

The New York Times

## Motherlode

Adventures in Parenting

---

APRIL 28, 2010, 10:56 AM

### The Slow, Winding Path to Adulthood

By [LISA BELKIN](#)

Many a parent believes that their children are growing up too fast. Eight is the new 12, and 12 is the new 18. Today's middle schoolers dress like adults, know how to swear like adults and are exposed to drugs. They also know about sex, talk back and reach puberty earlier than we ever did.

But then, they stop. And reverse. A [study](#) by researchers at Oregon State University, which appears this week in the journal *Transition to Adulthood* finds that “despite living in an age of iPads and hybrid cars, young Americans are more like the young adults of the early 1900s than the baby-boom generation: They are living at home longer, are financially insecure and are making lower wages.”

The study, titled, “[What’s Going on With Young People Today? The Long and Twisting Path to Adulthood](#)” is based on data collected by the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood. It concludes that this slower, more gradual entry into adulthood, while it seems like a function of both the current economy and the tendency of parents to hover, is actually the American norm. It’s the baby boomers who were the “anomaly” in that they struck out early and didn’t look back, writes the authors of the study, Richard Setterstein, a professor of health and human sciences, and Barbara Ray.

In the boom years following World War II, the high demand for labor meant well-paying industrial jobs with good benefits were available to workers with “high-school degrees (or less).” That’s when we got the idea that children should be independent once they stopped going to school. Before that, though, children lived at home until they could afford their own households.

There is one important difference between the turn of the last century, however, and the turn of this one. Back then, grown children were expected to help support their parents’ household, while today parents are spending 10 percent of their annual income helping their adult children “launch” adult lives.

Did you take longer than you would have liked to start a life all your own? How long is too long to need a parents’ support? What age is the right age to finally and fully grow up?

**Correction:** An earlier version of this article misspelled Rick Settersten’s name.