



Unpacking & Reclaiming the Transition to ‘Adulthood’

A Youth MOVE National Peer Center Issue Brief



INTRODUCTION

Purpose

This issue brief invites you to explore what we’ve come to understand about ‘adulthood’ and this idea of ‘transition to adulthood.’ Let’s unpack some conventional ideas and reclaim our own narratives, while also considering how we can support this journey for youth and young adults navigating through communities and systems.

Content note

The following includes references to trauma and other potentially activating content. Please keep that in mind, and honor your right to self-care through exploring this resource!

Initial Reflection

What does ‘adulthood’ mean to you? What words come to mind?



Why this Matters

The way adulthood is defined affects more than just expectations for the future.

It shapes how people are treated right now. It influences who is trusted to make decisions, who is seen as capable, and even what kinds of supports are available to us.

When there’s only one narrow idea of adulthood, it can leave people feeling as though they are doing something wrong simply for living differently.



This can show up in ways like:

- Feeling behind or 'off-track' compared to others
- Being expected to meet standards that don't match your reality
- Having limited space to explore what actually feels meaningful
- Being pressured toward paths that don't feel right

Expanding our understanding of adulthood creates more room for youth (and all) people to define their lives in ways that feel good and true to them.



WHAT EVEN IS 'ADULTHOOD?'

When we ask 'What does it mean to be an adult?' or 'What qualifies as experiencing adulthood?', it doesn't take too much digging to realize that even formal dictionary and legal definitions don't give us much of anything:

LII Legal Information Institute
law.cornell.edu Free Law, For All

adult

An adult is an individual who has reached the age of majority. The age of majority refers to the age at which a person will be defined by law to be an adult. This will be accompanied by the rights and responsibilities of adulthood. The age of majority varies from state by state and from country to country. Most

age of majority

The age of majority refers to the age at which an individual will be legally considered an adult. It is the age at which one will be subject to the full legal rights and responsibilities of an adult, including the right to vote, the right to join the military or the right to sign a contract. After reaching the age of majority, one will become fully responsible for their own actions, contractual obligations and other undertakings. Parental duties of support will also cease.

legal age

The legal age is also known as the age of legal majority. This is the age at which a person gains the legal status of an adult. The legal age is set by state law and can differ from state to state. However, almost all states set the base legal age as 18 years old. This is the age at which a person gains control over their own actions and affairs and becomes responsible for the decisions they make. Those past

Merriam-Webster

adulthood noun

adult·hood (ə-ˈdɛlt-ˌhʊd)

: the state or time of being an adult

adult 2 of 3 noun

: one that is adult

especially : a human being after an age (such as 21) specified by law

adultlike (ə-ˈdɛlt-ˌlɪk) adjective

Adulthood is simply described as the state of being an **adult**, while an adult is legally defined by criteria such as the 'age of majority' or 'legal age.' This circular logic shows us that there's a lot more to unpack and explore beyond these formal definitions, especially when it comes to recognizing our unique and intersecting lived experiences.

As we delve into the term 'adult' as a *descriptor* or *action*, we uncover more specific implications:



adult 1 of 3 adjective

ə-ˈdʌlt 'a-,dʌlt

Synonyms of *adult* >

- 1 : fully developed and mature : **GROWN-UP**
| an *adult* lion
- 2 : of, relating to, intended for, or befitting **adults**
| an *adult* approach to a problem
- 3 : dealing in or with explicitly sexual material
| *adult* bookstores
| *adult* movies

- “fully developed”
- “mature”
- “relating to”
- “intended for”
- “befitting”
- “behave like”
- “attend to the ordinary tasks required”
- “responsible adult”

adult 3 of 3 verb

ə-ˈdʌlt

adulted; adulting; adults

intransitive verb

- 1 **informal** : to behave like an adult : to attend to the ordinary tasks required of a responsible adult

These definitions are still rooted in vague ideas, reinforcing many imposed rules and norms that lack real, meaningful context.

Phrases like *'fully developed,' 'mature,'* and *'responsible'* hint at societal expectations that often influence our understanding of adulthood, but aren't actually grounded in anything substantial. Recognizing this can help us to begin to unpack some larger narratives and harmful roots that inform this experience, too.





WHAT SHAPES THESE EXPECTATIONS

These ideas don't exist on their own. They come from broader ways of understanding value, success, and what matters.

Some of the patterns underneath them include:

- Valuing independence over connection, community, and collective care
- Defining success through labor and financial stability
- Equating personal worth to societal standards of 'productivity' or 'outputs'
- Expecting people to meet consistent standards, even when circumstances are different
- Centering certain ways of being while dismissing others
- Assuming adults are inherently superior to young people, dismissing their experiences, and undermining their agency and wisdom.

Understanding these influences is essential in reflecting on more conventional or traditional narratives surrounding adulthood and their impact on youth and young adults. These patterns don't always get named openly, but they influence how expectations are created and reinforced.

THE 'TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD'



Adulthood is often framed by societal narratives that emphasize responsibility, productivity, and seriousness. The *transition* into adulthood typically begins when these societal pressures shift our focus away from things such as exploration, curiosity, discovery, creativity, and play toward more rigid expectations and ways of being.

Phrases like '*grow up*' or '*be more mature*' pressure us to conform to narrow definitions.

Questions like '*what do you want to be when you grow up?*' center on career goals.

And statements like '*life isn't all fun and games*' reinforce seriousness and the masking of our authentic ways of being.

With all of this, it's important to continue reflecting on how these messages may have shaped our journeys, or are influencing them now!

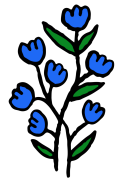
Reflection

At what point in your life did you begin to feel the shift or pressure of the 'transition' into adulthood?

**Consider specific ages, moments, places, or messages you encountered during this transition.*



THERE'S NO SINGLE PATH INTO ADULTHOOD



There is often an assumption that the 'transition to adulthood' happens in a clear, predictable, linear way.

In reality, it doesn't! It's a unique journey for every person.

So many different factors can influence this experience:



- **Personal circumstances**
 - *i.e., family dynamics, socioeconomic status, cultural background*
- **Life events**
 - *i.e., loss of a loved one or pet, having to take on caregiving responsibilities, moving through foster care or other systems*
- **Societal pressures**
 - *i.e., expectations around productivity, maturity, career paths, financial stability*
- **Systemic barriers**
 - *i.e., experiences of systemic unfairness, barriers due to identity and culture alone, intentional (and unintentional) restrictions on the ways resources are allocated, etc.*
- **Trauma**
 - *i.e., individual and collective experiences that shape our lives and perspectives*

Societal pressures push us toward expectations of productivity and career paths, while systemic barriers (*the 'isms'*) continue to complicate this journey.

Experiences of trauma can profoundly impact how we navigate life, especially during this time of transition. Experiences such as systemic unfairness or harmful legislation can shape how we come to understand who we are and how we engage with the world. These barriers can make this life transition even more challenging and are realities that are important for us to recognize as we continue to support youth and young adults and find new meaning for ourselves.

Ultimately, one single definition of adulthood won't ever truly reflect and recognize all that this could mean for any and every person. And that's okay! It means we have an opportunity to unpack and reclaim our *own* unique definitions of what this journey means for us.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY



Even as we begin questioning these ideas, it's not always easy to move away from them. There are real pressures that make it hard, even beyond what we've explored so far.

These can be things like:

- Needing to meet expectations to access housing, work, or education
- Feeling pressure to constantly be productive
- Not having spaces where you can explore or try things without being judged
- Worrying about how you'll be perceived if you do things differently
- Navigating systems that expect compliance instead of self-direction or critical thinking



We can often find ourselves masking our authentic ways of being and expressing to meet these expectations. Many of us also experience fear of judgment, worrying about how others perceive our joy and playfulness as we get older. Despite these barriers, this journey of reclamation and self-discovery is possible! All of these dynamics reflect the environments and circumstances surrounding us, not our personal worth.



RECLAIMING ADULTHOOD ON OUR OWN TERMS

Reclaiming adulthood doesn't mean ignoring responsibility or pretending these expectations don't exist.

It can mean creating space to decide what actually matters to you within all of that.

That might look like:

- Defining success in ways that feel real for your life
- Staying connected to things that bring joy, curiosity, or creativity
- Allowing yourself to change direction over time
- Making choices that reflect your values, not just what is expected from others or promoted in society

This process isn't linear. It can and should continue to shift depending on what's happening in your life, as well as the opportunities and supports that you have access to. All things within the human experience change, why shouldn't you?

Reflections

When you consider *your* current understanding of adulthood:

What aspects resonate with you that you want to hold onto?

What aspects or ideas don't feel good and true to you? Don't serve you?

And what can you let go of?



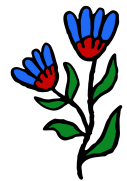
RECONNECTING WITH YOURSELF

Reconnecting with your 'inner child' is such an important part of being human!

This is more than just a nostalgic activity, too.

Dreams, goals, and aspirations differ from person to person, based on our unique interests and cultures, familial histories, ways we were brought up, what we've been exposed to or witnessed, where we've travelled, what languages we speak, where we are in the world, how we got where we are, why we want to stick around, what we value most and, frankly, a lot of things we might not think about right away.

Things like joy, play, and creative self-expression are vital parts of our human experience at any age, and can be essential for living into our full, authentic selves.



Ways to Reflect and Dream:

Consider journaling, vision-boarding, drawing or creating art, meditating, discussing with your peers, or looking through childhood keepsakes!

Reflections



- How do you incorporate play, joy, and self-exploration?
- What activities did you enjoy when you were younger that can be carried into your adult life?
- When have you felt the most authentic or true to yourself?
- Is there something you've wanted to try but felt was too "childish"? And if so, whose definition of "childish" are you worried about?

IMPORTANCE OF SELF-CARE



In a culture where productivity is often treated as the measure of a "successful" adulthood, choosing to care for yourself can push back on that expectation in quiet but real ways. It creates space to exist outside of constant pressure to do more, and to center your needs in ways that are often overlooked.

Self-care, in this sense, is about shifting your relationship to care itself.

When we're younger, care is often structured by others. As we move into adulthood, that responsibility becomes something we have to figure out more intentionally. Not perfectly, and not all at once, but in ways that reflect what we actually need.

This means making choices that protect and honor our:

- Time
- Energy
- Emotions
- And capacity



It might show up in everyday ways, like:

- Setting and holding boundaries, even when it feels uncomfortable
- Tending to your physical and mental health in ways that are actually accessible to you
- Letting yourself rest without feeling like you have to earn it
- Making space for things that bring you some ease, creativity, or connection

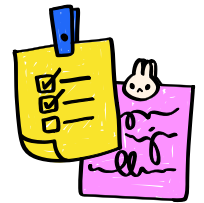
These are real parts of caring for ourselves and having more say in our own lives.

They are also part of how people build self-agency over time, especially in systems and environments that can make that feel limited or out of reach.

Self-care doesn't have to be perfect or consistent. It can be messy, ever-changing, and shaped by what is actually possible for you right now.

Although self-care can sometimes be used as a burden shifting tool by systems not to stop harm, provide livable resources, or to change, instead putting the burden on the individual to "take a bubble bath off the clock so you can show up to work tomorrow", at the end of the day, practicing self-care can still be a meaningful way to stay connected to ourselves while navigating expectations, responsibilities, and realities that aren't always within our personal control. It can be a privilege, yes, but reclaiming self-care, defining it for yourself, and finding ways, even small, to incorporate it into your everyday life can be liberating!

FOR PEOPLE SUPPORTING YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS



The way adulthood is defined within formal systems has a real impact on how young people are supported in navigating them.

Expectations around independence, timelines, and "readiness" can shape decisions, often without being questioned.

Creating more space for different experiences of adulthood means:

- Recognizing that there are multiple valid paths
- Supporting youth-defined goals, even when they don't follow traditional expectations
- Making space for personal goals and exploration, not just program outcomes
- Being aware of how assumptions about adulthood show up in our everyday interactions



Additional Reflections for Youth Peer Supports and Supportive Adults



How is 'adulthood' being defined in your work? What about 'transition age youth?'

What expectations are being placed on young people, directly or indirectly? And where might those expectations be limiting options or autonomy?

What could shift if youth had more space to define adulthood for themselves?

CLOSING



Adulthood is often talked about as something we "arrive" at. In reality, it keeps shifting. It's shaped by our experiences, our needs, what we have access to, and what we're learning about ourselves over time.

For many of us, the version of adulthood we've been taught or expected to follow doesn't fully fit. Questioning that, pushing back on it, or redefining it isn't a failure. It's part of figuring out what actually feels right and sustainable in our own lives.

Reclaiming adulthood can include responsibility, care, and accountability. It can also include joy, creativity, rest, and self-expression. Those things aren't in conflict with each other, even though we're often taught that they are.

There's space for us to move at our own pace. There's space for us to change direction. There's space to stay connected to parts of ourselves that may not always be recognized or valued by the world around us. There's also space for moments that feel lighter. Moments of curiosity, play, connection, or ease. Not as something we have to earn, but as part of being human.

As we move forward, we get to keep defining what adulthood means to **us**.

And that definition can keep evolving! It can make room for who we've been, who we are, and who we're still becoming.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO EXPLORE



Theories & Frameworks -

- [On Youth Liberation](#)
- [On Challenging Adulthood](#)
- [On Meaningful Systems Transformation](#)

Peer-Led Toolkits & Actionable Guides -

- [How to Help Yourself Transition to Adulthood](#)
- [A Toolbox for Self-Determination](#)

Video -



- [When are you actually an adult?](#)

BONUS REFLECTION ACTIVITY



On your own (*or with others!*) reflect on the poem located on the next page and all you've explored here, and consider how the themes in the poem relate to this idea of 'reclaiming adulthood.' Note any thoughts or feelings that come up around this 'reclamation journey' for you, as well as for any youth and young adults you support in your life and work!

Notes



The Little Boy

By Helen E. Buckley (1986)

Once a little boy went to school.
He was quite a little boy.
And it was quite a big school.
But when the little boy
Found that he could go to his room
By walking right in from the door outside,
He was happy.
And the school did not seem quite so big any more.

One morning,
When the little boy had been in school a while,
The teacher said:
"Today we are going to make a picture."
"Good!" thought the little boy.
He liked to make pictures.
He could make all kinds:
Lions and tigers, chickens and cows,
Trains and boats -And he took out his box of crayons
And began to draw.

But the teacher said:
"Wait! It is not time to begin!"
And she waited until everyone looked ready.
"Now," said the teacher,
"We are going to make flowers."
"Good!" thought the little boy,
He liked to make flowers,
And he began to make beautiful ones
With his pink and orange and blue crayons.

But the teacher said:
"Wait! And I will show you how."
And she drew a flower on the blackboard.

It was red, with a green stem.
"There," said the teacher.
"Now you may begin."

The little boy looked at the teacher's flower.
Then he looked at his own flower.

He liked his flower better than the teacher's.
But he did not say this,
He just turned his paper over
And made a flower like the teacher's
It was red, with a green stem.

On another day,
When the little boy had opened
The door from the outside all by himself,
The teacher said:
"Today we are going to make something with clay."
"Good!" thought the boy.
He liked clay.
He could make all kinds of things with clay:
Snakes and snowmen, elephants and mice,
Cars and trucks -And he began to pull and pinch his ball of clay.

But the teacher said:
"Wait! And I will show you how."
And she showed everyone how to make
One deep dish. "There," said the teacher.
"Now you may begin."
The little boy looked at the teacher's dish, then he looked at his own.
He liked his dishes better than the teacher's, but he did not say this.
He just rolled his clay into a big ball,
And made a dish like the teacher's.
It was a deep dish.

And pretty soon the little boy learned
To wait and to watch,
And to make things just like the teacher.
And pretty soon he didn't make things of his own anymore.

Then it happened
That the little boy and his family
Moved to another house,
In another city,
And the little boy
Had to go to another school.
This school was even bigger
Than the other one,
And there was no door from the outside
Into his room.
He had to go up some big steps,
And walk down a long hall
To get to his room.

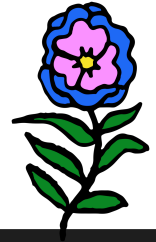
And the very first day
He was there, the teacher said,
"Today we are going to make a picture."
"Good!" thought the little boy,
And he waited for the teacher
To tell him what to do
But the teacher didn't say anything.
She just walked around the room.

When she came to the little boy,
She said, "Don't you want to make a picture?"
"Yes," said the little boy.
"What are we going to make?"
"I don't know until you make it," said the teacher.
"How shall I make it?" asked the little boy.
"Why, any way you like," said the teacher.
"And any color?" asked the little boy.
"Any color," said the teacher.

"If everyone made the same picture,
And used the same colors, How
would I know who made what, "And
which was which?" "I don't know,"
said the little boy. And he began to
draw a flower. It was red, with a
green stem.



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