‘Don’t tell anyone but my son isn’t an adult’: Conflicted and confused notions of adulthood among parents of first year university students

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Background to study

• Professional role supporting students

• In the Irish context:
  – Parents play a significant role in both
    • pre-entry decision making of applicant students (Smyth, Banks, & Calvert, 2011)
    • post-entry student retention (Bates, 2002; Blaney, 2005; Blaney & Mulkeen, 2008)
  – Majority of university students continue to live in the parental home (Harmon & Foubert, 2014)
The importance of parents

- Increasingly parents contact the university with a wide range of queries (demands?)
  - The parental role in earlier education sets pattern for parental behaviours at university level (Wartman & Savage, 2008).
  - Concern that parents may be inadvertently preventing students becoming independent adults (Savage, 2003).
Purpose of study

Understand, describe, and explain perceptions of parents of first year students and to offer practical insights for universities, parents and students in this context.
Combined theoretical perspective

Bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

- Home
- Person
- College
- Peers

Theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015)

- Identity Explorations
- Possibilities
- Ages of emerging adulthood
- Feeling in-between
- Self-focused
- Instability
Two phases in collecting data

- Sample: Parents, or guardians of first year, traditionally aged, undergraduate Engineering students in one academic year: Fathers (n=30, 38%), Mothers (n=49, 62%)

Phase 1: Initial Postal Survey (September)
252 surveys posted, 165 (65.5%) returned completed

Phase 2: Interview 1 (November)
79 parent participants

Phase 2: Interview 2 (January)
71 parent participants

Phase 2: Interview 3 (April)
69 parent participants
Research methods

- An inductive mixed methods approach
- Mixed mode: telephone or online
- Qualitative data coded as per thematic analysis
  (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
Phase 2, Interview 3: Parental views of adulthood

• How do you define adulthood?
• Are college students adults?
• Should universities and colleges treat students as adults?
• Is your student an adult?

• 69 parent participants completed this section (87.3% of Phase 2 participants)
ARE STUDENTS ADULTS?

Results of thematic analysis  (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
Q1: What is an adult?

- Specific age - ranging from 15-21 (n=18)
- Financial independence
- Living independently from their parents
- Responsibility
- Making decisions
- Respecting parents (interdependence)
Q2: Are university students adults?

- **Yes (n=29, 42.6%)**
  - Yes - Old enough...to learn from their mistakes. This is not to say I don’t still pamper my own daughter and do way too much for her! (Laura: Mother of a female student)

- **No (n=15, 22.1%)**
  - Certainly not in the early years in university as they have just come from security of home and school and have a lot to learn in many respects! This is not to take from a child going into college who may be mature. (Gillian: Mother of a male student)

- **Not sure (n=24, 35.3%)**
  - They're dependent; they're not independent. University students are dependent adults. They're adults but they're dependent adults. (Ronan: Father of a male student)
Q3: Should the university treat college students as adults?

- **Yes!** (n=57, 83.3%)
  - ...they are at an age when they should start behaving like adults and learn to act responsibly. First year is probably a bit of a transition for them with so many new experiences particularly for students living away from home for the first time but it’s a good time to start treating them as adults. (Sarah: Mother of a male student)

- **Maybe?** (n=8, 11.8%)
  - Maybe not in their first 6 months, they should make allowances that they are in a transition, taking into consideration the move away from home... (Frances: Mother of a male student)

- **No** (n=3, 4.4%)
  - No – they should be treated as students (Oliver: Father of a female student)
Q4: Is your first year student an adult?

- **Yes (n=29, 42.6%)**
  
  - Although I think for any parent it can be hard to remember this. He has grown up a lot this year. He lives on campus during the week. He has had to learn to manage his money. He has even learnt how to do his own washing! (Teresa: Mother of a male student)

- **No (n=15, 22.1%)**
  
  - Though mature in many respects, I wouldn’t consider him to be an adult as yet...I feel he has a bit to learn before he earns that title...in a bit of a ‘no mans land’ at this age! (Gillian: Mother of a male student)

- **Mixed responses (n=24, 35.5%)**
  
  - My student is bordering on adulthood. He openly states, jokingly, that he does not want to grow up yet. I believe if he had to live independently, and in an adult and mature way, he would manage. He just doesn’t want to, yet. (Esther: Mother of a male student)
Claire: Mother of a male student

- Coping
- Independence

What is adult?

College students adults?

- Not in 1st year

Is your student adult?

Should uni treat students as adults?

- No!
- Yes!
Implications for universities

• Adulthood doesn’t happen overnight (nor do students step foot on campus and instantaneously become adults) (Apter, 2001)

• Small number of parents who do not see their sons or daughters as adults can be problematic

• The ‘inexact science’ of determining when young people become adults (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011).

• For parents who regard university students as children, rather than adults, these parents may become more involved in their students’ lives and wanting more contact from the case study university (Daniel et al., 2001).
Sources cited


Many thanks!

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