

Segment 1

Today there's no set path or gold standard for defining when adulthood is reached. Definitions of what it means to be an adult may vary by the geographic region of our country, by one's ethnic and racial or socioeconomic background. There are however several hallmarks of the transition to adulthood today, and I'd like to talk about those now. First, despite all the worry about young adults who live at home, for most young people today, adulthood, early adulthood, is a period of living independently before marriage. Young people live in many kinds of households, some of which involve parents, by many of which don't. A much bigger issue is that these are years where young people are not living with a spouse. And incidentally, living at home is not a new thing that was suddenly created by the recession. This recession that we've been through has simply heightened a set of patterns that were in existence since the 1980s, even in times of economic affluence, and were even actually higher in the decades before World War II. While growing numbers of young people are living at home, most of this action occurs in the early 20s, and for most it's short-lived. It also reflects the close and connected relationships we see between young adults and their parents today. Second, the early adult years typically involve the pursuit of higher education, and a comfortable standard of living today generally requires a college degree. The widespread pursuit of higher education or some training after high school is part of what's driving a longer transition. But it is here that we also see major signs of crisis, as many young people are floundering or failing, especially in four year institutions, and as many of those students are taking five or six years to complete four year degrees. Many are also churning through multiple institutions as they make their way. And despite the common refrain that college is for everyone, high school dropout rates in our country are still quite high, and many young people do not have college as a goal or as a reality. The college for all mantra, in many ways, does a disservice to those students who need clearer and stronger pathways into adulthood that don't involve four year degrees, such as community college or vocational training. Third, regardless of college, young people are taking longer to secure full-time jobs that provide sufficient and stable resources to provide for themselves, let alone to provide for their families. They also have a wide range of employment experiences in getting there. Wages and benefits to those without four year degrees have eroded, but wages and benefits have also flattened for those with college degrees as well, which only exacerbates worry about college debt and the question of whether college is still worth it. But the effects of a college education are not just about wages and other kinds of resources. We know that there are persistent effects, positive ones, of education on health, social networks, and civic and political life. Fourth, marriage and parenting now come significantly later. For many young people, the sense is that you have to be an adult to get married and have children. You first have to get your ducks in a row so to speak by finishing degrees, getting settled in work, and building your resources. The 20s are experienced in dramatically different ways depending on whether and when you become a parent. Young adults who become parents early, and especially before completing high school, have far fewer opportunities and lower educational and occupational attainment than those who don't. It is also important to know that increasing numbers of young people are choosing to remain single and child-free. For them, marriage and fertility are not relevant markers of adulthood. And as a society, we also I think have not yet fully appreciated the social ramifications of these trends and of the fact that fertility and marriage rates are so different across socioeconomic groups and across racial and ethnic groups. Fifth, young adults have very different options and experiences depending on their family backgrounds and resources. For many young people in the United States, the wellbeing of them really rests on the investments that parents have made in the two decades

prior and on what they continue to do for their children as they move through their 20s. This is not a new phenomenon. The levels of investment on the middle class and wealthy families have gotten much higher, and what is emerging today is that lower income parents also know that their kids need support in order to do well, and they're struggling to provide it. These years look very different depending on how well-resourced young adults are, and that's not just about money. That's about emotional support, mentorship, and guidance. Finally, young people today are more racially and ethnically diverse and more diverse in terms of gender identity than other age groups. But because of this, we also see growing social inequalities, and we see that some groups are really struggling to find productive adult roles.

Segment 2

Older generations often complain about the slow pace at which young people are moving into adulthood today, but what scientific evidence shows, strong scientific evidence is that a slower path into adulthood today is often beneficial. And that it's a fast path that can be very risky when it comes to relationships, education, work and living situations. So why is a slower path beneficial? Taking time to figure out what young people want, need in a relationship before they marry and parent. And to have time together as a couple before children arrive. Those things are associated with much stronger marriages and more resourceful parenting. Taking time to pursue education or training after high school brings stable and stronger attachment to the labor force. Similarly, taking time to explore jobs and build skills creates stronger labor force attachment and greater satisfaction at work. Living at home too can be a smart decision. If it allows young people to be in school when they otherwise wouldn't be able to afford it or if it allows them to take low pay or no pay internships that will help them on the job market. Or if it allows them to save money for a stronger launch when they do go. I wanna emphasize that a slower course into adulthood is not the same as a slacker course, quite the contrary. It means doing everything you can to gain credentials and experience that will help carry you over the long haul and help manage uncertainty. A slower course also doesn't mean that young adults shouldn't have responsibility, of course they must and they must also come to know failure. Learning and recuperating from failure is an extraordinarily important growth experience and helps build both resilience and maturity. In contrast, why is a fast path so risky? Well, in many ways we should be much more concerned about young people who are going too fast than we are with young people who are going too slow. Quick marriages are much more likely to result in divorce and to involve kids. Quick parenting makes it difficult to attain education and full-time work. And a quick departure from home before young people are ready leaves them with fewer resources for getting by, let alone for investing in their future. In addition, staying at home keeps many young people out of poverty. And the reality is that if one bypasses education or some sort of training beyond high school, it's harder to go back when there are other responsibilities such as caring for young children.

Segment 3

I'd like to highlight four problematic views that society tends to have around the transition from adolescence to adulthood. First, there's a common misperception in the media and among the public that these are great years of personal freedom, exploration, and plentiful choices. Yes, this is true for some, but not for the majority of young people. Many young people are not exploring as much as they are drifting, searching for a niche, waiting for a break. Some amount of exploration is clearly good, but ungrounded exploration is expensive in terms of additional tuition, or lost earnings and opportunities. Second, since 2008, we've been bombarded with messages about the toll that the recession has taken

on young people. It's good that the recession has brought much needed attention to this period of life. But the recession didn't suddenly produce the trends we've talked about today. It has simply heightened a set of trends that were already well under way. Third, the post World War II script for life. A fast path into adulthood in which home departure was quickly followed by, or with simultaneous, with school completion, full time work, especially for men, and family formation, remains etched in the American psyche as if it's somehow the normal course to adulthood. And yet it's not. In the larger, historical picture, the post war period is actually the anomaly and we do young people a disservice when we use that outdated path to measure young people's progress into adulthood today. In a way, young people have more in common today with their peers. In the early decades of the last century, they too experienced longer periods of semi-autonomy and more scattered routes into adulthood. They too lived with family members, even at higher rates than we know today and relied on family members for their well-being. Finally, when we focus on and even demonize the millennial generation that's now in early adulthood, we fail to see that it's the period of life that's been restructured. Much more than it is about the people who are now in that period. Yes, each generation approaches the transition into adulthood in their own way. But much of what we're seeing will likely be true for the next generations as well because it's the period of life that's changing. Especially as a result of the mass pursuit of higher education and economy that prizes knowledge and technology, the growing inequality in our nation, the limited support of government for people after the ages of 18 and 21, and an Ethos of parenting and schooling, that place a premium on children's growth and development.

Segment 4

I'd like to highlight a handful of social skills and psychological capacities that we found to be helpful as young people make the transition into adulthood. First, learning how to adapt and be resilient in the face of changing circumstances, disappointments and failures, developing clearer and a more differentiated set of goals. This rests on learning individual strengths, limits and interests. It rests on identifying available options and ways to leverage them and to be able to set goals that are good and realistic match to your abilities. Match is especially important and it's shaped by input from parents, teachers, mentors, and adult peers. Sense of purpose, having a spark. Something that fuels passion and meaning and gives a shape to your plans. This too, rests on having at least some opportunities for self-exploration. The capacity for intimacy and close social relationships. A central task of the early adult years is learning how to build relationships that are characterized by trust, self-disclosure, closeness, commitment and concern. Achieving intimate relationships is really a gateway to adult development. This is not only about romantic relationships but it's about relationships of all kinds. Learning how to form and, especially, how to maintain all kinds of relationships. Learning about intergroup relationships. This is an especially important feature in our diverse world. Young people have to understand and be able to relate to people like them but also to recognize that they are just one of many subgroups in the larger society. They must be open too and have relationships with members of other groups in order to expand their feelings and their attitudes, in order to gain cultural knowledge and in order to build empathy for other kinds of people. Reflective capacity, this means having some self-awareness and the ability to take the perspectives of other people and to take these perspectives into account before we act. One must learn to analyze one's motives and experiences and extract lessons to shape future goals, decisions and behaviors. Self-regulation, the ability to control one's impulses and one's emotions in order bring them into compliance with the expectations in social settings. We know that this is a highly

predictive trait of many positive outcomes in childhood and in adolescence but it's probably no less important in adult life.

Segment 5

The lessons we've learned from research on the transition into adulthood suggests that there are ways that we can strengthen pathways into adult life through key institutions and social policies. I'd like to talk about three domains outside of four year colleges and universities. First, community colleges are ideal targets for intervention. They touch large numbers of people, a wide variety of young people, they serve many purposes, they're flexible, and they offer connections to a wide range of potential career paths. We too often equate success in early adulthood with getting a four year college degree and those with anything else feel like failures. The college for all mantra really leaves in the shadows many other important but alternative routes into adulthood. A key challenge is how to foster success for those who don't have the desire, the skills, or the finances to pursue four year degrees. In addition, some young people, due to disabilities and mental health issues or other concerns may face unique challenges in attending four year institutions and may require significant accommodations and support or require longer times to degree completion. As access to four year institutions have broaden, colleges and universities are building the array of services and programs to support first year students, especially first generation college students and students from underrepresented groups. Many local or regional community colleges and four year institutions are also trying to better coordinate courses and policies so that students have a smoother experience as they move across institutions. Second, civic engagement and service learning programs in many schools and workplaces offer important opportunities to build skills and networks, to explore social and political attitudes and values, to contribute to communities, and to develop a larger sense of purpose and meaning in life. Third, the military also serves many young people. For most young people who enlist, it is an institution of first choice, not a second choice institution. Like four year residential colleges and universities, it provides a setting in which young people learn to work and live and learn. With guidance and mentoring, the military can help young people acquire skills and foster a sense of competence and it can provide a bridge to higher education.

Segment 6

I'd now like to highlight some of the lessons I've learned about life transitions in the process of doing this research. First, early adulthood is a window into how the whole life course is changing. Every period of life today is being rewritten as old scripts no longer apply and can even be dangerous to follow in today's world. For example, what it means to be middle age or old, if we even allow ourselves to believe that we become old in our society, are similarly up for grabs. Every period of life today is characterized by new ambiguity, new vulnerability, and new uncertainty. I'm not sure why in the process we're so hard on young people. Next, seemingly private problems are often actually public issues. That is, people often believe that their situations are unique. And they somehow fail to appreciate the fact that many other people just like them are having the same kind of experiences. What happens in one stage also has implications for what comes next. Much of what we see in the 20s, for example, is clearly the result of things that have happened in childhood or in adolescence. Just as much of what happens in the 20s will be terribly consequential for the rest of adult life. Life is fluid, yes. But some things can't be easily reversed, especially as families are formed and as major debt related to housing or other kinds of spending is assumed. Similarly, the things that are going on for people in one period of life have implications for people in other periods. Lives are linked. The prolonged and more fragile transition to adulthood today has brought consequences for the choices and the resources of parents and grandparents, for example. In some families, it has raised anxiety, strained economic resources, altered mother's and father's choices about work, and saving, and delayed retirement. And of course, for young people themselves, it also means that they're getting a late start in building their own savings and their own retirements. Another lesson is that gender matters. Most of the crisis stories about this period of life are actually about men. High school and college drop out, unemployment, being disconnected, by which we mean being not in school, not in work, and not in the military, suicide, alcohol and substance abuse, high-risk sexual behavior, homicide, emotion regulation, imprisonment. The list goes on. These are also, especially, stories about underprivileged men. That's not to say that women are not vulnerable. Of course, they are. For example, women are at risk for depression, and sexual assault, intimate partner violence, eating disorders, and many other things. There's currently a measure focus on the years between zero and five, and especially on the years between zero and three. What is often not recognized is that there's still a need for intervention in adolescence and young adulthood, and that these later investments will also pay dividends over the decades of adult life. Another lesson is that hardship can prompt resilience and growth. This is not a reason to not intervene. But I'm often struck by how resilient the human spirit is and how growth and transformation can come in the face of adversity. Indeed, learning how to be adaptive and resilient may be one of the most important skills that we can teach young people. To me, learning to cope with disappointment and failure are probably the primary hallmark of adult life. In addition, adult life seldom turns out exactly as we planned it. And sometimes the most important things that happen are due to opportunities and encounters that happen by chance. Planning is important, sure, but so is flexibility. In an uncertain world, the most precious opportunities may go to those who have planned carefully. But at the same time, an uncertain world really demands that we constantly alter our goals and our expectations, and that we're open to finding opportunities in the places that we, sometimes, least expect them. We somehow expect young people to have their lives completely figured out, and to know exactly what they want, and how to get there. And yet, the rest of us who are no longer young know that adult life is anything but neat and tidy. And we conveniently forget that we didn't have it all figured out when we were young adults either. How many of us are actually living the lives we imagined when we were young? Another important lesson is that social

relationships matter. We tell young people that the goal of adulthood is to be independent. And yet, our existence at every age depends on our relationships with other people. Who we are, who we become, the opportunities that we get or are denied, those all are connected to other people. Success in early adulthood is about developing mutual and healthy relationships with other people who can nurture and support you and whom you can nurture and support. These people can be gateways to opportunities and also restrict opportunities. Indeed, many of the things that we associate with becoming adult, especially partnering and parenting, are things that bring a loss to our individual freedom. But they're also things that bring life much of its meaning. The bottom line is that the 20s are now a period in which people receive contradictory messages about themselves from the outside world and feel attention inside themselves about feeling not quite adult. After they've crossed the legal ages of adulthood, most young people say they are adults. But they also say that they do not feel entirely adult. In some ways and spheres they do. And in some ways and spheres they don't. With a general and gradual accumulation of experiences, one person we interviewed called these adult moments. They eventually build more integrated and stable senses of themselves as adults. They feel like adults, because they do adult things. And they also do adult things, because they feel like adults. Both directions matter.

Segment Q&A

- I'd like to highlight a handful of social skills, and psychological capacities, that we found to be helpful as young people make the transition into adulthood. First, learning how to adapt and be resilient in the face of changing circumstances, disappointments, and failures. Developing clear, and a more differentiated, set of goals. This rests on learning individual strengths, limits, and interests. It rests on identifying available options, and ways to leverage them. And to be able to set goals that are a good and realistic match to your abilities. Match is especially important, and it's shaped by input from parents, teachers, mentors, and adult peers. Sense of purpose, having a spark, something that fuels passion and meaning, and gives a shape to your plans. And this, too, rests on having at least some opportunities for self-exploration. It's not given, but it's found. The capacity for intimacy, and close social relationships. A central task of the early adult years is learning how to build relationships that are characterized by trust, self-disclosure, closeness, commitment, and concern. Achieving intimate relationships is really a gateway to adult development. This is not only about romantic relationships, but it's about relationships of all kinds. Learning how to form, and especially how to maintain, all kinds of relationships. Learning about intergroup relationships, this is an especially important feature in our diverse world. Young people have to understand, and be able to relate to people like them, but also to recognize that they are just one of many subgroups in the larger society. They must be open to, and have relationships, with member of other groups, in order to expand their feelings and their attitudes, in order to gain cultural knowledge, and in order to build empathy for other kinds of people. Reflective capacity, this means having some self-awareness, and the ability to take the perspectives of other people, and to take these perspectives into account before we act. One must learn to analyze one's motives and experiences, and extract lessons, to shape future goals, decisions, and behaviors. Self-regulation, the ability to control one's impulses, and one's emotions, in order to bring them into compliance with the expectations in social settings. We know that this is a highly predictive trait of many positive outcomes in childhood and in adolescence, but it's probably no less important in adult life. I'd like to offer some advice to those who work with adolescents on how best to prepare them for the transition to early adulthood. To start off, I'd like to say that any society that requires higher education for access to good jobs with living wages and benefits, and one that's characterized by gross inequalities is going to be a society where many

young people fail. And a society where many young people fail can't be a truly great society. No matter where one sits on a political spectrum, we must commit to supporting and investing in young people. This we know. How things unfold in the 20s is terribly consequential for the rest of adult life. And what happens in this decade both perpetuates and crystallizes tremendous inequalities among young people. The 20s are a crucial period for intervention. Poor outcomes have long-term, cumulative effects. Professionals who work with young people therefore have a great opportunity to make a difference in the lives of individual youth, and in doing so, we are also making a difference in our society because we're affecting the long-term decisions that they make. The power we have in making a difference is especially true for youth whose family relationships are fragile or absent, or youth who have been attached to the foster care, special education, or juvenile justice systems. These individuals are abruptly cut off from support at 18 or 21, precisely at a time when their more privileged peers are getting significant infusions of support, both financial and emotional, from their families. Any mentoring that we can offer these youth can make an extraordinary difference in their lives. We can also make a significant difference in nurturing the lives of boys and men in modeling responsibility, goal setting, and healthy relationship skills. Those will go a long way in improving the lives of men, and perhaps more importantly, in improving the lives of the people connected to them. Many of the world's problems are the result of problems of men. We must also recognize that life has changed since we were young. Providing advice based on what we knew isn't always good advice for today. We need to better appreciate the complexity of the world that young people are trying to navigate, resist the impulse to say, when I was young. Instead, ask young people how they feel, what they're struggling with, what brings meaning to their lives. Stop and truly listen to what they have to say, rather than tell them what they have to do. This is true for professionals and parents alike. For parents, I'd offer the following advice. First, the support of parents, financially and emotionally, is probably the single most important predictor of success for young adults in the United States, especially given the lack of government support once children reach the legal ages of adulthood. Involved parents provide many advantages that are necessary in today's world. New generations of parents have wanted deeper emotional connections to their children, and they got it. In my view, that's a good thing, but that doesn't mean it's easy. There are no guidebooks for how these relationships are supposed to go once children are grown, or when parents are middle-aged or old. But a warning to men, the close relationships that we see today between young adults and their parents are really much more about young adults and their mothers, not their fathers, despite how far we'd like to think that the American father has come. How involved should parents be? Well, what we might call Goldilocks parenting is probably best, that is hitting just the right amount of parental involvement. If you're over-involved, and you know who you are, step back, but if you're under-involved, step up. What we might call the hard knocks school of parenting of a bygone era, 18 you're out, no support thereafter, is not at all an effective strategy today. Building the self-esteem of children will carry them far, but children also need to know disappointment and failure, and not all disappointment and failure is created equally. Some hardships are more consequential than others. Parents must choose when to make the save, and when to let a child fall. If you want to see just how much involved parenting matters in the United States, track the lives of young people who don't have it. Many serious problems in our society stem from parents who are absent, neglectful, or abusive. The media and public obsession with helicopter parents is focused on the wrong end of the spectrum. Involved parents, even hyper-involved ones, aren't creating these kinds of significant social problems. Involved parenting is especially important for boys and men. Many of the crises of child development concern boys, and many of the crises of adulthood concern men. Both boys and men benefit from more

involved fathering. There's significant problem with the debt of young adults as well, not only college-related debt, and that's partly because they haven't learned anything about finances in school, or at home. Give your child experiences that foster their financial capability and literacy, and learning how to spend well and save well. Don't get hung up on your kids living at home. In the US the ideal of an early departure from the parental home has always been more of a myth than a reality. Most living with parents happens in the early 20s, by the second half of the 20s, it drops dramatically as the transition to adulthood has gotten sorted out. As noted earlier, for many young adults living at home can actually be a smart way to get ahead. And moreover, it keeps many young people out of poverty and safe.