

The new adulthood: Extended parental support as a safety net

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A new study from the *Journal of Marriage and Family* shows that contrary to popular anxieties about slacker young adults who refuse to grow up, or indulgent parents who stifle their adult children's development by continuing to support them, there is evidence that parental assistance in early adulthood promotes progress toward autonomy and self-reliance.

Study author Teresa Swartz, "The fact that young people depend so heavily upon their parents well beyond the age when most people from earlier generations had already started families and had dependable jobs has triggered a great deal of public anxiety over whether these trends signal young adult immaturity and stunted development. The larger social trends in delaying family formation may be one reason for the extended dependence upon parents. Today, the road to adulthood is much longer and more arduous than it was thirty years ago."

The researchers collected longitudinal data to examine the conditions under which [young adults](#) are more likely to receive financial support for living expenses, or to live in the parental home. Although almost half of the respondents received either money for living expenses or lived with their parents (or both) in their mid-twenties, only 10-15% received financial or housing help when in their early 30s. The likelihood of receiving financial help decreased 15% each year, and the likelihood of living with parents decreased by 18% each year. Swartz, "These results indicate that young people do eventually become independent of parents as they grow older."

Beyond the effects of age, young people were more likely to receive help from their parents if they were students or had encountered recent difficulties such as a job loss, a serious illness, or a divorce. Swartz, "Parental aid serves as 'scaffolding' to help young people who are working towards financial self-sufficiency and as 'safety nets' for those who have experienced serious difficulties. In an economy that requires advanced education for good jobs, parents are more likely to aid their children when they are students. As the labor market offers fewer opportunities for stable, full-time, well-paid work for the young, parents often fill in when needed."

The authors find that parental support tapers as young [adult children](#) take on adult roles such as earning higher incomes or forming families, regardless of their age. Lead author Teresa Swartz, "Forming intimate partnerships, in the forms of marriage and cohabitation, appears to signal to parents that their children have moved into adulthood and should now be on their own. Although family formation is largely understood as a 'choice' today and not viewed as essential for achieving adult status, it does appear that parents and/or adult children themselves interpret family formation as an indicator that adult self-sufficiency is appropriate."

The findings provide evidence that families are adaptive and responsive to family members needs and troubles, and that [parents](#) are more likely to support adult children, even those who are older, to help them get through hard times and to help them attain self-sufficiency. The instability and rapid pace of change during early adulthood may make young adulthood a particularly vulnerable period necessitating a safety net more frequently than other stages in life.

More information: "Safety Nets and Scaffolds: Parental Support in the Transition to Adulthood."; Teresa Toguchi Swartz, et. al. Journal of Marriage and Family; Published Online: March 10, 2011.

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