

# Millennials: Stop Talking About 'Adulting' and Become Adults

My 20-year-old son recently returned home from his first year away at university. Of course, he did not arrive empty-handed: he brought with him several bags stuffed full of dirty laundry.

It's clearly people like my son that the UK's [Department for Education](#) has in mind when it announced plans this week for a "new masterclass to prepare students for independent living."

Pupils in their final year of school are to be given lessons in how to survive away from the family home—in other words, how to be an adult. Topics covered will include managing money, dealing with conflict, and negotiating relationships, as well as [practicalities](#) like sewing, cooking, and how often to change bed sheets.

The aim of the classes is to help young people to build resilience and ease their transitions from school to university. But when did growing up get to be so complicated that we need schools to run lessons in it? Generations of young people have left school and entered higher education or the workplace without it being viewed as a special period requiring professional support. But today's young adults are, it seems, considered so uniquely incompetent and emotionally vulnerable that they cannot be left to work anything out for themselves.

Sadly, rather than rejecting instruction in life skills as patronizing and unnecessary, many youngsters are eager to participate. And it's not just in the UK. In the U.S., increasing numbers of Millennials are signing up for [classes in "adulting."](#) Adulting means, apparently, changing a

lightbulb, baking a cake, cleaning a bathtub, and, of course, managing a relationship. Wannabe adults can join online workshops or receive face-to-face tuition on topics such as “love,” which cover “how to have a relationship, how to talk to someone, conflict resolution—how not to fight.”

Millennials, let’s not forget, are those who came of age around the turn of the century—the oldest among them are now in their mid-thirties. Yet the demand for classes in how to be an adult suggests that although they may be rapidly approaching 40, they still perceive themselves as adolescents. [Adulthood](#) is not just a label for classes; it is used ironically to describe when one engages in routine activities: filing a tax return, taking a car to be serviced, even raising children. Its use implies that these tasks are not simply part and parcel of everyday life, but bewildering accomplishments.

Putting adulthood on the school curriculum, or running special classes on the topic, reinforces the idea that growing up is fraught with difficulty: daily life is presented as so complicated that you need an instructor. In reality, life skills are best learnt not in the classroom or via an online tutorial, but through experience. The best way to learn about cooking is to prepare some food; the best way to learn about doing the laundry is to wash your clothes. And the best way to learn about relationships is to get out and meet people. Of course, we all make mistakes along the way, but this is how we learn: few people put red socks in with white laundry more than once!

Today, children grow up without mastering skills that, even a generation ago, would have been taken for granted. As a result, they arrive at adulthood less capable of living independently. One reason for this is that nowadays many parents are more involved in their children’s lives than in the past. The phenomena of the [helicopter](#) mom who hovers over her children, monitoring and supervising their every action,

or the [snowplow](#) mom who pushes ahead of her offspring, clearing obstacles out of their way, has been well documented.

Helicopters and snowplows are crude caricatures. It is easy to blame parents, especially those moms who, it seems, are either neglectful or controlling yet always in the wrong. But the fault lies on our entire culture, which has a problem with letting children experience independence and allowing young adults to grow up. Schools, businesses, social workers, and even the police all operate on the assumption that kids need to be under close adult supervision at all times. Children [walking to school alone](#), or [playing with friends in a public park](#), or [sitting in a car](#) while dad hurries into a shop, are seen as potential victims in need of protection.

Children who arrive at adulthood having had little experience of independence will find it more difficult to handle life on their own. That creates the temptation for parents to continue being closely involved in the lives of their adult children. A recent survey from the [New York Times](#) suggests that parenting “remains hands-on, and gets more expensive” when children grow up. Three quarters of parents reported reminding their 18-to-28-year-old offspring of deadlines or making appointments for them, including to see doctors. The problem with this approach, as with adulting classes, is that it reinforces the idea that basic life skills are beyond the capacity of Millennials. The more young adults are treated like children, the more they will act like children.

It is easy to scorn [snowflake students](#) who don't even know the price of milk. But it is older people, my generation, who have sent the message to children and young adults that being a grownup is scary and complicated. Worse still, we have told them that growing up is an entirely negative experience. Too often, being old is not associated with wisdom, as in some cultures, but with [ignorance and prejudice](#). Coming of age is rarely seen as exciting and positive but as a series of mundane hoops to jump through. If being an adult means nothing

more than knowing how often to change your bed sheets, then it is hardly inspiring. We need to tell young people that knowing how to use a washing machine is a price worth paying for the autonomy and freedom to set the course of your own life.

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