

### *Attachment in the Transition to Adulthood*

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical period of life with momentous implications for the rest of adult life and for one's children (Allen, 2008; Crittenden, 2008). The major tasks of this period are to (1) define oneself realistically, (2) use that information to guide selection of a partner with whom one will have and raise children, (3) transfer one's primary attachment from parents to partner, (4) complete one's preparation for financial independence, and (5) take responsibility for directing the continuing course of one's own development. When children are born before a life partner is selected, emerging adults must also (6) manage the safe and loving rearing of the children. When the parents are single, they often (7) concurrently seek a sexual partner for themselves; this both takes energy away from raising children and also benefits the children when a stable step-parent joins the family.

To accomplish these tasks successfully, emerging adults need (a) access to relevant and undistorted information, (b) the ability to integrate information to reach sound conclusions, and (c) the habit of comparing conclusions to outcomes so as to revise one's behaviour when things don't turn out as expected. In addition, (d) access to a trusted and reliable attachment figure, usually one's parents, who supports the young adult's increasing self reliance while guiding them gently as new situations are approached, is helpful.

For young adults coming from high risk backgrounds, the period between 16 and 25 years of age is crucial. It is their best opportunity to turn their lives around and create a safer future for themselves and their children than they experienced in their childhood. The brain maturation that occurs in this period permits thoughtful young adults to override the brain development that occurred during childhood. Doing so, however, requires thoughtful reflection on their experience and long periods of learning to change the reflexive responses they learned while growing up. Without a great deal of thought and practice, new mental and behavioral patterns will not take hold. Moreover, if the adolescent or young adult feels threatened, it is unlikely that they will be able to engage thoughtfully in this process. That is, a safe and supportive environment best supports developmental change in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. On the other hand, if emerging adults' developmental needs (including safety, support, and opportunities to practice new responses) are not met, they and their children may suffer greatly, possibly even until their children themselves reach adulthood. Because their parents are often unable to support them appropriately, an acquired adult attachment figure, e.g., a teacher, foster carer, co-worker, etc., may be selected to fulfill this role. That is the advantage – and risk - of these final years of development: emerging adults can change their human and geographic context, choosing a developmental niche that supports – or thwarts – adaptive development.

Allen, J.A. (2008) The Attachment System in Adolescence, In J. Cassidy, & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment. Theory, research and clinical applications* (pp. 419-435). New York, London: Guilford Press.