

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Ben Sasse's Solution to the Emerging Adult Crisis in America

Nebraska Senator, Ben Sasse, has written an enjoyable and important book entitled, *The Vanishing American Adult*. His book addresses what Jeffrey Arnett calls the “emerging adult” phenomenon in our culture (see below). Because of technology and affluence, Sasse sees the nature of this “crisis” as centered in the “digital world” and its “polarizing effect, its tendency to favor emotion over reason, and because citizen engagement in a republic requires reasoned debate, critical thinking, the thoughtful contesting of ideas, and individuals willing to stand up for what they believe, even when challenged,” this crisis is serious. With the emerging adult, adolescence is perpetual and this reality threatens our republic and our freedom in a way not seen before. Sasse analyses the problem in the early chapters of his book (“Our Passivity Problem”) and then offers solutions to the problem as he and his wife, Melissa, worked out strategies to raise their three children, whom they have homeschooled. Throughout the book, Sasse offer specific suggestions that he and his family used to accomplish the following objectives:

- Overcome Peer Culture (chapter 4)
- Work Hard (chapter 5)
- Resist Consumption (chapter 6)
- Travel to Experience the Difference Between “Need” and “Want” (chapter 7)
- Become Truly Literate (chapter 8). Here he suggests a list of books to help the emerging adults develop critical reading and thinking skills.

Ben Sasse has written a timely book—worth reading and worth applying. Because he is in the US Senate, I was encouraged that we still have a few representatives in our democratic-republic who are thinking and proposing meaningful, real-world solutions to our nation’s problems. I heartily recommend the book. But Sasse has also raised the important issue of the emerging adult phenomenon that is a most serious challenge to the survival of American civilization and to the church. To that I now turn.

First, a definition of the emerging adult: Basically, America invented the stage of human development we call adolescence. America identified this stage as a unique stage in the development of becoming an adult. It begins about 12 or 13 and continues until age 18. But now sociologists are calling for the recognition of another stage before full adulthood, called emerging adulthood. Coined by Jeffrey Arnett, the phrase, “emerging adulthood,” (the stage of development between 18 and 30) is now being studied extensively by Notre Dame Sociologist Christian Smith. [See his book, *Lost in Transition*.] Smith characterizes the features of this stage

as “intense identity exploration; instability; a focus on self; feelings of being in limbo, in transition, in between; and a sense of possibilities, opportunities, and unparalleled hope. These are often accompanied . . . by large doses of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, disappointment, and sometimes emotional devastation.” The steps through schooling, a first real job, marriage, and parenthood (all definitions of adulthood) are simply less well organized and coherent today than they were in the past. As Smith argues, “these years are marked by a historically unparalleled freedom to roam, experiment, learn, move on, and try again.” Arnett and Smith see emerging adulthood as the recognition of unique characteristics that explain a new and particular phase of life.

Second, what forces have combined to create this new phase in the American life? There are six identifiable changes over the last several decades that have helped create this stage of human development.

1. First is the dramatic growth of higher education. The GI Bill, changes in the American economy, and government subsidizing of higher education all led in the second half of the 20th century to a dramatic rise in the number of high school graduates going to college. More recently, the need for graduate education has been added as an expectation and a requirement for social advancement. Hence, a huge proportion of young adults do not stop their education at 18, but extend their formal training well into their twenties. Those continuing in graduate education often do so well into their late twenties and early thirties.
2. Another powerful social change is the delay of marriage. Between 1950 and 2006, the median age of the first marriage for women rose from 22.8 to 25.7 years old. For men, the median age rose from 22.8 to 27.5. Typically, young people finished high school, married and began having children. Today, many young adults spend almost a decade between high school graduation and marriage, exploring life’s many options as singles—in a period of unprecedented freedom.
3. The global nature of our economy has undermined stable, lifelong careers and replaced them with careers with lower security, more frequent job changes and the ongoing need for new training and education. Therefore, extended schooling, delayed marriage, and “arguably, a general psychological orientation toward maximizing options and postponing commitments. Far from being happy to graduate from high school and take a factory job or office job . . . many youth today spend five to ten years experimenting with different jobs and career options before finally deciding on a long-term career direction.”
4. Parents today are more willing than ever to help their young adults financially—well into their 20s and 30s. This financial help enables emerging adults to have the freedom to live a good lifestyle until they settle down into full adulthood (defined as financial independence, stable career and the end of schooling).

5. Beginning in the 1960s, numerous and reliable birth control technologies became widely available. The last five decades have witnessed major changes in the variety, reliability, ease and accessibility of such methods. The primary cultural effect of this technology has been to disconnect sexual intercourse from procreation in the minds of many Americans. Sex has therefore become a normal element of many close or perhaps even many casual relationships. It also occasionally becomes a recreational activity of sorts. The “hook-up” culture is another effect of this reality for many emerging adults.
6. The impact of Postmodernism on emerging adults cannot be minimized. The deep-seated characteristics of this worldview—a radical hermeneutic, a radical pluralism, a radical relativism, a radical morality and a radical pragmatism—define and support the emerging adult’s worldview. This worldview has both caused and perhaps more importantly justified most of the choices of the typical emerging adult. A radical autonomy is the vital center of almost everything the emerging adult does and thinks. Further, the technology of this age—the cell phone, Smartphone, iPod, iPad, etc.—enables and empowers the emerging adult to define his/her own reality. This entails almost all entertainment choices, leisure choices, purchasing choices, even food and clothing purchases. Further, the social networks, especially Facebook and Twitter, frame the social dynamic of the emerging adult. This technology reinforces all the other elements that help to explain the emerging adulthood phenomenon.

Third, what are the implications of emerging adulthood for the church and for the larger culture? For the culture, Smith demonstrates that this stage in life has resulted in far more confusion and lack of certainty about almost everything for this age group. Their lives and their worldview are constantly in flux. There is no commitment whatsoever to institutions—government, family (as normally defined) and most importantly to the church. Typically, most emerging adults are not attending church and are not involved in ministry. As Smith’s book shows, they do not vote and are not engaged in civic service or volunteerism. For the church, this generation begins to come back to church once they begin having their own children; but often the church does not know what to do with them. Many of them view church through the grid of youth group with all the fun, excitement and energy so characteristic of current youth groups. Regular church is not like that and often they do not fit in. In my view, the church needs to seek a greater level of understanding about the emerging adult and develop plans and strategies about how to reach and minister to them. The church is losing its youth in increasing numbers. When they do come back, are we ready for them? Answering that question is perhaps the church’s most important agenda item for the future.

See Ben Sasse, *The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance*; Christian Smith, et al, *Lost in Transition*; and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 1-11.