

Not quite a teen, not fully an adult

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Fueled by hormone fluctuations, the teenage years can be a time of huge emotional upheaval. But, as an initiative by MIT's Young Adult Development Project finds, the roller coaster may not end at the 18th birthday.

Research gathered, analyzed and published this summer by MIT suggests that the years from 18 to 25 should be regarded as a specific developmental period with its own characteristics, milestones and limitations--a time of both stunning accomplishment and chilling risk as young adults are propelled into full maturity.

"Consensus is emerging that an 18-year-old is not the same person she or he will be at 25, just as an 11-year-old is not the same as he or she will be at 18. They don't look the same, feel the same, think the same, or act the same," says A. Rae Simpson, the program director of parenting education and research at MIT's Center for Work, Family and Personal Life, and the creator of the Young Adult Development Project.

Simpson's work, which has been distilled into [downloadable documents](#), has implications for colleges and universities hoping to ease student stress and depression as well as for parents dealing with adult children. Young adults also may gain greater understanding into their own psyche.

"I'm hearing from a lot of people in their 20s because they are feeling huge pressure to get it all together and make their mark," Simpson says. "And that's really unfair. There's an enormous amount that happens after 25 or after 30 or after 40--some of which can't happen any earlier."

Simpson, an authority on parenting and adolescent issues, examined more than 500 articles and other sources about the young adult years, with a special focus on about 30 researchers.

She bases her conclusions in part on research that indicates that some important developments in the prefrontal cortex of the brain don't occur until the early 20s. But she also considers cultural factors: Today's American young adults are attending school longer, delaying marriage and often living at home due to economic pressure. "The kind of milestones that we have associated with adulthood are happening later in the 20s," she says.

Simpson launched the MIT Young Adult Development Project in July 2006, with grant money from the Lord Foundation of Massachusetts and additional funding from the Office for the Dean of Undergraduate Education. William Kettyle, director and head of MIT Medical, is the co-principal investigator.

The work was originally sparked by concerns within MIT and nationwide about incidences of harmful and risky behavior on campuses, including suicides. While 21-year-olds are legally adults, their capacity for complex thinking in times of high emotion--what researchers call "hot" cognition as distinguished from "cold" cognition when calm--is still being developed, Simpson found. Problems such as mental illness often emerge often emerge in the mid-20s, possible additional evidence of changes in the brain in those years.

But ages 18 to 25 are also a time of wonderful energy and creativity, Simpson says. The dualistic thinking of teenagers (everything is either bad or good) is being replaced by an ability to see a complexity of viewpoints. Young adults show a greater acceptance of diversity; they are interested in public service and in continued learning.

"In our current, incredibly complex global society, some of the changes that happen in young adulthood may prove to be crucial," she said.

Simpson hopes her material will be used by administrators, employers, educators, counselors, parents and even young adults themselves who may come to realize that, despite the media's focus on youth, life is a long journey that continues far past age 25.

Provided by MIT

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