one female college student stated, "Parties with my extended family I am allowed to miss, but parties and celebrations with my immediate family I am not excused from." Some of the college students expressed that their role had changed in

their families now that they had become an adult family member. This included being expected to help out with siblings and grandparents. For example, one male college student responded, "My dad started asking me to talk to my younger brothers about school and life. That I was an 'example' to them and my words mattered." A female college student said, "Just recently my parents celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and for the first time it was my responsibility to plan something and get the family together."

Additionally, one male stated, "When I got my car, I had to drive my sister all over and give her and [her friends] rides." One female mentioned, "When I received my driver's license, I was expected to drive home from soccer, dance, go food shopping, etc. with my little sister." Only one Emerging Adult mentioned that family obligations changed by increased responsibility for a grandparent. This female participant stated "My parents allowed me to take her (mom-mom) for errands, medicine, and doctor's appointments when I returned home after the first year of college."

### Discussion

The findings from this study indicated that parents indeed do communicate Emerging Adulthood status to their children and that both parents and children know what is being communicated about their status, even if it is not verbally communicated but instead achieved through some action on the parent's part. Both parents and children commented on new financial responsibilities as well as social responsibilities, such as the care of younger siblings or relatives. In addition, parents and children communicated that milestones such as graduation, getting a car, getting a job, and moving from home indicate their adulthood status.

Financial independence was an issue that was mentioned by both the Emerging Adults and their parents in this study. Previous research by Aquilino (1991) investigated the parent-child relationships of Emerging Adults who still live in the family home through a national longitudinal study. It was found that financial dependency and unemployment, as well as the Emerging Adult returning home after a marital separation or with grandchildren increased the conflict between the Emerging Adult and his or her parents. In another article by Aquilino (2005) on parental attitudes toward economic support of Emerging Adult children, it was found that step-parents and the biological parents who had been remarried were less supportive of the idea of financially assisting their Emerging Adult children than those parents from "intact" families. Single parents also reported less positive attitudes about financial support for their Emerging Adult children.

Leaving home also was mentioned as a marker of adulthood by the Emerging Adults and their parents in this study. In an earlier study by Moore and Hotch (1983) of college students' views on leaving home, it was found that the Emerging Adults indicated establishing more "personal control" as being the most important reason for leaving their family home.

Sullivan and Sullivan (1980) found college students who moved out of the family home to attend college perceived their parents as increasingly affectionate toward them as compared to college students who stayed in the family home and commuted to college. In addition, the college students who moved out of the family home indicated that they, themselves, became increasingly affectionate toward their parents during the first year of college as compared to when they lived at home during high school and they reported better communication between themselves and their parents as compared to students who stay in the family home and commuted to attend college.

Even though many of the parents in this study communicated adulthood status to their Emerging Adult children, there were cases where both parents and children felt that the

parents failed to communicate their Emerging Adulthood status to them. One female college student indicated she wished her parents had commented on her getting her period, and one mother said, “I always try to tell him stuff but I know he doesn’t like to hear that type of stuff. It’s too mushy for him.”

Some limitations to this study include sample size. Given the length of time for completing the open-ended questions, and having three surveys to complete per family, it was difficult to obtain a large sample. However, qualitative research can provide very broad information on a new topic and all of the questions reached the saturation point with the sample collected. Future research may include a larger sample of Emerging Adults and parents, as well as a quantitative measure of communicating adulthood status. A Likert scale questionnaire may be developed using the themes found in the current study.

Some strengths of this study are that the data previously available on communicating adulthood status is very limited, and the qualitative information collected as part of this research is valuable in beginning to understand this phenomenon. Now that discreet categories of communicating adulthood status can be found, such as increased financial responsibility, increased care of siblings, more ability for decision-making and moving from home, more research can be conducted in this area. Future research could interview parents and Emerging Adults to elicit further detail on aspects of communicating adulthood status, as well as creating more quantitative measures of Emerging Adulthood status. Five consistent themes were introduced through this study, and more thorough exploration of the financial responsibilities, the specific changes to the relationship between parents and children, and the family obligation shift may be explored further in future research.

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