

Bridging the Generational Gap: Addressing the Challenges of Emerging Adulthood Together

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Emerging adulthood, a period typically spanning the late teens through age 25 or 30 (depending on the source), is a time of significant transition and development. This stage often brings emotional, psychological, behavioral, financial, and social challenges that can lead to conflicts between young adults and their parents. A generation gap, where differing values, attitudes, and experiences come into play, often exacerbates these conflicts.

The generation gap refers to the differences in opinions, values, attitudes, and behaviors between one generation and another, often leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. The distinct social, cultural, and economic contexts where each generation grows up create generational gaps in technology use, communication styles, work ethic, social norms, and political beliefs.

Inherent conflict from the generation gap:

Generation gaps can contribute significantly to conflicts between emerging adults and their parents. Differences in attitudes towards technology and communication styles often lead to misunderstandings. Varied cultural and social values, especially concerning gender roles, sexuality, and diversity, can create tension. Divergent views on work ethic, career expectations, and lifestyle choices also play a role, with parents sometimes perceiving their emerging adult offspring's choices as impractical or unrealistic. Growing up in different contexts, these offspring may perceive parental beliefs and expectations as old-fashioned and "out of touch."

Economic Context:

Parents' Perspective: Many parents from the Baby Boomer and Generation X cohorts, grew up when the job market was more stable, higher education was more affordable, and achieving financial independence by a certain age was more attainable. As a result, they might expect their children to be able to follow a similar path of quickly entering the workforce, becoming financially independent, and achieving traditional milestones like home buying or starting a family.

Emerging Adults' Perspective: Today's emerging adults face a different economic reality, characterized by high student debt, a competitive and often unstable job market, and rising living costs. These economic pressures can delay financial independence and traditional life milestones, leading to differing expectations about what constitutes success and responsible behavior.

Technological Context:

Parents' Perspective: Parents may have grown up with limited technology and slower rates of technological change. They may have limited use and skills with digital communication and social media and a limited desire to participate in the learning curve to adopt technology to broader areas of their lives. They may view smartphones and social media as distractions from real-life responsibilities and face-to-face interactions.

Emerging Adults' Perspective: Emerging adults have grown up in a digital age, where technology and social media are integral to their daily lives. They often use these tools for communication, learning, and career opportunities. Generation differences in the use of these tools can create a gap in understanding, where parents may see technology use as excessive or unnecessary. Emerging adults view it as essential.

Social and Cultural Context:

Parents' Perspective: Previous generations often held more traditional views on career paths, marriage, and family roles. Traditional views emphasize early marriage, starting a family, and long-term employment with one company as markers of success.

Emerging Adults' Perspective: Contemporary views often focus on career flexibility, work-life balance, and diverse family structures. They may prioritize personal fulfillment, experiences, and social causes over traditional markers of success. These differences may lead to conflicts when parents' expectations don't align with their children's choices and values.

Educational Context:

Parents' Perspective: Many parents experienced a more straightforward and often less expensive educational system, with a direct pathway from education to employment. They might expect their children to complete their education quickly and transition smoothly into their careers.

Emerging Adults' Perspective: Emerging adults face a more complex educational landscape, with longer durations in higher education (e.g., a 4-year degree takes at least one additional semester,) frequent changes in career focus and goals, and the need for continuous learning and adaptation. Ambiguous routes to career achievement can result in different timelines and pathways, which parents might perceive as indecision or lack of direction.

Social Norms and Communication Styles:

Parents' Perspective: Traditional communication styles and social norms valued direct, face-to-face interactions, face-to-face interactions, letter writing, and formal meetings, with clear etiquette and respect, and

structured interactions. Parents might expect their children to conform to these standards and may view alternative communication styles or non-traditional social roles as inappropriate, disrespectful, or immature.

Emerging Adults' Reality: Emerging adults are often more comfortable with indirect communication methods (e.g., texting and social media) and fluid social roles. They value inclusivity, diversity, and flexible social structures, which sometimes clash with their parents' more formal, authority-deferent expectations.

Coping Strategies and Mental Health Awareness:

Parents' Perspective: Older generations may have limited acceptance of mental health issues and may have relied on traditional coping mechanisms. Older parents, especially Baby Boomers, grew up during a time when mental health issues were often stigmatized, and seeking help was sometimes seen as a sign of weakness or failure. The coping and mental health techniques of that generation probably would have been self-help books, religious or spiritual practices, or trying to "tough it out" rather than seek professional mental health support. Generation X parents were more inclined to seek help for mental health issues but still valued the independent, self-reliant methods to develop personal strength and resilience. They may use various coping mechanisms, including exercise, hobbies, socializing, and professional counseling. They might expect their children to handle stress and challenges in similar ways.

Emerging Adults' Perspectives: Today's emerging adults are more aware of mental health and often prioritize self-care and mental well-being. They may adopt the coping skills and techniques advocated by previous generations plus use contemporary resources and strategies such as telehealth, mental health apps, social media communities and influencers, creative outlets, alternative therapies (i.e., aroma therapy, acupuncture, etc.,) distraction and problem-solving techniques. Parents may question the effectiveness and usefulness of some of these techniques.

Emotional and Psychological Support:

The typical developmental tasks of identity formation, emotional self-regulation skills, independent living skills, education, job/career selection, and continued tuning of relationship skills are occurring amid conflicting values, approaches, and belief system differences between generations.

Emerging adults are learning from their peers, their social contexts, and their parents. They may or may not be consciously seeking help for these developmental tasks. They may be getting mixed messages, tutoring, guidance, and expectations, leading to feelings of confusion, anxiety, and stress.

Parents remain a crucial player in providing a safe emotional space, offering encouragement, validating their offspring's experiences and feelings, and giving feedback. Emerging adults may reject input and advice, complaining that parental information is outdated. Information transfer is still essential, and parental guidance and advice are still invaluable as young adults navigate mental health issues, self-esteem concerns, and the cognitive shift from adolescent to adult thinking.

Behavioral and Financial Guidance:

It's often very confusing for parents when emerging adults frequently engage in risky behaviors, have trouble with decision-making, or find it challenging to take responsibility for themselves. Parents may expect that they should be past impulsive behavior and have good executive functioning.

Executive functioning skills are cognitive processes that enable individuals to manage themselves and their resources to achieve goals. These skills are crucial in planning, decision-making, problem-solving, and regulating behavior and emotions. Executive function skills are a function of the brain's prefrontal cortex, which is still developing into the mid-twenties to age 30.

Parents can model healthy behaviors, set appropriate boundaries, and support their children's life skills development. Financial challenges are a common source of conflict as young adults transition to financial independence, manage budgeting, and navigate economic uncertainties. Parents' financial education and monetary assistance can make a significant difference here. Carte blanche enabling financial irresponsibility is probably not helpful and can cause more damage than assistance.

Parents can also assist their emerging adult offspring in taking responsibility for themselves by encouraging them to make their own appointments, allowing them to get themselves to work and fulfill their educational or work responsibilities without hovering or micromanaging. When living in the parental home, they should be held responsible for helping maintain the house and family environment (financially, being responsible for chores, or both). They should master cleaning up after themselves before they leave home.

Social and Practical Support:

Changing relationships and the need to build new social networks are common during this stage. Parents can help by using their networks to provide internships, jobs, or mentorship opportunities and encourage participation in social activities. Additionally, teaching essential life skills and supporting decision-making processes help emerging adults achieve greater independence and self-sufficiency.

Financial Independence and Career Progression:

Parents might see emerging adulthood as a "failure to launch" when young adults continue to live at home, are financially dependent, or struggle with unstable employment and career indecision. Parents may also see extended time in education or frequent changes in academic focus as avoiding the workforce. The generation gap may be at work here, with

under-appreciation of their offspring's current economic challenges, such as job market instability, lack of marketable skills, or student debt.

Delayed Life Milestones and Lifestyle Choices:

Delays in marriage, starting a family, or maintaining long-term relationships can be seen as a reluctance to take on adult responsibilities. While Baby Boomers' courtship and mate selection entailed traditional, face-to-face interactions, early marriages, and well-defined social norms, contemporary emerging adults use digital technologies, embrace flexible roles, and often delay marriage in favor of personal growth and diverse relationship models. These shifts reflect societal changes and evolving cultural attitudes toward relationships and marriage.

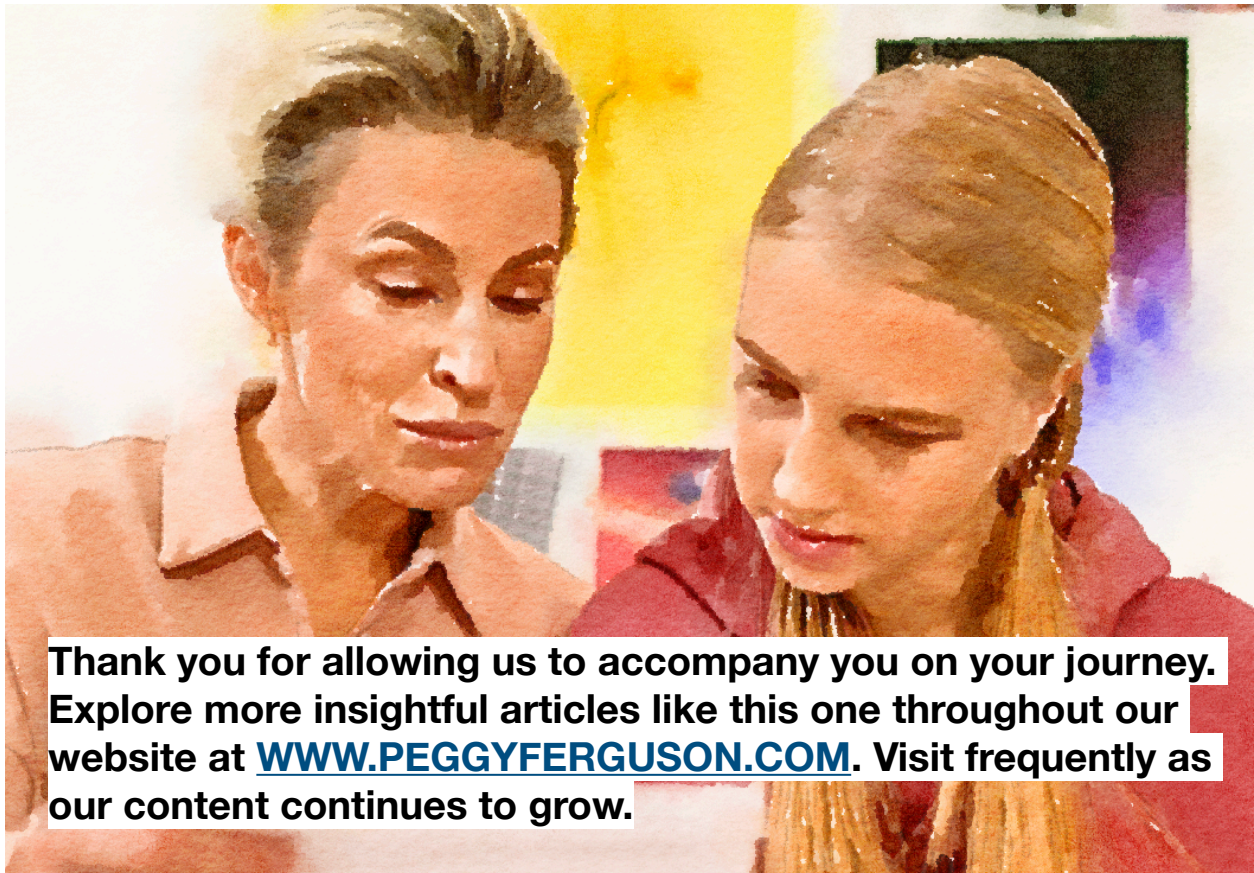
Similarly, spending significant time on hobbies or leisure activities rather than career advancement might appear as avoiding responsibilities. Parents' prioritization of focus on career initiation and development may not align with the values of emerging adults today.

Emerging adults may prioritize experiences over material possessions, preferring to spend money and effort on travel, adventure, sports, and cultural experiences. They often seek careers that provide a sense of purpose and align with their values, seeking work/life balance and jobs that offer flexibility (e.g., remote work and freelancing).

Bridging the Gap:

Understanding and addressing these differences requires open communication and mutual respect. Parents and emerging adults must acknowledge and respect their differences, actively listen to each other's perspectives, and find common ground. Recognizing the broader context of emerging adulthood, including economic, social, and cultural shifts, can help bridge the generation gap, foster a more harmonious relationship, and enable the previous generation to assist their adult offspring. Emerging adulthood is a complex and challenging phase, but with parents' support

and understanding, young adults can benefit from parental assistance in stage of life and achieve critical developmental milestones.



Thank you for allowing us to accompany you on your journey. Explore more insightful articles like this one throughout our website at WWW.PEGGYFERGUSON.COM. Visit frequently as our content continues to grow.