

OpenTheo

What's up with kids these days? | Nancy Hill

May 26, 2022



The Veritas Forum

PART OF A SPECIAL 6-WEEK SERIES | People today reach the standard markers of adulthood — finishing education, getting married, becoming financially independent — later compared to people 50 years ago. Does that mean that kids these days are “behind” in their development? Or should these standard markers be rethought? Our guest today, Dr. Nancy Hill, is a Harvard professor and developmental psychologist. She invites us to consider how attending college might change how we develop — not just in our twenties, but for the rest of our lives. You can order Nancy and her co-author Alexis’s book, *The End of Adolescence*, here: <https://www.amazon.com/End-Adolescence-Lost-Delaying-Adulthood/dp/0674916506> Like what you heard? Rate and review *Beyond the Forum* on Apple Podcasts to help more people discover our episodes. And, get updates on more ideas that shape our lives by signing up for our email newsletter here: https://mailchi.mp/veritas/newslettersubscribe_pd. Thanks for listening!

Transcript

When you think of what it means to be a quote "adult," you probably have some milestones around adulthood that come to mind, like graduating college, getting married, buying a house, or having children. But socioeconomic trends have shifted in the past few decades. Housing prices have increased, the cost of college has skyrocketed, and student debt has ballooned.

As a result, young adults are delaying marriages, mortgages, and kids. These traditional milestones aren't as meaningful to them. One sociologist suggests that one of the most important things that kids have been doing is that kids are being treated as a child.

And the most important thing is meaningful to them. One sociologist suggests that we're in a quote "changing timetable" for adulthood. And Google Trends confirms it.

Prior to 2015, the term "adulting" was nowhere. But in 2015, it was everywhere. Without having accomplished the traditional milestones, young people needed to look for other markers of adulthood.

And they did. Quote "adulthood" celebrated anything from getting renters insurance, to balancing your checkbook, to folding your laundry as soon as it's out of the dryer. In the past few years, even colleges like UC Berkeley have started quote "adulthood classes." Students, also known as adults in training, learn how to build a resume, stick to a personal budget, or follow a recipe.

Honestly, I would have found those classes really helpful. In this episode, I talk with Dr. Nancy Hill, a developmental psychologist at Harvard. She's written a book called "The End of Adolescents." And she says that the idea of "adulthood" doesn't mean what we may think.

Superficially, trends are shifting. But when we look deeper, today's young people are no different than young people from 50 years ago. They're asking the same questions and facing the same fears.

This is Beyond the Forum, a podcast from the Veritas Forum and PRX that explores the ideas that shape our lives. This season, we're talking about character and virtue. I'm your host, Bethany Jenkins, and I run the media and content work at the Veritas Forum, a Christian nonprofit that hosts conversations that matter across different worldviews.

I am the Charles Bigelow Professor of Education at Harvard University, and I've been on faculty here for 14 years. Which account? They've been good years. Prior to Harvard, I was on faculty in the Psychology and Neuroscience department at Duke University.

I came up to Harvard on a sabbatical and didn't go back. Growing up, Nancy was the youngest of eight children, and in her words, a good introvert. She spent many of her afternoons at the local library.

But she wasn't reading young adult fantasy fiction like many of us did as kids. Instead, she was curious about psychological topics. You read a lot about the 60s.

You read about cults, you read about mind control. You just do a lot of reading about how people think, and I became very curious about how people come to believe what they believe. Once she got to college, this curiosity about how people come to believe what they believe led Nancy to study psychology, and eventually, developmental psychology.

Developmental psychology is the study of human development. It's the study of how humans unfold for the course of their life. We have a lot of emphasis on infancy to early adulthood, but developmental psychology really, as we say, womb to tomb.

Some developmental psychology researchers observe how babies play with one another or measure the short and long-term impacts of various teaching methods, like remote learning during COVID. But Nancy mainly works with adolescents and young adults, people between the ages of 10 and 24. My research focuses on adolescent development.

I have a long track record of studying the family as it relates to adolescents and adolescent identity and sense of purpose, school achievement and career aspirations, and the role in which ethnicity and race and socioeconomic status shape. How parents' parents and how youth figure out themselves. And adolescents is that developmental stage that's so ripe for impression and ripe for changing one's trajectory, charting one's course.

It's such a fertile period of development and a fertile period of self-agency in development. Given the delayed milestones of young adulthood and the recent socioeconomic changes, some developmental psychologists advocate for a new developmental stage after adolescents. They call it "emerging adulthood." But Nancy's skeptical.

I've always been suspicious of this idea that today's adults, young adults are somehow different, that there's this new developmental stage of emerging adulthood that just never seemed right to me. Although those milestone shifts are important to track and monitor, Nancy advocates for looking beyond an apples to apples, or a milestone to milestone, comparison of young adults today to young adults of say the 50s or 70s. Take college, for example.

College itself is a milestone, but it also affects other milestones. Those who go to college over the generations always delay getting married and having kids. Women who went to college in the 1950s married on average at age 26, which is just two years younger than today.

Those who didn't go to college married at like 18 and 20. So college has always been a factor in delaying adulthood. The difference today from the 1950s is how many people go to college.

It's more than tripled. From 13.4% of 18 to 24 year olds in 1951 to 41% today. But college is expensive.

Not everybody can afford it. This is why Nancy says attending college isn't its own developmental stage, because it's not available to everyone. It can't be a new developmental stage.

If only some people get it, right? Let's just be honest. And so a new developmental stage for the privilege. Instead of creating a new stage of development called emerging adulthood, Nancy recommends recognizing a shift in the situational context of young adults.

They're facing different realities today than previous generations faced. She outlines just what the shift means in her new book, *The Individatolence*. The book began when her co-author tripped over some unpublished research on college student development.

Alexis Redding, my co-author, was doing an internship at the Bureau of Study Council, and I was supervising that internship. And she stumbled on a box in the attic closet on the fourth floor of the Bureau of Study Council on London Street, right in Harvard Square. And behind this tapestry, she was looking for something else, and she saw what looked like transcripts.

I remember that blue mimeograph kind of, these were old documents, right? And some of them looked like just old documents, but others looked like interview transcripts. The transcripts in these boxes were from interviews of Harvard students, mostly in the 1970s, but some dated as far back as the 1940s. As Alexis dug into them, she was surprised to discover that students then sounded a lot like students today.

They expressed feelings of discouragement, they lamented not doing well on tests, and they talked about problems with their parents. At a Veritas Forum event, Nancy reflected on their discovery. We realized that we had this opportunity to use history or historical documents to say something about adolescent development today, which isn't what you really do.

And as a developmental psychologist, you want current data. And here we were saying that historical data were going to tell us something really amazing about the present. In their research, Nancy and Alexis focused specifically on interviews done between 1971 and 1979.

This study was conducted by Dr. William Perry, who was the founder and director of the Harvard Bureau of Study Council. He and his research team, Nancy, says, were setting out to answer almost the same question posed to developmental psychologists today. Are kids these days different? And it turns out every generation thinks that the next generation hasn't easier, somehow it's different.

Dr. Perry and his research team began each interview with one question, quote, "What stood out for you from this year?" They went on for 45 minutes, 90 minutes, and they talked about what stood out to them. And those are the interviews that we have. And they spent 10 years, hundreds of hours doing these interviews, coding these interviews, transcribing these interviews, real to real tapes onto mimeographed, and then coding it the way you do.

And they realized that there's nothing different. And in fact, Alexis found it in some of the documents that she found the statement from the meeting minutes from the research team, where they concluded with measures of regret that they could not find anything different. Although Dr. Perry and his team didn't find any meaningful differences between kids in the 1970s and earlier generations, that finding was what Nancy and Alexis decided to investigate.

After running their own analyses on the transcripts and verifying the original conclusion

of no differences, Nancy and Alexis set out to discover just what exactly was staying the same. As they combed through hours of interviews and hundreds of pages of notes, they found experiences and themes shared by college students in the 1970s that mirrored the experience of college students today. Nancy and Alexis identified six facets of development that occurred during college.

One, leaving home. Two, overcoming loneliness and finding friends. Three, learning to find oneself.

Four, discovering purpose. Five, committing to the future. And six, quests for more time.

We'll go through them in turn. The first facet is leaving home. Leaving home, it detaches people from the places that have formed them and from the people that have formed them.

And so it creates an opportunity and a vulnerability. Some students are ready for it. They couldn't wait to leave.

And for others, it catches them by surprise. For many students, the impact of leaving home wasn't fully realized until they came back home. And no sooner than they have begun to find themselves on campus and build friendships.

They go home. They go back home for Thanksgiving or Christmas holiday, that would December holidays. And then they find themselves needing to fit back into their home life, which has implications for their high school friends and those friendships and figuring out which friendships are going to last and which aren't.

You know, renegotiating those relationships with their parents now that they've been away for several months and in charge of their their own lives getting themselves up in the morning and food and laundry and staying out however long they want to stay out or up and they can go to class if they want to or not. And now they're going to move. We're going to go back home.

And students talked about how much they changed in those months between when they arrived on campus and the December holidays and that was surprising to them. And for some of them, they hadn't fit in on campus yet and now they no longer fit at home. As students grappled with the changes in their identities and their views of self, many found themselves without close community to process these changes with.

This lack of community greatly contributes to Nancy's second facet of development, overcoming loneliness and finding friends. And so in that early leaving home and their in college, the amount of loneliness that students talk about, we hear a lot more about it today but they talked about it in the 1970s and in the earlier data. Because they've left that comfort place, but they haven't found their friends yet.

And so there is this piece of loneliness and they're in a new place with people from literally all over the world. And so the things that they know and believe about themselves and the habits that they've developed and the things they thought were for certain are now suddenly seen in relief is different or unique from their roommates. And so there's a jarring or a detachment that happens.

This detachment is especially challenging given the common narrative surrounding college and its social perks. The message they're often given is, these are the best years of your life and your best friends that are going to be with you for the rest of your life. And so they come to college with that narrative and then they realize that many of them, as many as 60% of the first semester freshmen, are deeply lonely.

One unexpected challenge to overcoming loneliness, Nancy, says, is that we don't really tell high schoolers that you make friends differently in college. The students in our 1970s data talked about it, that they are lonely and no one really tells them that they're going to find friends differently and in different places. And so one of the students talked about how, you know, in high school, all my friends were the people I was in class with that I went to school with.

And, you know, how is it possible that I can sit in class for a whole semester and not know anyone's name? When was the last time you were in a high school class where you didn't know everyone's name? And then you feel awkward by the time you get to the end of the semester, "Hey, you, can I borrow a pencil?" And so the ways and the places in which they met friends in high school doesn't serve them well. And Nancy says that technology and so-called social media hasn't made making friends any easier. Technology is the difference that people point out and they say it must be different because we have smartphones and Facebook pages and TikTok and Instagram that they aren't really leaving home because they're tethered.

In some ways it magnifies the very issues that we're describing, the uncertainty and the anxiety and the loneliness. And it magnifies it not because the students are able to stay connected to their friends and, you know, text each other all day. It magnifies it because those platforms are highly curated, both in terms of what people post about themselves and how the algorithms feed those messages and viewpoints and lifestyles that can heighten students' feelings about not measuring up.

Nancy sees social media in particular as a complex component of college students' lives today, but she's hesitant to put it as solely a positive or a negative influence. I think social media enables people to find communities that they can't find in their geographic community. So I think that has been an asset for minoritized identities, that being able to find a community online can be really helpful.

But part of what social media does, it facilitates communication, right? So you're only going to find those social support systems and networks if you're willing to ask for them,

and you're willing to be vulnerable and say, "I'm lonely and I'm anxious and I'm uncertain." And for many students in college, they feel like they're the only one. They're not going to reach out on social media and assume that someone's going to be there in the same way they're not going to talk to their roommate about it because their roommate looks like they have it together. One thing Nancy has found helpful for some students is getting involved in a faith community, but it has to be real, not transactional.

When I think about the challenges, the anxiousness that students feel and the loneliness, I think there is a way to talk about the community that comes with a faith tradition and Christian faith in particular, that kind of helps you find your way and find your friendship group. But we all know people who are lonely in the church, that you're right there in the pews. It's not transactional in that way.

You don't get this instant community. I become a Christian and now I have a bunch of friends. There is something deeper than that.

Through the process of growing in friendship and community while at college, young adults experience Nancy's third facet, learning to find oneself. People often believe that college is where they find themselves, that they are going to develop their identity in college. They're going to start it in high school and they're going to finish in college.

But as we read the transcripts, we didn't find students who were finding themselves. We found students who were figuring out how to find themselves, figuring out the process of defining and then redefining who they are. Nancy says that the students who experienced the defining process most readily were those who embraced humility and curiosity.

Part of the detachment and leaving home caused many students to question their beliefs, question who they were, question who they wanted to be, and really interesting and surprising and exciting ways that they felt that college gave them an opportunity to broaden their horizons, to learn about all parts of the world. And the students who are most excited about this talked about intentionally letting go of their prior beliefs. And in doing so, they created this sense of vulnerability about who they were and an intentionality around exploration and deciding how they were going to judge for themselves.

What was worthy to believe or what was worthy to take on or how they were going to judge good information from not so good information. Nancy said that as students became more independent, they felt less bound to their parental expectations and experienced more freedom. And so they talked about detaching themselves from what their parents believed, detaching themselves from their parents' expectations for them.

They talked about pursuing the arts, pursuing their interests, taking languages that they were interested in. Many of them read books that were outside of their interests. And

keep in mind that was the 1970s.

Today's version would be listening to Ted Talks and podcasts, right? But the method is different over the years, but the desire for new information and a broadening of horizons was the same. As students explored these new interests and learned more about what they wanted to do, not just what their parents wanted for them, they found themselves grappling with Nancy's fourth facet of development, discovering purpose. Instead of coming up with new attributes of "adulthood," the students and Nancy's transcripts focused on how they could actively shape their futures.

As they experienced setbacks, like poor grades, broken relationships, or failures and internships, they decided to focus on what was within their control. In high school, youth are answering those questions, and they're answering them often for the first time in a way that's quasi-detached from their parents. And I say quasi because when they're little little kids, kids are who their parents say they are.

But when they get into adolescence, they begin to kind of say, "Okay, I'm going to find out who I am and I'm going to have some agency in this." And then they do it again for real detach from their families when they get to college. And that starts the cycle of doing it for the rest of their lives. For Nancy personally, one place she finds purpose in is her Christian faith.

And for many students, they can use their college years to ask big questions about their life and discover their own faith journey too. I believe that God has a purpose and a place for everyone and gives people gifts and talents to be used in community in relation to their faith. It's consistent with a Christian faith to be able to find a sense of purpose, something bigger than yourself.

And it might not be your vocation, it's always great if it could be your vocation. But it might not be your vocation. But that doesn't mean that it's not significant and it's not deeply meaningful.

Nancy thinks that these two facets of development, discovering purpose and learning to find oneself, are especially important given how many job transitions the average college graduate today will experience. The average millennial changes jobs every two years and nine months. For Gen Z, it's every two years and three months.

Given the current economy, people are going to reinvent themselves. They are going to pack up and move for their career. They're going to change jobs.

They're going to reinvent themselves. We're no longer in economy where people get a job and stay in it, you know, for their career and retire with the watch. Right.

And so the ability to leave and build a community is essential to succeeding today. The ability to reinvent oneself, to take skills that you learned in one job role and understand

how they have prepared you for the next job role, perhaps in a different industry, is something that students are going to need to know how to do.

[MUSIC] Hi all, this is Carly Regal, the assistant producer of Beyond the Forum.

If you're loving the podcast so far, we want to invite you to continue engaging in these important conversations by signing up for our newsletter. Each month, you'll receive thoughtful content about the ideas that shape our lives, updates from our student and faculty partners, and other Veritas news and events. You can sign up today by visiting veritas.org. Thanks for tuning in and enjoy the rest of the show.

[MUSIC] Nancy's fifth facet of development for college students is committing to the future. At some point, college students have to make a decision about life after graduation. As my old boss used to say about impending, definite deadlines, that baby is going to be born.

And Nancy says that recent college grads often fall in three camps. The first are those who know what they want to do and they move forward with intention. For some, they make the transition well.

They find their path forward and they embark on it. The second are those who take the safe route. A lot of times these are good students who do well in school.

They often default to grad school because they know they do school well. As one of our students described it, we'll take the default path into law school. These are people who don't really want to be lawyers, but they don't know what else to do.

So they apply to law school. And so there's this dynamic where they can't figure out what to do, then they go to the safety path. The third camp doesn't commit to any particular future at all.

They might take a gap year to travel or take an internship to learn more about what's out there. Or they may be paralyzed within decision worrying about the future and losing opportunities to move with intention toward figuring things out. But regardless of which campus student falls into, intentional, safe or noncommittal, all students in Nancy's transcripts shared about how stressful the committing process is.

There's pressure that comes with having so many opportunities. The more opportunities you have, the greater the pressure to make the right decision to find the right path. And so they don't have the kind of time and structure to really make sense of all of their opportunities.

And if you look at decision making theory, it will tell you that, you know, if you have all these options in that moment, it feels great. People always want more options. But where people become discontent is when they can't actually investigate and evaluate all

those options and they have to start closing doors uninvestigated.

And that feels hard and uncomfortable and anxious and also feels like I didn't, I didn't capitalize on the opportunity. What if I close the wrong door and then that leads to people becoming frozen in the moment and the inability to make the decision because they can't. And so they're immobilized.

In the face of this immobilization comes Nancy sixth and final facet quest for more time. At some level, this delaying of adulthood is this quest for time. And then with the same time, college is time.

You go to college, you get more time by default, right? But time isn't used in a way that they can make sense of it. And so they want more time and they get more time in college, but they don't get to do with it, but they really need to do with it developmentally. Nancy thinks that colleges could adapt to better serve students who want more time.

There's so much emphasis on the academic work and the coursework, but that's not where the real development happens. They talked about this desire to take time to do that to have time and to have guidance. And so many of them wanted to take time off.

I just need to take a year off. Maybe if I took a semester off, but they don't have that time and space that if they do leave, it is hard to come back. There's not a mechanism for leaving and coming back.

And the only mechanism that there is is to say study abroad or to take some kind of internship, which is a taking time off. That usually requires writing a proposal and saying that you're going to do something and produce a product or paper or some type of impact. One reason they want time off is that they've been on an education conveyor belt for almost 20 years.

Back in the airbell it was full of syllabi that told them what to read and by when. They feel like they need a break to just process and think and make intentional decisions. One student described it.

When I was in middle school, I worked really hard so I could get in the honors track in middle school so I would be on the right track in high school. And then to get on the right track in high school so that I could get into the right college. And he said, you know, his first year in college was the first time he wasn't trying to be on the right track to get on to the next thing that for just one semester he could actually just be.

Colleges and universities can support students by offering easier options to take time off and by offering more support when they return. But Nancy also says the facets identified in her research suggest a more holistic view of the purpose of education. And her experience as a professor during COVID made this holistic vision more concrete.

What we learned from the book is that the academic aspects of college are much less important than everything else in college. And the real development during the college years and during the young adult years happen outside of the classroom. And what we learned from the pandemic is that you can move the classes online and you can get good technology to run break.

You can't run breakout rooms and lectures and record them. But we can't readily recreate the context where real development happens in the dormitories and the cafeterias on the campus. Greens through the extracurricular activities through the coffee shop talks and hanging out in the library.

That's where the real development happens. And while at the beginning of the pandemic some news that you know residential colleges will become a thing of the past because we can do this all online. We learned that college isn't necessarily only about getting the credential and racking up the credits.

In other words what COVID made clear was that college was less about the credits and more about the community. It's about all these other aspects. It's about learning to let go of yourself and find yourself.

It's about learning to leave home and plant yourself in a new community and find a community and build a community in a new place. It's about challenging your assumptions, both in the classroom and outside of the classroom. It's about pursuing extracurricular interests that are going to enrich your life for the rest of your days.

Can you do this without a college campus? Sure, it's just much harder. And what we learned in the process of the pandemic is that everyone wanted these other aspects of college and felt that these were the things that they were really paying for. And if they were just getting the classes they weren't getting their money's worth.

I love the idea of developmental psychology. I love that it assumes you're in development. This idea is key to appreciating the idea of this season of the podcast that we can grow in character and virtue.

Nancy spoke to me about this idea of growth too. In her book she refers to it as quote "The Hope Theory". She says that hope isn't an emotion but a motivation.

And this motivation is key to confronting the deep challenges that many students in these transcripts faced. Like academic probation or reckoning with privilege or being rejected from law school. With hope comes this a sense of agency.

And so if you're high on hope as a motivation, you kind of feel like you can navigate these challenges. And you probably feel like you can navigate these challenges because you've navigated challenges in the past. And students talked about that.

Well, I solved these kinds of problems in the past. I feel like I can rise to this occasion. I feel efficacious and agentic in this.

There's a similar theological idea. The idea that we can trust God in the future because he's been faithful in the past. To look forward, you have to look back at how God has already proven himself trustworthy.

When I think about hope theory and hope when it comes to faith, hope means that we can trust that it's going to be okay no matter what the outcome is, right? So how do we have hope if you're a Christian? You have hope as a Christian by looking at testimonies of how God has brought you through in the past. Even if you're lonely and of course being a Christian doesn't mean you're never going to be lonely and your mental health problems are going to be magically resolved. That's of course not true, but you do have a thread of hope that you can lean on that comes from the testimonies of those in the community of how God has brought them along and has provided for them.

Not in the vending machine way I got the perfect career whenever it is. But in this way that it doesn't matter what the outcome is because it's going to be okay. And that's where I think faith and hope and purpose and navigating the real insecurities and challenges and opportunities that come with becoming an adult.

Nancy and her co-author identified six facets of development in college, leaving home, overcoming loneliness, learning to find oneself, discovering purpose, committing to the future, and quests for more time. But development doesn't end with college graduation. All of us are in development.

And we will be I hope until the day we die. The question is how we navigate these changes, how much awareness and patience we have with ourselves and others as we move through different developmental stages, and perhaps how much we can trust that there is an all powerful, all loving God who has shown you grace in the past, and therefore can be trusted to continue showing you grace in the future. In our next episode we talk with psychiatrist, me, Addie at Yale.

He's studying development in a way too. We talk about neuroplasticity and how our brain wiring changes based on trauma, but can also change and develop with help too. You won't want to miss it.

Hi again, this is assistant producer Carly Riegel. To end our episode, we at Beyond the Forum want to take time to say thanks to all the folks who helped us get the show together. Our first thanks goes to our guest, Nancy Hill.

Thank you for joining us and for talking about development with us with such joy and compassion. Be sure to check out the link in our show notes to order a copy of Nancy's book, *The End of Adolescence*. We also want to thank our production team at PRX.

Galen Beebe gave us fantastic edits on our narration, and Jocelyn Gonzales and Morgan Flannery made everything sound good, which is not an easy task. And of course, we want to thank the students who host and plan these forum conversations, as well as the John Templeton Foundation and all of our donors for the generous support of our conversations. Alright, that's all for this episode.

Thanks for listening to Beyond the Forum.

[Music]

(buzzing)