

Preparation for “Are We Grownups Yet?”

The question “Are we grownups yet?” assumes that there are defining characteristics of adulthood. Many lists are available that purport to show just that, giving lists of 5 or 10 or 50 signs that you are indeed a grownup. Such lists usually fall into categories, such as:

- Developmental tasks (working a job, marrying, having children)
- Behavioral tasks (cleaning up after self, gardening, saving \$\$ for retirement)
- Owning things (bank accounts, life insurance, matching dishes)

Generally, governments regulate certain activities by age based on biological markers: driving, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, voting, seeing movies with adult ratings, working outside a family business, or being charged for crimes as an adult. These biological markers continue to change over time, so puberty and brain development of past generations do not match what the next generations may experience.

Many religions and cultures also use these biological markers for “coming of age” ceremonies. Through the sacrament of confirmation, Catholics are encouraged to recognize their responsibility for their neighbor, a sign of adulthood. In Jewish tradition, a boy of 13 or girl of 12 becomes responsible for observing the commandments, and the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony publicly marks the assumption of that obligation. UU congregations mark the transitions of youth in “coming of age” or “bridging” ceremonies, including reflections from the youth and their educators on their beliefs, in a demonstration of UU’s fourth principle: the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

In an *Atlantic* article on definitions of adulthood, Julie Beck cites research psychologist Jensen Arnett, who claims that young people still want career, marriage and parenting, “they just don’t see them as the defining traits of adulthood.” Arnett says that adulthood is tied up with social roles: “A big part of being an adult is people treating you like one, and taking on these roles can help you convince others – and yourself – that you’re responsible.” Beck asked readers for opinions and found that no one event marks adulthood. One reader reports, “I’m an OB/GYN and watch women struggle through many life changes ... I think the answer to ‘When do you become an adult?’ has to do with when you finally have acceptance of yourself ... My patients who seem secure through any of life[’s] struggles, those are the women who seem like adults.”

We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another; unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made up of layers, cells, constellations. *Anais Nin*

To abandon the child ‘within’ means that the adult ‘without’ will be an adult in name only. And frankly, I can only name a handful of things that are that tragic. *Craig D. Lounsbrough*

Maturity, one discovers, has everything to do with the acceptance of ‘not knowing.’
Mark Z. Danielewski, House of Leaves

I am convinced that most people do not grow up ... We marry and dare to have children and call that growing up. I think what we do is mostly grow old. We carry accumulation of years in our bodies, and on our faces, but generally our real selves, the children inside, are innocent and shy as magnolias.
Maya Angelou, Letter to My Daughter

Critics who treat 'adult' as a term of approval, instead of as a merely descriptive term, cannot be adult themselves. To be concerned about being grown up, to admire the grown up because it is grown up, to blush at the suspicion of being childish; these things are the marks of childhood and adolescence. And in childhood and adolescence they are, in moderation, healthy symptoms. Young things ought to want to grow. But to carry on into middle life or even into early manhood this concern about being adult is a mark of really arrested development. *C.S. Lewis*

We thought we were running away from the grownups, and now we are the grownups.
Margaret Atwood.

Would the boy I was approve of the man I am? No, the boy I was would have thrown himself off the nearest bridge just to save himself from future embarrassment. The adolescent I was would have driven the car to get him to the bridge, and the man I was the year following my father's death would have plied the boy with strong spirits so the fall wouldn't hurt so bad. But I am not the child I was, the teen I was, nor the man I was then. ... I am the man I am now. It is all I can ever be. It's all any of us can be. *Raziq Brown, from Becoming: A Spiritual Guide for Navigating Adulthood*

You don't stop laughing when you grow old, you grow old when you stop laughing.
George Bernard Shaw

Questions to Ponder

1. Describe a "defining moment" when you felt you might have achieved adulthood. Knowing what you know now, how might your description change?
2. How do you judge whether someone is an adult? Reflect on whether you are using "adulthood" as a term of approval, a descriptive term, or whether the term carries some other meaning.
3. What coming of age ceremonies have you played a part in? Reflect on their meaning culturally or spiritually.
4. What differences have you noticed in your own learning through being with diverse age groups as opposed to programs geared toward specific age groups?
5. Think of an experience that has helped to "bridge the gap" in communication as our families have been separated by generations and distance throughout our lifetimes.
6. What activities do you indulge in that help recall the freedom and innocence of childhood?
7. Without referring to your biological age, how old do you feel?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, think of a time when you felt like you had achieved adulthood. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence:
"I felt like a REAL grownup when I ..."