

Helicopter parents

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Q&A: Why 'not quite adult' is not quite a bad thing

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By Chris Becerra

Rick Settersten, author of Not Quite Adults.

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

Young people today have been criticized for taking longer to "grow up" than in the past. But in a new book, Not Quite Adults: Why 20-Somethings Are Choosing a Slower Path to Adulthood, and Why It's Good for Everyone, Richard Settersten and Barbara Ray say adults should back off. Settersten, a sociologist at Oregon State University, talks with USA TODAY's Sharon Jayson.

**Q: We often hear that young adults today are prolonging adolescence and delaying adulthood. You disagree?**

**A:** So much of the conversation about young people in our culture is negative, and so much of our research evidence runs counter to it. With this book, we hope to redirect the conversation and make it more productive. A slow path is good, and a fast path is risky.

**Q: What's different today?**

**A:** If you think back just a few decades, we've seen the complete evaporation of the manufacturing sector. ... The second thing that changed

a lot is families. Living at home, for example, is a possibility for young people now. Some decades ago, it would have been horrifying to live at home with your parents. (But today) parents and young people feel a closeness or connection that they didn't have in the past.

**Q: Let's get to some findings. You and others with the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood have studied this group for 10 years, including almost 500 additional interviews from young people around the country. Did any finding surprise you?**

A: There is a realization that to get young people launched today, we need to provide lots of supports. ... Why do we focus so much on making sure that young people are "independent," when human existence is built on relationships? At every age, our welfare rests on our connections to other people.

**Q: Your book says "helicopter parents" aren't so bad after all. Is this just Baby Boomers trying to rationalize their involvement in their kids' lives?**

A: We're not necessarily advocating for helicopter parenting per se, but involved parenting matters. The resources and relationships of parents are crucial in ensuring kids' successes. In the book, we really say we should be more worried about uninvolved parents. Not having parents around to help you is a real disadvantage. At the end of the day, we should be talking a lot more about uninvolved parents than we are about obsessing about super-involved ones.

**Q: How do young people today compare with the past?**

A: As we evaluate young people today, it's like we've got the wrong benchmark. That kind of quick start to adulthood that so many generations have in their heads — all that grows out of the postwar period. (But) that's the anomaly. It was a time when people were quick to leave home. They were also quick to marry. Why? It's because economic opportunities were ample and social conventions really encouraged it. It was expected and also possible. But if you look further back, you'd see that a lot of the patterns today — with young people in a period of semi-autonomy — was also true of the decades before World War II.

**Q: What worries you most about the future?**

A: There's so many negative portrayals of young people, and there are so many worries about why young people are taking their time. My bigger worry is we don't want to push kids out of the gate before they're ready. A quick

marriage is clearly more likely to end in divorce and involve kids. That's not good. Quick parenting? It makes it difficult to attain your education and to work full time and build skills and experiences that would help you over the long haul. That's not good. A quick departure from home means you have fewer resources to invest in your future. Early departures from home are much more likely to result in poverty. That's not good

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**Q:** Back to the main idea here. Why is it that today's young adults have such a bad rap?

A: Maybe it's just that each generation comes of age in its own time and what is true of one can't easily be applied to the next. It seems like a timeless theme in history that older generations look down and think the younger one screwed up. What really matters and what we hope to show in this book is just how different the world is they're trying to navigate, and it's not just about personal choices. It's about these big forces that have changed the very landscape of life. We have to not just point fingers at young people but also look at the things they're doing right and see what we can learn from them