The Level of Maturity that Constitutes Adulthood

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the article's first paragraph.

The United States of America provides its citizens with many freedoms and privileges unique to other nations worldwide. At 15, you may start working with the proper legal working papers. The same freedom that allows you the right to earn that living also allows the government to take taxes out of your paycheck as a thank you for the privilege. This very same government acknowledges the fact that you are old enough a U.S. citizen for the government to remove taxes, federal and/or state, from your paycheck. yet you're still not old enough to vote in our nation's elections until 18 years of age. At 16, you are given the opportunity to drive an automobile by passing a written and road test prior, but you may not serve your country in a war until age 18 as well. At 18, you may also purchase a shotgun and ammunition with a minor background check. but you may not buy a beer. With these adult-type privileges being offered to us at various ages, is it any wonder people are confused? Is there a set age at which a person is considered an adult, with all its prohibitions and privileges, in the United States?
The Level of Maturity that Constitutes Adulthood

By Peter Stoller

The United States of America provides its citizens with many freedoms and privileges unique to other nations worldwide. At 15, you may start working with the proper legal working papers. The same freedom that allows you the right to earn that living also allows the government to take taxes out of your paycheck as a thank you for the privilege. This very same government acknowledges the fact that you are old enough a U.S. citizen for the government to remove taxes, federal and/or state, from your paycheck, yet you're still not old enough to vote in our nation's elections until 18 years of age. At 16, you are given the opportunity to drive an automobile by passing a written and road test prior, but you may not serve your country in a war until age 18 as well. At 18, you may also purchase a shotgun and ammunition with a minor background check, but you may not buy a beer. With these adult-type privileges being offered to us at various ages, is it any wonder people are confused? Is there a set age at which a person is considered an adult, with all its prohibitions and privileges, in the United States?

In an effort to determine an answer to the above question and come up with a basis for the decisions made, there are several factors that needed to be considered: historical, legal, religious, and psychological.

Historical

To understand why our government made certain decisions and the circumstances that occurred which led to those decisions required a review of the U. S. Constitution. Roger K. Newman, in his article "Constitutional Concepts", in Principles of American Government, did just that: "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men," John Madison wrote in The Federalist #51, "the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed, and in the next place, oblige it to control itself" (Newman 7). With this in mind, the Constitution was drafted to limit government using the principles of separation of powers and federalism, the "due process" clauses, and the doctrine of judicial review (7). Chief Justice John Marshall called it "the theory of our government" (Newman 8).

Newman went on to describe popular sovereignty as a government that is created by and subject to the will of the people and which allows the people to make changes to the Constitution (9). The ability to limit governmental power is through the amendment process (9). Amendments to the Constitution are introduced in Congress where the first step is to have a two-thirds approval in both houses (Newman 10). After that, the amendment goes to the individual states for approval (10). Congress may call a national convention to propose an amendment if two-thirds of the state legislatures approve it (10). The amendment becomes part of the Constitution only after legislatures or specially chosen conventions in three-fourths of the states have ratified it (10).

Interpretation of the Constitution is one of the most controversial subjects in history. One approach is of "original intent" or that the Constitution should be interpreted according to the intention of those who drafted and adopted it. History and the words used are very important to interpretation. Another approach is the "living Constitution," namely, that the constitution is to be kept as up to date as today's news. Unfortunately, the idea that a country's fundamental charter of government should be constantly changing bothers a lot of people (Newman 11).

The Constitution is rigid in regards to personal liberties that are basic, timeless, and the very reason this country was founded (Newman 12). It is an adaptable and changing document that creates and limits power at the same time (12). The commitment to the Constitution is one of the few bonds that unites all Americans (12).

Upon establishing the Constitution, our founding fathers also had the foresight to realize that what worked then may not work in the future. To insure the freedoms they initially established would work, they didn't stop at just the Constitution. They went on to draft the Bill of Rights or the first ten Amendments to the Constitution, which set forth the liberties of the people and also to limit the power of the federal government.

This legal document and the above process is what are used to determine the rights of all Americans and legal age is one of those rights. The 1st Amendment and 5th Amendment, which basically guarantee life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all Americans are by far the most well known and well used of the Bill of Rights.

The 14th Amendment is probably the 3rd most important amendment. Up to this point most people were governed by the state that they lived in. Made into a law in 1868, it was designed to prevent state and local governments from violating the individual American's rights and freedoms. Coming after the Civil War, the intent of this Amendment was to also place the word "equal" into the Constitution originally left out by the Framers. The 14th amendment is considered one of the cornerstones of American freedom. Along with the 13th amendment which banned slavery, and the 15th amendment which...
affirmed national birthright for citizenship, it offered Americans a second Constitution, one that was more freedom loving, giving equality to all the people (Newman 90-95).

Legal

During this review of basic American freedoms, the term "Age of Majority" was used a lot. In Black's Law Dictionary, 7th edition, under "age" the following list is found:

**Age of capacity:** The age, usually defined by statute as 18 years of age, at which a person is legally capable of agreeing to a contract, executing a will, maintaining a lawsuit, or the like. Also termed age of majority; legal age; lawful age.

**Age of consent:** The age, usually defined by statute as 16 years, at which a person is legally capable of agreeing to marriage (without parental consent) or to sexual intercourse.

**Age of majority:** 1. The age, usually defined by statute as 18 years, at which a person attains full legal rights, esp. civil and political rights such as the right to vote. Also termed lawful age. 2. See age of capacity.

**Age of reason:** The age at which a person becomes able to distinguish right from wrong and is thus legally capable of committing a crime or tort. * The age of reason varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but 7 years is usually the age below which a child is conclusively presumed not to have committed a crime or tort, while 14 years is usually the age below which a rebuttal presumption applies.

**Fighting age:** The age at which a person becomes eligible to serve in (or liable to conscription into) a military unit. See 26th Amendment - age 18.

**Lawful age:** 1. See age of capacity. 2. See age of majority. (62)

According to the various legal definitions listed above by Black, the age of 18 is definitely old enough to do just about anything to establish oneself in this country as an adult.

Religious

One of the reasons for establishing the United States was religious freedom. Referring to age of an adult from the religious point of view is just another step in answering the question at what age are you considered an adult in the United States.

The Oxford Dictionary of Jewish Religion cites the age of adult, and this is for boys only, as 13 (100). A Jewish religious ceremony known as a Bar Mitzvah is when a 13-year-old boy becomes an adult member of the Jewish community (100). The Talmud, which is a collection of Jewish teachings, states that a male child reaches his religious majority on attaining puberty or age 13, and is regarded as a responsible person, liable for the results of his own actions (100).

The Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary, which relates to most Christian religions, refers to an adult as one who has reached maturity, or age of reason. The age of reason is an age at which a child is normally able to make responsible decisions, usually age 7, but this may vary with children (13). The book also refers to the age of discretion, which is a time in life when a person can begin to make serious decisions (13). The Maryknoll book also lists the age of consent, which is the lowest age at which a person can marry: age 14 for boys and for girls, the youngest at which a girl may consent to sexual relations without having her partner subject to statutory rape (13).

The above information is very important as to the makeup and mindset of those that came before us, those responsible for the laws we now have to abide by. It also takes us into the next area of review.

Psychological

When my grandparents were young, adolescence was thought to be a short passage between childhood and adulthood. Today, it starts early and does it ever end? As the world has become more complex, adolescence is extending into the years that were once considered "adult," the late teens and early twenties. On the other hand, children now enter into puberty at younger ages than their grandparents ever did ("Childhood's End 1). Good judgment and maturity may lag behind.

To my mom, who was a single, working parent, a big issue was at what age could one stay at home alone. Dr. John Chamberlain, an area pediatrician, reported that while the courts may frown upon leaving children younger than age 12 home alone, it is based more on the maturity of the child. He has seen children as young as 10 displaying a maturity and responsibility level that was far above other children as old as 14. He also went on to add that parents who treated their children with love and respect, who took an active role in guiding their children, and supported them in decisions they made affect the maturity level of the child.

A public radio station out of New York City WNYC hosts a weekly talk show called "An Infinite Mind" which is hosted by Dr. Fred Goodwin. During the last week of January 2003, a program aired called "Childhood's End". Appearing on this program was Ms. Kay Hymowitz, author of "Ready or Not: Why Treating Children as Small Adults Endangers Their Future and Ours." Dr. Laurence Steinberg is a professor of Psychology at Temple University. Dr. Ronal Dahl is a professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Dr. Reed Larsen is a professor of human development and family studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Jeffry Arnett is a developmental psychologist at the University of Maryland. They were the panel of experts for this
show. Also appearing on this show was Jessica Margolis-Pineo and Valerie Randall, 18-year-old reporters of the Blunt/Youth Radio Project in Portland, Maine, giving insight on what it means to be an 18-year-old today. Zachary Charles, a 13-year-old Jewish boy and his parents also appeared, giving testimony as to what it means to be an adult in the Jewish faith.

Up until the last century, it wasn't unusual for young teens to get married, start careers, and take on adult responsibilities (2). Back then, adolescence lasted just a few years. That is not the case in today's society. People are taking longer to get an education they need to succeed as adults and adolescence often reaches as well as other environmental factors are bringing puberty on much earlier (2). So while the youth of today are taking longer mentally to mature, their bodies physically and even emotionally are maturing at a much younger age (2).

Dr. Goodwin says he has seen the rates of adolescent and young adult depression, suicide, substance abuse, and violence double in the past 30 years (2). Mental illness and substance abuse can put normal development on hold, robbing young people of the necessary period of error and growing up (2). Also, what evolution has done for us doesn't mesh with modern society. Hormones are raging and good judgment is lagging (2). It seems to be harder to grow up today.

Jessica Margolis-Pineo, at age 18, does not believe she is an adult. "I graduated from high school last Friday. I have my own checkbook. I wear contacts, I can drive, I can vote and I take Women's One-A-Day vitamins. But I still don't feel like I'm quite there yet" ("Childhood's End" 2). Is it because she is a middle child, mimicking her older sister and parenting the younger one? Valerie Randall, another 18-year-old, has yet to graduate from high school, is afraid of the dark, and still sleeps with a teddy bear (3). But because she has made plans to go away to college, she is seen as an adult (3). Yet to ask them, they don't know if they will ever get there.

The two girls interviewed people in different demographics and came up with various responses to their question when are you considered an adult? One of the most remarkable answers that stuck with the girls was a comment from Jessica's grandmother, who said she connected adulthood more with character development than reproduction ("Childhood's End" 4). She didn't have to be a mom to be an adult. As for the two reporters, Jessica has applied for a job in Europe, hoping that getting out in the world will make her ready to take on some of those "adult" responsibilities (4). She wants to determine who she is herself. Valerie says that while your parents can find you a job, an apartment, and make you look like an adult, you still have to initiate becoming an adult yourself (4).

Another problem that has come up in the quest for the answer to age of maturity is today's culture: Navel bearing fashions for little girls, first graders with schedules so hectic they don't have time to play, and the early onset of puberty while adulthood is being delayed ("Childhood's End" 5). Dr. Reed Larsen believes that there is a paradox with younger children who are given tremendous autonomy and exposure to sexuality by way of the media yet given very little responsibility for things that really matter (7). They are becoming more adult-like without the experiences that would help them to learn how to handle responsibility (7). The late onset of adulthood hasn't helped.

Dr. Jeffrey Arnett explores why most young people today don't think of themselves as fully adult until their mid 20's ("Childhood's End" 9). One key reason is the age of puberty has gone down and the end of adolescence has moved up. We now have the "tween" years, a period between ages 8 and 12, where they have more opportunities to make choices at a very young age and end up looking older than they are (7).

Ms. Hymowitz remarks on the negative consequences of these "tween" years. She states that kids that young have a very shaky sense of themselves ("Childhood's End" 6). They don't have a clear idea of what the world expects of them and who they are (6). They have all these choices thrown at them with less supervision (7). They often end up following their peers or even worse, the advice of the media who has taken advantage of these "tweens," and they end up looking at trouble (7). Dr. Arnett reflects that this tween age group is ruining adolescence. The emerging adults from these tween years share instability ("Childhood's End" 8,9). They are changing jobs, partners, and educational direction and exploring all their options. Is it any wonder that the age of majority is questionable?

When asked, Dr. Arnett suggests that the things people view as important and needed in becoming an adult are not tangible things but psychological ("Childhood's End" 9). Taking responsibility for oneself, learning to make independent decisions, being considerate of others and financial independence are things that rank high as being an adult (9). One remarkable note is that after surveying people from ages 13 to about 60, marriage was not a significant marker of an adult (9).

Ms. Hymowitz believes that parents need to understand when their children are really children and they have to be adults ("Childhood's End" 10). How else would a child learn to be an adult without adult role models in their everyday life? They learn through osmosis, a gradual absorption of thought.
processes, adult practices, and achieved responsibilities. They also have the safety net of parents to learn from. And, they have to realize that mentally, by the time one is 30, one is an adult, whether one wants to be or not (10,11).

Dr. Goodwin asked Dr. Steinberg as a developmental psychologist, “what are the developmental stages of a person ten through puberty to adulthood (“Childhood’s End” 13)?” Dr. Steinberg states that it is believed there are three different stages of development. At 10-13 children go through puberty in which a series of cognitive or intellectual changes take place (13). This leads to the development of more abstract, sophisticated thinking. From the ages 14-17 a lot of the initial changes are cemented in the person, and they become consolidated (13). Then from age 17 to early 20’s, the transition from adolescence into adulthood takes place (13,14). A lot of development goes on during this time, which is a relatively new discovery (14). And yes, girls in general, do mature earlier (not faster) than boys (14). They usually go through puberty earlier and because some changes associated with puberty drive other changes in thinking and emotional functioning, girls will be a little ahead of boys for awhile. Eventually, there is not a huge sex difference in cognitive, social, or emotional functioning (14).

Dr. Steinberg states that society’s conflicting expectations for adolescents lead to an awful lot of confusion (“Childhood’s End” 15). He asks, “why is it we let people drive before we let them see a sexy movie without parental presence?” (15) Driving is much more dangerous than going to the movies, yet we make decisions about people’s legal status for practical and pragmatic reasons which, more often than not, do not align well with development.

Dr. Larson notes that young people are hesitant to take on adult roles and/or responsibilities such as marriage, moving out of their parents’ homes, and supporting themselves (“Childhood’s End” 8).

Personally, I feel the economy has a lot to do with young adults taking longer to assume adult roles not a maturity level. With jobs hard to find, the pricing of houses and apartments, not to mention the cost of living in general high, it makes better business sense to continue to live at home. This is a win-win situation for both parties. The child is allowed to assume adult roles slowly, at a level that he can handle so failure is less likely to occur, while being to take advantage of the parent’s experiences and save money. The parents are able to receive money from the child to assist in the living expenses while guiding the child into making good decisions.

Dr. Dahl remarks that adolescent hormonal changes seem to affect brain development (“Childhood’s End” 14). Waking and sleep patterns that change for teenagers, staying up later and later while the body needs more sleep is one such example of hormones overpowering the brain (14). He also goes on to say they often lack fine-tuning in their sense of judgment (14). When asked, Dr. Dahl tells that panel that from a professional standpoint, it is very hard to identify adulthood by a level of brain development (14). It is more about the skills, knowledge, and judgement a person develops over the years that define maturity or adulthood (14).

Dr. Steinberg has research showing that adolescents facing tough decisions in experimental settings do not give much weight to the long-term consequences of their actions (“Childhood’s End” 15). He also finds a troubling discrepancy between some of the rules that society imposes on teens, especially as they relate to juvenile justice (15). He is appalled that in some states, juveniles as young as thirteen can be tried as an adult in a capital offence yet are not old enough to vote (15). He believes that if we don't feel a person responsible enough to vote, is it reasonable to hold him to adult standards of legal responsibility (15)? There is a linear increase in the extent to which people mention long-term consequences of their decisions, rather than focusing on the immediate consequences (15,16).

Dr. Steinberg states in a paper he presented as a part of a Congressional Research brief that there is a reason for the existence of a juvenile justice system (1). The juvenile court operates under the presumption that offenders are immature, in three different senses of the word; their development is incomplete, their judgement is less than mature, and their character is still developing (Steinberg 1,2). He considers a juvenile to be anyone under the age of 18, unless tested and found to be of mental incapacity (2). He does note that children as young as nine have the capacity for intentional behavior and know the difference between right and wrong and should be not be held blameless for their actions (3). At the same time, it is clear that the vast majority of children under the age of 13 lack certain intellectual and psychosocial capabilities they need to be held fully accountable for their actions under certain circumstances (5). Of course, by the time they reach 18 it is reasonable to expect they possess the intellectual and psychosocial capacities that allow them to exercise good judgement, even under difficult circumstances (6).

As I continued my search for answers to the question of who is an adult these days I ran across an article in the Associated Press by David Crary titled, “Across the Board, Age Raises Ethical Questions,” in which Mr. Crary basically asks the same question. He states in his article that across America, prosecutors and legislators are pushing to try more and more juveniles as adults when committing serious crimes (1). He goes on to add that law-abiding adolescents are being subject to more and more restrictions in their
daily lives that treat them as non-adults: curfews, parental-consent requirements, zero-tolerance policies in schools (Crary 1).

Crary thinks that this type of juvenile-crime hysteria is ludicrous (2). He goes on to state that it depends on what it is or what you do decides whether or not you are an adult (3). Crary says, "Though 18 is the age most commonly used to define adulthood in America, there is no single clear-cut age of majority" (1). Jason Zeidenberg, a policy analyst arrived (Crary 2).

"Kids of today are being blamed for everything and credited with nothing" (Crary 1). I feel that sometimes they are the scapegoats for society's bigger problems. Yes, some kids out there are committing really serious crimes, but it is my belief that the majority of kids are no worse than previous generations. We just get caught because our parents are not as naïve as their parents were; they follow the creed of "Been there, done that!"

The National District Attorneys Association believes that a "new breed of juvenile delinquent -- the serious, violent, and habitual juvenile offender" has arrived (Crary 2). Instead of resolving their disputes with fists like in years past, today they use baseball bats and handguns (Crary 2). Nadine Strossen, a professor at New York Law School and president of the American Civil Liberties Union stated that public officials have their own agendas in mind when they talk about young adults (Crary 2). Strossen says, "For their own political purposes, it makes sense to them to demonize the youth of today" (2). After all, haven't you heard the music they listen to? That's enough to turn anyone into a criminal. And they are right; I mean Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones sang about sunshine and roses back in the day, forget about Sympathy for the Devil.

John Bender, Executive Director of Seniors United Supporting the Second Amendment (SUSSA), which is a new civil-rights group, and a staff writer and columnist for Ether Zone, in his article, Young Adults Deserve Equal Rights; the Age of Majority made some very valid points. Today, our nation sends men and women, ages 18-21 into Iraq to fight and die for America, a country that treats them like second-class citizens (1). American adults age 18 through 20 cannot own or carry a handgun and purchase or drink alcoholic beverages but can go off to war where they will have control over fully automatic weapons, tanks, shoulder-fired missiles, hand grenades (1). Upon returning home, that same person still cannot own a handgun until he/she is 21 (1). A person today can go into the service, receive security clearances and have access to our nation's military secrets, get a responsible job on a nuclear sub or strategic bomber but can't buy a beer (1).

It was during Vietnam that the law of majority was changed to 18 (Bender 1). People were disgusted with the body count of young kids dying in Vietnam; they demanded that everyone old enough to go to war should be declared an adult with all the privileges that age enjoys or that the government change the combat age to 21 (Bender 1). Recognizing that they needed 18 to 20 year-olds in the combat, Congress buckled and changed the age of majority to 18 (Bender 1). However, that didn't last long. Anti-civil rights activists got Congress to strip young adults of their Second Amendment rights. The neo-prohibitionists followed with having Congress bar young adults from buying or consuming what they termed "adult beverages," also known as alcohol (Bender 1,2).

Once again, young adults were thrust into a separate class of citizenship, with inferior rights and privileges. Mr. Bender stated in his article that he believes that "no American should be asked to die for a country when he is denied his rights" (1). Isn't that one of the reasons we are fighting in Iraq right now, because the Iraqi people have lost their civil rights?

Maturity is not an automatic accomplishment of age and physical development. The mature person realistically appraises the world and themselves, finds that there is imperfection but is open to change ("Adolescence" 4). They are able to enjoy the actual as well as the possible. They have a strong sense of identity with humankind. Mature individuals are able to experience joy and sorrow, to act spontaneously without fear of humiliation or losing control (Erikson and Levison 839). Do you need to be 21 to be independent, non-conforming, creative, or humorous? Can a person be 18 to enjoy feelings of intimacy with a few people and freely accept alternative courses of action with flexibility and an open mind?

Dr. Laurence Steinberg in "Childhood's End" stated, "the decisions made about people's legal status were set for practical and pragmatic reasons" (15). Now considering our society has advanced in numerous directions over the past century, I am proposing that highly renowned developmental psychologists and doctors sit down with Congress and reassess the laws. The "privileges" need to be reevaluated with the ages people receive them at. Or maybe a possible "maturity evaluation process" should be considered. Either way, something must be done. There are too many contradictions in the "age of majority" and the current war is stirring up controversy with citizens' rights.

Although this proposal sounds like common sense and should have been looked at years ago, I think it could only occur in a utopian society. The issue of age isn't so cut and dried. I have gone through the process receiving America's "privileges" and the particular ages at which I receive them, my parents have done the same, and their parents did too. So for now, the only thing you can do is...deal with it!
Works Cited


Bender, John. "Young Adults Deserve Equal Rights... The Age of Majority." Ether Zone 4 (2001). 19 Mar. 2003


