

## Young people's transition to adulthood

A review of existing research concludes that the transition to adulthood is more difficult and complicated than in the past. There is no sharp distinction between childhood and adulthood: it is a complex mixture of continuing dependency on parents stretching into the twenties and beyond, and autonomy in specific areas from the early teenage years. In their analysis, Virginia Morrow and Martin Richards of the University of Cambridge, found:

**f** While young people expect autonomy and independence at earlier ages, economic and social policy changes have placed more responsibility for them, and for a longer period, on families. Certain groups of young people may be vulnerable if they lack family structures to support them.

**f** More young people remain in education or training, delaying their entry to the adult labour market.

**f** Young people generally leave home later and, because of delayed entry into employment, increasing numbers return home before finally leaving for good. Some of those with problems at home risk becoming homeless.

**f** Young people are entering sexual relationships at younger ages but marry and have children later. Increasing numbers of children are born outside marriage, but largely to cohabiting couples.

**f** Participation in consumer markets, culturally important to young people's sense of self and social status, is likely to be delayed by increased economic dependency on families.

**f** While families and kin can play a vital role in supporting young people as they move into adulthood, many young people may be effectively without kin because of a variety of social changes.

**f** The report highlights the mismatch between young people's expectations and ambitions and the reality of their everyday experiences as they move into adulthood.

## Background

The transition to adulthood is usually thought of as comprising the following interconnected elements: leaving school and entering work or higher education; leaving one's family (or the equivalent, such as local authority care) to set up a new, independent home; becoming involved in sexual relationships, and eventually cohabiting or marrying; becoming a parent; and becoming a full adult consumer, able to purchase commodities which signify adult status.

Definitions of adulthood are complex, however, and the boundaries between childhood and different aspects of adulthood are increasingly blurred.

- **Legally or politically**, young people acquire a range of rights and duties between the ages of 14 and 21; perhaps the crucial defining age is 18, with the acquisition of the right to vote.
- **Financially or economically**, young people are technically able to leave school at the age of 16 and go into full-time work, where they may receive adult pay levels. However, they are now much more likely to stay on in further education, higher education or training, or to become unemployed, than get a full-time job. Further, young people are not eligible to claim full social security benefits until they are 25 years old. These factors mean that young people are frequently economically dependent upon their families until well into their mid-twenties, and this may restrict their ability to act as consumers.
- **Socially and sexually**, young people still expect to be able to develop separate, independent identities and lifestyles; evidence suggests that they have sexual intercourse at earlier ages. On the other hand, they are tending to delay becoming parents for longer, frequently until their late twenties or early thirties.

All this suggests that the different aspects of adulthood have become disconnected from each other.

## The importance of family support

This study reviews recent research on each of the key transition processes to adulthood. Given the shifts in social policy which have had the effect of making families responsible for their older and younger members to a much greater extent than in the recent past, it also attempts to identify the part that 'kinship' relations play in helping or hindering young people towards adulthood and, conversely, to identify specific groups of young people who may be disadvantaged by a lack of family assistance (for whatever reason), at the various stages in the

transition to adulthood. For this study 'family support' is defined widely to include earlier socialisation for adult life; social and emotional support during times of change; and financial and other material support.

## Leaving school

Recent research shows that broad trends in the transition from school to getting or seeking work have changed over the past 20 years; the increasing proportion of young people remaining in education or training has the effect of delaying entry into work or unemployment. Social class differences are persistent: unqualified young people are likely to come from manual backgrounds and are likely to be unemployed, particularly if they live in an area with a depressed labour market. Gender, ethnicity, disability, and geographical location all interact to constrain the opportunities available to young people when they leave school.

Families provide support for young people at this point both in terms of socialisation, in that some young people internalise their parents' aspirations and expectations for the future, and in terms of practical use of family social networks for information and influence about local job opportunities, higher education opportunities and so on. Clearly young people from families whose members are in employment or relatively affluent are advantaged in these respects. For young people whose parents are unemployed one channel which may have provided practical help in getting a job will be blocked.

## Setting up home

Young people are generally leaving home later, and increasing numbers return home before finally leaving for good. This is probably related to the trend towards delayed entry into the labour market. There has also been an apparent increase in the numbers of homeless young people. The small amount of research which has examined family support for young people setting up independent homes has found that only a minority receive financial help. The rise in youth homelessness is sometimes linked to family conflict and rows with parents and particularly step-parents, and so may be indirectly related to demographic changes, in particular the increased divorce rate and rise in numbers of children living in step-families.

## Becoming sexually adult

There has been a tendency for young people to have sexual intercourse at earlier ages over recent decades, a

marked rise in cohabitation rates, a decline in marriage rates and a tendency to marry later.

However, most people still marry at some point in their lives. The importance of family support in each of these processes is generally unclear - parents are a source of information about sexual development, and may approve or disapprove of young people's involvement in sexual activities and this in turn will have an impact on family relationships.

### Transition to parenthood

The overall trend is for couples to have fewer children than in previous decades and later in their life cycles, with increasing numbers of children born outside marriage (although often to cohabiting couples rather than lone mothers). Growing numbers of women expect to work in the labour market and the pressures to combine work and family are great. Qualitative studies suggest that family ties are important to working mothers, who may call upon relatives as a source of childcare; maternal grandmothers still appear to be important sources of support for mothers at home. Teenage mothers in particular appear to rely upon their families for social, practical and emotional support.

### Adult consumerism

Participation in consumer markets is important to one's sense of self and social status as an adult. It is likely to be delayed by the increasing economic dependency that many young people now face. Research shows that young people rely more and more on their families for financial support and there are suggestions that families may try to cushion their young people from the worst effects of poverty in this respect by supplementing their spending.

### Conclusion

The report highlights an increasing mismatch between young people's expectations and ambitions, a gap between what young people are led (by various institutions, such as the education system, families, and dominant norms and values) to expect that they may attain, and the reality of their everyday experiences in their transitions from school or higher education and training to the labour market, leaving home, to social and sexual adulthood, and becoming parents.

While previous research has tended to focus on the more public aspects of the transition to adulthood, such as starting work and leaving home, it is clear that the private and public spheres of life are not separate and, at the point of the transition to

adulthood, the public appears to impinge upon the private to a considerable extent.

Overall, the report suggests that, for many young people, an assumption that kinship will provide a source of support in the transition to adulthood may simply not hold true. Many grandparents may not be in a position to help their children financially or practically (for example, grandmothers may not be able to provide childcare if they are part of the labour force). For children who are effectively 'without kin' the 'dependency assumption' is particularly problematic: research has shown that young people leaving local authority care who have no contact with their families face a range of difficulties financially, socially and psychologically.

The rise in rates of divorce and remarriage may mean that resources may not be available to the children of a first marriage and, for some young people, whole kinship networks may be lost. It also seems likely that a combination of factors, such as increased longevity, declining value of pensions, unemployment and increased divorce rates will put much greater stress on family resources. In an ideal situation, kinship links (in practice, probably support from parents) may ease the transition to adulthood for some young people, but to assume that they can for all young people is to place too much responsibility upon families for their young, given social and economic contexts of poverty, unemployment, lack of housing, and insecure work and to do so may result in the cyclical reproduction of disadvantaged families and social groups.

### About the study

The report is a systematic review of recent research, drawing on a wide range of research reports, including social policy studies, and sociological and psychological accounts of aspects of the transition to adulthood.

## Further information

The full report, *Transitions to Adulthood: a family matter?* by Virginia Morrow and Martin Richards, is published for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by York Publishing Services Ltd (price £11.95).

## Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 44** Lone parenthood and family disruption (Jan 94)
- 45** Children living in re-ordered families (Feb 94)
- 69** Developing work and family services in the workplace (Jan 95)
- 70** Family support for young people setting up home (Jan 95)
- 80** Social backgrounds and post-birth experiences of young parents (Jul 95)
- 84** Single lone mothers (Oct 95)
- 91** A survey of group-based parenting programmes (Jan 96)
- 95** The relationship between family life and young people's lifestyles (Apr 96)

The following *Summary* is also relevant:

- 4** Family and parenthood: supporting families, preventing breakdown (Feb 95)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie, Publications Officer, on 01904 629241.



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