



The Changing Transition to Adulthood

with Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Ph.D.

■ Discussion Guide for Professionals

This discussion guide is designed for professionals who are interested in learning more about the transition to adulthood today, how it has changed over time, what skills and capacities are helpful as young people navigate this transition, and the roles of families, schools, workplaces, and policies in the process.

Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Ph.D., Professor of Human Development and Family Studies and Endowed Director of the Hallie Ford Center for Healthy Children & Families in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences at Oregon State University, is an expert on life transitions. In his research, Dr. Settersten examines how what was once viewed as an established, straightforward path to adulthood has become a more complicated journey filled with uncertainty, shifting cultural expectations, growing social inequalities, and difficult economic choices and constraints. Scientific evidence often counters the perception of young adults as “slackers” and reveals that slower, strategic transitions to adulthood can be beneficial. He also cautions about the “illusion of independence,” describing how the need for parental and other types of support sometimes clashes with existing public policy and institutions. Dr. Settersten has written about this transition in books such as, “Not Quite Adults” and “On the Frontier of Adulthood,” and his work has been covered by many media outlets, including *NPR*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Here are a few tips for professionals working with youth:

- Plan for participants to view Dr. Settersten’s video segments individually or as a group. The videos are on YouTube and are a total of approximately 30 minutes in length (divided into shorter segments that can be watched individually or together).
- Decide who will facilitate the conversation.
- Allow approximately 30 minutes to discuss the questions. If the group is larger than 10 people, consider breaking into small groups.
- Ask the facilitator to walk through the resource list with the group (and, if possible, to review the resources themselves before the session).



■ Discussion Questions

1. The transition to adulthood has changed from the way it was in previous generations. Which changes strike you as particularly relevant to the journey of the youth you work with?
2. Dr. Settersten remarked that a slower, strategic path to adulthood can be beneficial, and that a “standard” or “conventional” route to adulthood has eroded. What do you think is important to communicate to youth about these varied paths? How could you best communicate this to youth you work with?
3. Dr. Settersten described different kinds of markers of adulthood, especially focusing on changes in traditional “social” markers – leaving home, finishing school, finding work, partnering, and parenting. He also mentioned more abstract “psychological” markers like developing a sense of maturity, responsibility, independence, and personal control. How have the youth you work with progressed on these types of markers of adulthood? Which things matter most for *your* view of young people, and *their* views of themselves, as “adults?” Do you care about the same things?
4. Dr. Settersten elaborated on a handful of social skills and psychological capacities that are beneficial to young people today, including learning how to develop clearer plans and more differentiated goals, to create a sense of purpose, to build and maintain close personal relationships, to understand and relate to others who are different from them, to be resilient, and to be more self-aware and self-regulate emotions and impulses. Are these significant challenges for the youth you work with? What might you do to help foster these skills and capacities?
5. What are three takeaway messages from Dr. Settersten’s presentation that you will share with adolescents you work with, their family members, and other interested adults?

■ Additional Resources

- Richard A. Settersten, Jr. & Barbara E. Ray, *Not Quite Adults: Why 20-Somethings Are Choosing a Slower Path to Adulthood, and Why It's Good for Everyone*. New York: Bantam/Random House.
<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/164372/not-quite-adults-by-richard-settersten-phd-and-barbara-e-ray/9780553807400/>
- Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Timothy M. Ottusch, & Barbara Schneider, “Becoming adult: Meanings of markers to adulthood.” In R. A. Scott & S. M. Kosslyn (Eds.), *Emerging trends in the social and behavioral sciences: An interdisciplinary, searchable, and linkable resource*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



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<http://health.oregonstate.edu/biblio/emerging-trends-social-and-behavioral-sciencesbecoming-adult-meanings-markers-adulthood>

- Gordon Berlin, Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., & Mary Waters (Eds.), Transition to Adulthood. A special issue of *The Future of Children*.
http://www.futureofchildren.org/sites/futureofchildren/files/media/transition_to_adulthood_20_01_fulljournal.pdf (Free PDF)