

# ***THE PROMISE AND PERIL OF COMING OF AGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY***

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The second decade of life is a transition that poses unique developmental challenges for adolescents, and also for their families and teachers, and how well adolescents negotiate this transition will have important implications for later outcomes across the life course. Coming of age, acquiring the status and trappings of adulthood, unfolds over many years, easily a decade or longer, and so we have the problem in 21st century America of what to do with biologically mature young people whose cognitive, psychological and social competence has not fully arrived to take up the challenges of modern life.

The transition to early adolescence has special significance (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). The ages 10 to 14, or roughly the period that spans the middle school years, is a crucial juncture for setting youngsters on pathways that lead to productive integration within the adult role structure of society. But it does not always turn out that way for a distressing number of youngsters, for early adolescence is also a time when develop-

mental casualties are most likely to pile up and it is a pressing challenge for educators and families to figure out ways to mobilize the resources of students and schools so that the middle school years are an opportunity to “*meet and match the moment of hope*”—to borrow Winnicott’s (1962, p. 309) beautiful expression—where the aspirations of youngsters are matched with educational experiences that meet their developmental needs and put them on the trajectory to responsible adulthood (Eccles, 2004; Eccles & Roeser, 2013).

But the trajectory to responsible adulthood will face a second developmental challenge as adolescents face the third decade of life. The culturally standard script marking the transition to adulthood has been shredded so that traditional signs of adulthood are no longer clear guideposts for the achievement of adult status. Turning 18, for example, or making certain role transitions, such as getting married or finishing one’s education, do not reliably indicate that adult status has been reached. Rather, adulthood is thought a matter of accepting

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responsibility, deciding on one's own beliefs, establishing a sense of equality with parents, and gaining financial independence (Arnett, 2001). Even by the mid-twenties adult status is not necessarily in reach for many young people. Some developmental scientists believe that a new stage of development, called *emergent adulthood* (Arnett, 2004) characterizes this part of the lifespan, which means that even after one successfully negotiates the developmental tasks of adolescence, there is still much work to do before adulthood is reached.

Coming of age, then, faces two developmental hurdles. This article has several objectives. First, I outline in broad strokes the promise and peril of these two formative developmental transitions: the transition to adolescence and the transition to adulthood. I next describe a conceptual framework for making sense of these developmental challenges and for guiding educational interventions. Third, I illustrate the application of this framework for understanding the middle school shift in early adolescence and for identity work in emergent adulthood. I conclude with observations about character education and how best to *meet and match the moment of hope* for young people facing the modern challenges to coming of age.

### **PROMISE AND PERIL**

There is something fascinating about the preening vulnerability of young adolescents. On the one hand they are self-absorbed and self-conscious, mortified about being embarrassed or the target of rumor, concerned about their public self to the point of shyness, but also prone to showing off, exhibitionism and clowning. They are critical of adults and slaves to peer opinion. They demand to be taken seriously, to be consulted, to have a fair measure of autonomy, but take surprising risks and exercise poor judgment. They are conforming but reject conventionality. They insist on authenticity, value honesty, and detest fakes and phonies, all the while experimenting with

roles, postures, self-presentation and identity. They desire acceptance, popularity and friendship, long for intimacy, and yet engage in patterns of peer exclusion or meanness or bullying, seeming to deny to others what they most want for themselves, and possibly to advance those very ends (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Rose & Swenson, 2009).

But it is not all preening vulnerability. Adolescence is also marked by idealism and optimism and rising self-esteem, by a sense of loyalty and devotion to friendship that is touching, and by a readiness to volunteer and to take up the good cause. Young adolescents are introspective and creative—possibly at no other time will adolescents be as in touch with their inner life, becoming, as a result, avid poets, diarists, songwriters and other examples of the creative impulse.

Some of the characteristics of adolescence, then, point in two directions: one toward promise, and the other toward peril. Pubertal maturation is a good example of the promise and peril of early adolescence. It is the onset of puberty that is the most visible sign that one's childhood is being left behind. The hormonal and physiological changes that accompany puberty, the growth spurt, and the transformation of the child's body into an adult form are physical changes that push development on many fronts. It forces young adolescents to revisit their self-image, to come to grips with sexuality, and with a wide range of socioemotional experiences. Pubertal maturation also provokes reactions in others—parents grant more privacy, teachers give more responsibility, peers seek one out as friend or romantic partner—all of which complicates the usual pattern of interaction that was common during the long years of childhood.

But if the promise of pubertal maturation is that it sculpts the body into adult forms and brings about sexual and social maturity, with all this entails with respect to growing up and coming of age, it also holds peril to the extent that it induces a significantly negative self- and body image, or is a signal for increased con-

flict with parents, or it comes early or late with respect to peers.

Take brain maturation as another example. There is a 3000-fold increase in the speed of synaptic transmission as a result of the maturation of the adolescent brain, resulting in greater connectivity and integration of neural circuitry across regions of the brain (Spear, 2010). This processing speed and connectivity surely underwrites the expansion of cognitive abilities and the capacity for learning during early adolescence. But there is peril, too. For early brain maturation also involves functional changes to the limbic system involving receptors for two important neurotransmitters, dopamine and serotonin. Both are involved in the experience of emotions—dopamine for the experience of reward and serotonin for the experience of moods. As a result of these changes teenagers are more emotional, moodier, more responsive to stress, than they were as children, and more likely to engage in reward seeking and sensation seeking, particularly when in the company of peers (Steinberg, 2008; Steinberg et al., 2008). Undoubtedly, some reward seeking and sensation seeking of early adolescence is completely adaptive and appropriate, and we should hope that it finds outlet in our classrooms and schools, in challenging curricula, for example, and the experience of school membership, because if not in schools there are certainly other contexts where risk-taking and sensation seeking could pose considerable peril.

A third example of promise and peril is more psychological and involves the challenge of becoming an agentic, independent, and autonomous self. Individuation is, in my opinion, the heartbeat of adolescent development. It requires a distancing or separation from childish dependencies on parents. It requires increasing the range of autonomous functioning and the construction of a sense of selfhood and identity on what seems like independent footing. But the trick is that independence, emotional autonomy, and self-governance must be affirmed without giving in to isolation or to individualism so rugged that it is absent

meaningful and satisfying relationships (Lapsley, 2010).

In other words, the desire for agency must not lead to isolation or come at the expense of our simultaneous need for communion, bonding, and connection to others. By the same token our desire for attachment and communion cannot be so total that the sense of self becomes enmeshed and smothered by our relationships. We cannot *become* our relationships but aim instead for being an individuated self who *has* them (Kegan, 1982). Working out the dialectics of self-in-relation will take time to get right, and uneven progress in mastering this developmental challenge should account for a fair share of the angst of adolescence.

The calibration of social distance in self-other relationships is a creative, iterative, and dynamic process that is crucial to how and whether we flourish and live well the life that is good for us to live. Indeed, the tension between agency and communion is so fundamental that it has been called the *duality of human existence* (Bakan, 1966) because it is around themes of agency and communion that much of our lives take meaning, and not just in adolescence. The peril is that an attempt to become an individuated self in the context of mutually validating relationships might result instead in dysfunctional forms of independence or of dependence (Kins, Beyers, & Soenens, 2013). Pervasive difficulty in regulating social distance and intimacy lies at the core of personality disorders (Tackett, Baliss, Oltmanns, & Krueger, 2009), and it is worth speculating that this sort of self-other pathology may well have its developmental roots in individuation gone wrong.

Fortunately, we know how to encourage healthy individuation. It is encouraged by emotionally close family relationships where parents acknowledge and respect the individuality of the child and where they avoid behaviors that intrude, exploit, or manipulate it (Barber, 1996, 2002). Parents who enable individuation provide structure and make demands for maturity but have open, warm lines of communication. Much like a good teacher, they

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scaffold teens' ideas by questions and explanations and they tolerate differences. In contrast, intrusive, psychologically controlling, and overprotective parents constrain teens' individuality and almost resent it. They devalue or denigrate independent thinking, cut off disagreement, and have lower tolerance for differences. In such poorly differentiated families the emerging autonomy striving of the adolescent is almost seen as a betrayal of the family (Gavazzi & Sabatelli, 1990). Not surprisingly, adolescents whose parents enable emotional and behavioral autonomy are more individuated, have better identity and a healthier profile of psychosocial competence. Adolescents whose parents constrain autonomy show a much poorer profile of adjustment (Allen, Hauser, O'Connor, Bell, & Eickholt, 1996).

The lesson is that individuation requires relationships of a certain kind. Authentic autonomy is also deeply relational, and so the duality of agency and communion must be held in creative tension. Agency is enabled in families where communion is strong. Children are more likely to adopt and internalize expectations, values, and goals when parents are nurturing and supportive so that the quality of the relationship comes to have motivational properties. The lesson is the same for schools—schools that are experienced by students as caring communities are a context where healthy individuation is most likely to develop. And teacher practices enable agency (or constrain it) just as surely as parent practices do, and the quality of these relationships also has motivational properties (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Wentzel, 2002).

### ***DEVELOPMENTAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE***

The challenge of individuation underscores the fact that trajectories of individual development are refracted within families, schools and other contexts. For that matter the very nature of adolescence itself, including its emergence as a developmental phase and its duration, and

the timing of transitions to adulthood, cannot be understood without reference to broad sociocultural and historical forces. The contours of adolescence as a developmental moment in the lifespan, and the formation of a new phase of emerging adulthood right before our eyes, have deep sources in the churn of economic life. Even biological processes associated with the onset of puberty are responsive to life history factors such as the availability of calories in childhood (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Essex, 2007) or the quality of family life (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Belsky, Steinberg, Houts, & Halpern-Felsher, 2010). It is not possible to understand any dimension of adolescent development without reference to the social context in which it unfolds. This will come to have important implications for how we understand character and the design of effective character education, as we will see.

The developmental systems paradigm attempts to model the complexity of developmental processes. It locates the developing person at the intersection of overlapping systems that exists at multiple levels (Lerner, 2006). Person variables and contextual variables interact dynamically in complex ways and both are mutually implicated in behavior. The "developmental manifold," as Gottlieb (2007) puts it, includes genetic and neural activity, biological systems, physical, relational and cultural influences of the external environment, all exerting reciprocal influence across levels of the manifold. Developmental achievements have *biopsychosocial* explanations. "It is both child and parent," writes Sameroff (2010, p. 7) "but it is also neurons and neighborhoods, synapses and schools, proteins and peers, and genes and government."

This conceptual framework changes dramatically the terms of reference for enduring debates about the relative influence of nature and nurture (Sameroff, 2010). Nature and nurture are not disjunctive or dichotomous sources of influence. They are not competing sources of explanation. Instead genetic and environmental factors are fused as a unit, dynamically interactive, and jointly implicated

in the realization of all phenotypes. The emerging interest in epigenetics reveals just how exquisitely the genome responds to environmental factors. Stress, diet, behavior, qualities of caregiving, toxins, and other factors activate chemical switches that turn portions of the genome on and off. Gene-environment interactions are pervasive and underwrite developmental processes of all kinds (Gottlieb, 2007).

Development takes place, then, at the intersection of persons and contexts. We cannot understand how puberty influences self-image, for example, until we understand something about the context in which it is experienced, for example, in the context of dating or making a school transition (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Whether hormones rage or whisper will depend on pubertal timing and the range and kind of positive and negative life events that adolescents encounter (Susman & Rogol, 2004). Whether school transitions have a positive or negative effect on young teenagers will depend on whether there is a good fit between the teen's psychological needs and the way that schools are organized (Eccles, 2004). Student motivation is not just a "person" variable, it is not just a characteristic of the adolescent but is something that interacts with teacher practices in the context of the classroom (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Similarly the stable behavioral signature associated with trait dispositions, including traits associated with character and the moral dimensions of personality, require contextual specification and are located at the intersection of person  $\times$  context interactions (Hill & Roberts, 2010; Lapsley & Hill, 2009).

### ***TWO EXAMPLES: MIDDLE SCHOOL TRANSITIONS AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT***

The developmental systems paradigm serves as backdrop to understanding challenges that attend coming of age at two crucial moments, the transition to early adolescence and the tran-

sition to early adulthood. Transitions often provoke a reorganization of developmental processes in a way that invites promise or peril. In some instances, a transition provides a new opportunity to remake oneself, to alter peer reputation, or to stretch one's abilities or aspirations by taking on stage-appropriate challenges. We grow in our judgment, maturity and self-regulation, in our capacity for friendship and intimacy, in our ability to love, work, and play. In other instances, a transition can have convulsive effects that impede forward movement on developmental tasks. The challenge of coming of age is mostly a matter of surmounting the challenges that attend important transitions.

The interplay of experiences in the contexts of family, peer, schools, and neighborhood will provide occasion for surmounting challenges across the entire developmental manifold as a youngster makes the transition to early adolescence. There is a significant literature on how the structure and function of schools must be adapted to meet the unique developmental needs of young adolescents (Eccles & Roeser, 2013). Adolescents 10 to 14 are not simply smaller or "junior" versions of high school students but have emergent developmental needs that are not well met by the structures of traditional junior high schools. For example requiring a school transition from elementary school to Grade 7 disrupts peer networks just when peers take on a stronger focus for young adolescents. The sheer size of junior high schools, along with departmentalized curriculum, limits the opportunity of teachers to know students well. School practices that emphasize competitive grading and social comparison, or limit opportunities for student leadership and decision making, tend to exacerbate adolescent self-consciousness and frustrate the growing desire for increased autonomy. Similarly, instructional practices that trade on lower level cognitive strategies collide with students' expanding capacity for learning.

Eccles et al. (1993) argued that the middle school shift calls for a tighter *stage-environment fit* between the needs of youngsters at this

stage of development and the institutional structures we create to receive them. Indeed, poor fit undermines student motivation and achievement and has deleterious effects on other psychosocial outcomes (Eccles, 2004). Of course it has been known for a long time that early adolescence requires developmentally responsive educational programming. The middle school philosophy that touted interdisciplinary team teaching, block schedules, faculty advisors, and school transitions that avoid puberty was supposed to be a corrective to the junior high school model (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995).

But it is by no means clear that changing organizational structures is sufficient to improve stage-environment fit. Recent research documents adverse consequences associated with the transition to middle school (Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Whitley & Lupart, 2007), with increasing calls to transform stand-alone elementary and middle schools into a K-8 configuration (Farmer, Hamm, Leung, Lambert, & Gravelle, 2011; West & Schwerdt, 2012). Other researchers urge less focus on transitions and grade organization and more on classroom quality, challenging curriculum, school size, and positive social relationships between students and teachers (Holas & Huston, 2012; Lee & Burkham, 2003).

In addition to the challenge of schooling is the concern over the 10-fold increase in antisocial behavior during adolescence (Moffitt, 1993). The spike in misconduct is so dramatic that some believe it is almost aberrant of teens to refrain. Such behavior is surely overdetermined but making sense of it requires attention to the complex interplay of family, peers, schools and neighborhood. For example, unstructured peer activity without adult supervision, especially at night, is associated with many problems (Gage, Overpeck, Nansel, & Kogan, 2005), even in community recreation centers (Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004). One study found that unsupervised peer contact, lack of neighborhood safety and low parental

monitoring incrementally predicted externalizing problems in seventh grade, with the greatest risk for youngsters in low monitoring homes in unsafe neighborhoods (Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Meece, 1999). Disorganized neighborhoods provide greater access to delinquent groups (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). So does tracking in school that keeps disaffected, low-achieving or antisocial youth in homogeneous groups (Eccles, 2004).

In an important study Sameroff, Peck, and Eccles (2004) investigated whether ecological determinants of misconduct varied across transitions into middle school, into high school and into early adulthood. They found that each ecological setting (family, peer, school, neighborhood) was associated with conduct problems across adolescence (although neighborhood effects tended to wash out after other variables were controlled). The association of seventh grade conduct problems with harsh parental discipline, inconsistent parental control, and exposure to antisocial peers was particularly prominent. Yet, exposure to negative peers was influential at all transitions; so was the deleterious influence of harsh discipline. Inconsistent behavioral control was influential at all transitions, save the transition to high school. So there were few unique predictors of conduct problems at these transition points, with two interesting exceptions. First, conduct problems were mitigated during the transition to middle school when students felt like they were "being treated fairly and respected more for the quality of their school involvement than for their abilities" (Sameroff et al., 2004, p. 883). Second, exposure to prosocial friends mitigated conduct problems over the transition to adulthood. Indeed, the authors found that the positive and negative influence of peers was not clearly differentiated until high school and that positive influences do not make an independent contribution to behavioral outcomes until youth make the transition to early adulthood (Sameroff et al., 2004).

The transition to early adulthood heralds the challenge of identity formation. This was not how it was supposed to happen. In

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Erikson's majestic theory, adolescence was the life stage reserved for identity work while early adulthood was tasked with the challenges of intimacy and isolation. In his view, authentic intimacy is possible only when partners commit to the relationship after first securing their own firm sense of identity. Of course, teenagers fall in love all the time, and yearn for intimacy and a sense of connection. But even the deeply committed relationships of steady daters will prove pseudointimate if not anchored to an identity strong enough to make plans for the future in a way that includes each other, in a way strong enough to give the self away to the other and to the coupleship without feeling depleted, anxious or smothered. Hence there was logic to Erikson's (YEAR) epigenetic ground plan of lifespan development: first sort out identity issues in adolescence, then commit to intimate relationships in early adulthood. Commit to a way of being in the world (getting a job for example), and then get married.

This might have been the way coming of age unfolded generations ago but this has not been true for some time. The new phase of emerging adulthood confounds the timetable so that in the 21st century young adults will continue to wrestle simultaneously with identity and intimacy as concurrent developmental challenges. The temptation, of course, is that individuals will force premature resolution of their identity and intimacy work by foreclosing on unsuitable life options or by taking pseudointimacies to the altar.

Indeed, for many young adults identity work does not come to easy closure. Emerging adulthood extends the moratorium of identity exploration and complicates the formation of commitments. The modern economy is complex and presents a bewildering array of options just when there are fewer reliable guideposts for navigating the transition to the adult role structure of society (Schwartz, Cote, & Arnett, 2005). Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (2006) argue that identity exploration and commitment are not unitary constructs. Exploration can take two forms,

exploration-in-breadth and exploration-in-depth. The former involves gathering information about identity alternatives, while the latter involves gathering information about one's current commitments. Identity commitment can also take two forms, commitment making (actually making commitments) and identification-with-commitments, the latter coming close to the sort of identity that Erikson (YEAR) had in mind.

On this account, identity is less a status and more of a process that involves interwoven cycles of broad exploration and commitment making with deep exploration and identification with commitments. But a third kind of exploration has also been identified called "ruminative exploration"—the kind that describes the young adult stuck in perpetual exploration—and it is associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety and low self-esteem (Luyckx et al., 2008). The interwoven cycles of exploration and commitment, and the risk of ruminative exploration, are the contemporary challenge of coming of age in early adulthood.

## CONCLUSION

This review of the promise and peril of coming of age in adolescence and early adulthood reveals certain lessons when viewed through the prism of developmental contextualism. One lesson is that character education, to be effective, must be comprehensive, have multiple components, address overlapping ecological contexts, be implemented early, and be sustained over time (Lapsley & Yeager, 2013). A second is that effective character education is not only an intervention or a curriculum or something that takes place in schools. Indeed, what happens in schools is deeply embedded in overlapping systems of influence that include family, peers, and neighborhood.

But the contextualist perspective does pose special challenges for educators. The challenge for educators is how to adapt instruction for a classroom of students for which there are individual differences in level of development,

ability, preparation and interest. Children are deeply embedded within multiple ecological systems, and educators must contend with multiple sources of influence at different levels of organization. Consequently, instructional lessons that focus only on “the child” without addressing “context” will likely fail. Educational planning that does not address the diverse developmental contexts represented by students—their culture, ethnicity and life circumstances—will fall short of its objectives. On the other hand educational planning that focuses only on “context,” only on alterations to the “learning environment,” without taking into account children’s individual differences, will also fall short of the mark. A similar challenge awaits psychologists, counselors, and community mental health professionals. The challenge for professionals is how to organize classroom, schools, and communities in a way that meets the many diverse developmental needs of adolescents.

But a developmental systems perspective provides *hope* as well as challenges. The transition to early adolescence and early adulthood, like all developmental transitions, affords opportunities to revisit or reconstruct the self we claim ourselves to be. Personality and context interact in complex ways, and dispositions can be molded or canalized by the type and quality of experiences found in the settings we create for young people. The plasticity of development, and the expectation of change, gives us hope that adolescents can build competencies, surmount vulnerabilities, make adaptive changes and pursue options that contribute to thriving and well-being. It gives us hope that adolescents will profit from our educational efforts as teachers, our therapeutic efforts as counselors and psychologists, and our prevention and intervention programs as community mental health professionals. The developmental systems perspective, in its insistence of dynamic change across the life course, gives no one cause to give up on kids.

And if the requirements for the design of effective education seems daunting, given all the ecological complexities, then Masten’s

(2001) account of the “ordinary magic” of resilience processes should give educators encouragement. In the end the most needful thing is not something exotic but ordinary. What adolescents need is at least one good relationship with a caring adult in the family or community, the development of cognitive and self-regulation skills, a positive view of the self, and a sense of one’s mastery and effectiveness. These are things within the reach of educators. There is promise and peril in the transition to adolescence and emerging adulthood, to be sure, but the way forward is to create opportunities for ordinary magic in the lives of youngsters by building and connecting adaptive ecological settings, which is a way of going to *meet and match the moment of hope* as adolescents face coming of age in the 21st century.

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