

life + love

FOREVER YOUNG?

With the average age of home ownership, marriage, motherhood, and passing the traditional milestones of adult life ever on the rise, are we the Peter Pan generation that refuses to grow up?

BY HANNAH BASS

Child's play could mean a higher IQ.

I turned 26 this year. Do you know what my parents were doing when they were my age? They'd already been married two years, bought a house, and were following my dad's high-profile job around the world. A few years later, their first baby (yours truly!) would arrive. Want to know what I'm doing at 26? Living with my best mate, dating whenever the mood takes me, moving from one rented flat to the next (sometimes going cap in hand to the Bank of Mum and Dad for a loan), and last year moved across the world because I fancied an adventure and thought and figured I didn't have any responsibilities tying me down. The idea of marriage and children seems laughably far off—how could I possibly raise a kid when I still feel like one myself? Yes, I've finally secured a good position in my chosen career, but if anything that makes me something of an anomaly among my friends. When I was a kid, I thought 26 sounded so grown-up—I was convinced I'd have life sorted out by now. And in some ways I do feel grown-up—I mean, I have a job, I pay bills, I live thousands of miles from my parents—but in other ways, I feel like an eternal teenager.

I'm not alone. Sociologists have traditionally defined the passage to adulthood as marked by five distinct milestones: Finishing school, flying the nest, becoming financially independent, getting married and having kids. According to stats from the United States Census Bureau, back in 1960, 77 percent of women had passed through all five milestones by the age of 30. In 2000, fewer than half of 30-year-old women had done the same. And a 2001 Canadian study found that the average 30-year-old had hit the same

number of milestones as a 25-year-old in the 1970s. No wonder, then, that in a recent survey of 18-29 year-olds, 60 percent of those interviewed said that they felt both grown-up and not-quite-grown-up.

In recent years, the effects of global recession have entered the equation, as there are fewer jobs and lower salaries for young adults. Several studies project that millennials will be the first generation in western history to be worse off economically than their parents. A 2012 Associated Press analysis of US government data found that 53.6 percent of recent graduates were either unemployed or underemployed—the highest

rate in 11 years—and those who were in work were earning less than their equivalents were in the 1970s. And while the oil-rich countries of the GCC have some of the world's lowest employment rates, even in this region youth unemployment—particularly among locals—is on the rise.

Not surprisingly, this has had an impact on home ownership—in the UK the average age of a first-time buyer is now 35, compared to 28 ten years ago and 25 in the 1960s. As a result, we've become the boomerang generation, with a US study finding that 40 percent of 20-somethings move back to their parents' home at least once. And even when we've flown the nest, we're

more likely to be financially dependent to some degree on our parents than they were at our age—almost twice as likely as young adults in the 1980s, according to a study conducted by researchers at Purdue University in the USA.

But it's not just economic doom and gloom that's causing this generational shift: Our timeline for hitting those milestones of adulthood has been extended, in part due to societal changes and scientific advances. As women have made huge strides in the workplace, the pressure to marry young has eased off; and while studies show that female fertility starts its sharp decline around the age of 35, a plethora of medical interventions—from IVF to





egg freezing—have quietened the ticking of the so-called biological clock. So while we may still have traditional aspirations—86 percent of 18-29-year-olds say that they expect to have a marriage that lasts a lifetime—today's 25-year-olds are only half as likely to be married as their parents' generation at that age.

One of the leading researchers in the field of adolescence, Jeffrey Arnett, a psychology professor at Clark University in Massachusetts, US, has conducted extensive surveys of 18-29-year-olds and says that their overwhelming response to this period of their lives is one of "ambivalence." While 83 percent agreed with the statement that, "This time of my life is fun and exciting,"

72 percent also responded that they felt that, "This time of my life is stressful," and a further 56 percent reported feeling anxious often. Arnett believes that this ambivalence stems from more than just the present-day economic and social context and argues that, just as psychologists decades ago had to fight to get teenagehood or adolescence acknowledged as a specific developmental phase, we will one day recognise this "extended adolescence" as its own phase—a phase Arnett calls "emerging adulthood." In his study, he proposes the term emerging adulthood as an "in-between" life stage, a bridge from adolescence to a settled young adulthood," Arnett believes

that this period of our lives is characterised by "a sense of possibilities" and self-exploration. It's a figuring out of our personal identities that begins during adolescence and takes on new urgency as we start to find our way in the big, bad world, away from our families. Arnett's survey revealed that, despite the hardships and uncertainties, there's an overwhelming sense of optimism among emerging adults: When asked if they agreed with the statement, "I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life," 96 percent said yes.

With lifespans now frequently stretching into nine or even ten decades, is it any bad thing that today's young adults have time, free from serious responsibility, for idealism and soul-searching before settling down with a partner, or into a career? Indeed, Arnett believes that a period of emerging adulthood is essential for young people to, "develop skills for daily living, gain a better understanding of who they are and what they want from life, and begin to build a foundation for their adult lives."

And the benefits may be neurological, too. While neuroscientists once believed that the brain stopped growing after puberty, they now know that it keeps maturing into your 20s. A study conducted by the US National Institute of Mental Health followed nearly 5,000 children throughout their development and found that their brains did not fully mature until they were at least 25. A significant part of the maturation process is the "pruning" of unused synapses to create a brain structure that's more efficient for its owner and her demands. In other words, you use it or lose it. As a result, some scientists and psychologists are questioning whether remaining exposed to a wide variety of new

ideas and experiences well into the maturation period could actually be beneficial for our brains. Writing in the *New York Times*, Laurence Steinberg, professor of psychology at Temple University in the US, points out that, "People who can prolong adolescent brain plasticity for even a short time enjoy intellectual advantages over their more fixed counterparts." He references studies showing that people with higher IQs typically have a longer period of time in which new synapses continue to form, meaning that their "intellectual development remains especially sensitive to experience."

The same study also found that the most significant changes to occur in the brains of young adults took place in the regions associated with emotional control, and higher-order cognitive function. These prefrontal regions of the brain take longer to grow than the limbic system, where emotion originates and which, tellingly, has a huge growth surge during puberty. In other words, it may take until you're in your mid-20s to develop the brain capacity to rationalise your emotions. Dr. Jay Giedd, who directed the study, told the *New York Times*, "The prefrontal part is the part that allows you to control your impulses, come up with a long-range strategy, answer the question 'What am I going to do with my life?'"

In an influential TED Talk, clinical psychologist Dr. Meg Jay recommended embracing the exploration, and even mistake-making, that comes with your 20s, warning only that you should make sure it's "Conscious, productive, rather than stalling." So next time you wonder whether you'll ever "grow up," reflect on the opportunities to learn about life, and yourself, that come with the feeling of extended adolescence—and enjoy it while it lasts! ■