Transition to Adulthood for Young People from Vulnerable Populations

As young people reach the threshold of adulthood, they encounter many challenges. Expectations for independent behavior and mature judgment increase. Obtaining an education, finding a job, learning to live independently, managing money, establishing relationships with others – these are challenges for all young people making the transition to adulthood, but they may be especially difficult for those who have disabilities or who are already vulnerable due to other life circumstances.

In their book on transition to adulthood in vulnerable populations, Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth (2005) discuss the challenges during this developmental period for young people in several groups including those exiting foster care or the juvenile justice system, special education students, and those with serious mental health problems or physical disabilities. They emphasize that in recent years this transition has become more difficult for all young adults in specific ways. The transition has lengthened as the process has become more complicated; many who study this period think of it as extending from age 18-30. In addition, young adults also require more family support (for example, financial support, extended time living with parents, additional support such as babysitting) for a longer period of time in making this transition.

Osgood et al., define the transition to adulthood in terms of 1) entering adult roles, and 2) managing adult life. Adult role transitions include changes in family, educational, and work roles. Young adults are expected to learn to live independently. Expectations for social roles, including developing long-term, romantic relationships and becoming parents, also change at this time. In addition, young adults are expected to move into more adult school and work roles by
completing educational goals and obtaining employment. The other aspect of transition to adulthood, managing adult life, includes obtaining housing, maintaining health, and avoiding problem behavior in the areas of substance use, problems with the legal system, and mental health.

As these authors report, the transition to adulthood is a challenge for individuals in vulnerable populations for several reasons. First of all, many have limitations on their skills, including learning or cognitive problems that may lead to difficulty completing many ordinary tasks of adult life. Behavioral difficulties also may make it difficult to meet typical work setting expectations, such as punctuality or maintaining good relationships with co-workers. Eligibility for government programs providing special education and other services to disabled children often end at the beginning of adulthood; this policy leaves these young adults without the assistance they might need at this critical time to transition successfully to adult roles. Lack of family support, a frequent problem for young adults from certain groups, such as those in foster care or exiting the juvenile justice system, also plays a part in making the transition to adulthood more difficult.

Improving adjustment during this transition for those in vulnerable groups presents policy-makers with numerous challenges to develop effective services (Foster, et al., 2005). The discontinuity occurring due to the age restriction on services at the beginning of adulthood is particularly troubling. Changes in restrictions or more focus on transition services to young people as they age out of eligibility may improve outcomes for these young adults.

References


For further information regarding this article, please contact Mary Ellen Lynch, Ph.D., at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., 320W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9800 or visit our website at [http://www.emory.edu/MSACD](http://www.emory.edu/MSACD).

The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is funded in part by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD).