In Levinson’s model of adult development, each stable life structure is followed by a period of transition in which that structure is reexamined.

(*Source:* From Daniel Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*, copyright © 1975, 1978 by Daniel J. Levinson. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc., and SII/Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc.)

For example, marriage requires a new life structure. Even if the newlyweds have known each other for a very long time or have been living together, they have not known each other in the roles of husband and wife. Moreover, they have never had in-laws. So, young adults who marry acquire a new set of relationships. At the same time, they face many new day-to-day, practical issues such as how finances will be managed, how housekeeping chores will be done, and whose family they will visit on which holidays. As Levinson’s theory predicts, newlyweds usually go through a period of adjustment, during which they experience more conflict than before the wedding, and after which things are much calmer. The calm comes, as Levinson would put it, when each spouse has achieved a new life structure that is adapted to the demands of marriage.

Emerging Adulthood

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| **LO 14.3** | **What are the characteristics of emerging adulthood?** |

Like Levinson, a growing number of developmentalists view the period between 17 and 22 as a transitional one. Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett has proposed that the educational, social, and economic demands that modern cultures make in individuals in this age range have given rise to a new developmental period he calls [**emerging adulthood**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_037.xhtml#eid52683). Arnett defines this phase as the period from the late teens to the early 20s when individuals experiment with options prior to taking on adult roles (Arnett, [**2000**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid54408)). He argues that emerging adulthood is not necessarily a universal phase of development. Instead, it arises in cultures where individuals in their late teens face a wide array of choices about the occupational and social roles they will occupy in adulthood (Jensen & Arnett, [**2012**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid58158)). Research examining the self-concepts of men and women in this age group support Arnett’s view. His own studies and those of other researchers indicate that, at least in the United States, young people do not tend to think of themselves as having fully attained adulthood until the age of 25 or so (Galambos, Turner, & Tilton-Weaver, [**2005**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid57066); Kins & Beyers, [**2010**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid58579)).

**emerging adulthood** the period from the late teens to early 20s when individuals explore options prior to committing to adult roles

Neuroimaging studies have provided some support for the notion that emerging adulthood is a unique period of life. These studies suggest that the parts of the brain that underlie rational decision making, impulse control, and self-regulation mature during these years (Crone, Wendelken, Donohue, van Leijenhorst, & Bunge, [**2006**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid56068); Gogtay et al., [**2004**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid57298)). As a result, early on in this phase of life, individuals make poorer decisions about matters such as risky behaviors (e.g., unprotected sex) than they do when these brain areas reach full maturity in the early to mid-20s.

The neurological changes of the emerging adult period combine with cultural demands to shape the psychosocial features of this period of development. Researcher Glenn Roisman and his colleagues have hypothesized that emerging adults must address developmental tasks in five domains: academic, friendship, conduct, work, and romantic (Roisman, Masten, Coat-sworth, & Tellegen, [**2004**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid61086)). Roisman’s research suggests that skills within the first three of these domains transfer easily from adolescence to adulthood. Useful study skills (academic) acquired in high school, for instance, are just as helpful in college. Likewise, the skills needed to make and keep friends (friendship) are the same in both periods, and the process of adapting to rules (conduct) is highly similar as well.

By contrast, emerging adults must approach the work and romantic domains differently than they did as adolescents, according to Roisman. Certainly, many teenagers have jobs and are involved in romances. However, the cultural expectations associated with emerging adulthood require them to commit to a career path that will enable them to achieve full economic independence from their families. Likewise, emerging adults must make decisions about the place of long-term romantic relationships in their present and future lives as well as participate in such relationships. As predicted by his hypothesis, Roisman’s findings and those of other researchers suggest that emerging adults experience more adjustment difficulties related to these two domains than they do in the academic, friendship, and conduct domains (Korobov & Thorne, [**2006**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid58729)).

Finally, psychologists speculate that the tendency of emerging adults to push the limits of the independence from their families that most acquire in the late teens contributes to the remarkable neurological changes that occur during this phase. Thus, the road that leads to fulfillment of the developmental tasks outlined by Roisman is often a bumpy one. The hope of most parents and teachers of emerging adults is that each of these bumps further opens, rather than closes, the doors of opportunity to emerging adults.

Cognitive Changes

Like most aspects of physical functioning, intellectual processes are at their peak in early adulthood. Indeed, it now seems clear that the intellectual peak lasts longer than many early researchers had thought and that the rate of decline is quite slow. Current research also makes clear that the rate and pattern of cognitive decline vary widely—differences that appear to be caused by a variety of environmental and lifestyle factors, as well as by heredity.

Formal Operations and Beyond

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| **LO 13.9** | **What types of postformal thought have developmentalists proposed?** |

As you should recall from [**Chapter 11**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_022.xhtml#eid28268), Piaget’s formal operational stage emerges in mid- to late adolescence, but some theorists dispute Piaget’s hypothesis that the formal operations stage is the last stage of cognitive development (Labouvie-Vief, [**2006**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid58836)). These theorists hypothesize that a fifth stage emerges in early adulthood, typically in the early 20s, in response to the kinds of problems that are unique to adult life. The term [**postformal thought**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_037.xhtml#eid53474) is collectively applied to the types of thinking that these theorists propose to be characteristic of the fifth stage of cognitive development.

**postformal thought** types of thinking that are associated with a hypothesized fifth stage of cognitive development

The work of postformal theorists owes its origins to the ideas of Lawrence Kohlberg, whose theory of moral development you read about in [**Chapter 12**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_023.xhtml#eid30780), and William Perry (LabouvieVief, 2006). Kohlberg and Perry emphasized the shift toward [**relativism**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_037.xhtml#eid53654), the idea that some propositions cannot be adequately described as either true or false, that occurs in early adulthood (Kohlberg & Kramer, [**1969**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid58692); Perry, [**1968**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid60532)). Perry studied undergraduates at Harvard University in the 1960s and concluded that they began their studies with the view that knowledge is comprised of truthful statements and that the purpose of education is to accumulate an increasing number of such propositions. As young adults progress through college, Perry’s work suggested, conflicts among the many ideas to which they are exposed push them toward a relativistic approach that enables them to evaluate propositions in terms of their underlying assumptions and the contexts in which they occur.

**relativism** the idea that some propositions cannot be adequately described as either true or false

For example, in the United States, most high school history students learn that slavery was the main cause of the Civil War (1861–1865). According to Perry’s view, a student who is presented with a different idea about the main cause of the war is likely to dismiss it as “false” rather than to analyze it with regard to the supporting evidence that is cited by the person who advocates it. Perry argued that college classes reframe the “facts” that students acquired in earlier years in just this way and, in the process, help students develop a postformal approach to such complex issues. As Kohlberg and Perry would predict, researchers have found correlations between tests of postformal thought and adults’ perception of ambiguity and their understanding of irony and metaphor (Blouin & McKelvie, [**2012**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid55011)).

Another theorist, Michael Basseches, points out that many young adults turn away from a purely logical, analytic approach toward a more open, perhaps deeper, mode of understanding that accepts paradox and uncertainty. He calls this new adult type of thinking [**dialectical thought**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_037.xhtml#eid52628) (Basseches, [**1984**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid54666), [**1989**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid54669)). According to this view, adults do not give up their ability to use formal reasoning. Instead, they acquire a new ability to deal with the fuzzier problems that make up the majority of the problems of adult-hood—problems that do not have a single solution or in which some critical pieces of information may be missing. Choosing what type of refrigerator to buy might be a decision aided by formal operational thought. But such forms of logical thought may not be helpful in making a decision about whether to adopt a child or whether to place an aging parent in a nursing home. Basseches argues that such problems demand a different kind of thinking—not a “higher” kind of thinking, but a different one.

**dialectical thought** a form of thought involving recognition and acceptance of paradox and uncertainty

Psychologists Patricia King and Karen Kitchener (2004) have proposed that [**reflective judgment**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_037.xhtml#eid53629), the capacity to identify the underlying assumptions of differing perspectives on controversial issues, is an important feature of postformal thought. For example, reflective thinkers can ascertain that a person who argues that the key to reducing drug use is to educate people about the adverse effects of drugs is assuming that those who use drugs do so because they lack such knowledge. According to the studies that King and Kitchener have carried out, the capacity to analyze arguments in this way develops in a series of seven stages across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (King & Kitchener, [**2004**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323031223/epub/OPS/loc_038.xhtml#eid58571)). Like Kohlberg’s stages of moral judgment, these stages are loosely tied to age and are influenced by an individual’s level of education.

**reflective judgment** the ability to identify the underlying assumptions of differing perspectives on controversial issues

Many of these new theories of adult cognition are intriguing, but they remain highly speculative, with little empirical evidence to back them up. More generally, psychologists do not yet agree on whether these new types of thinking represent “higher” forms of thought, built on the stages Piaget described, or whether it is more appropriate simply to describe them as different forms of thinking that may or may not emerge in adulthood. What may be most important about such theories is their emphasizing that the normal problems of adult life, with their inconsistencies and complexities, cannot always be addressed fruitfully using formal operational logic. It seems entirely plausible that adults are pushed toward more pragmatic, relativistic forms of thinking and use formal operational thinking only occasionally, if at all. Postformal theorists agree that this change should not be thought of as a loss or a deterioration, but rather as a reasonable adaptation to a different set of cognitive tasks.

Reference:

Boyd, D., Bee, H. (2015). Lifespan Development (7th ed.). Pearson Education