

Emerging as adults

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [December 12, 2012](#) issue



My husband and I laugh at ourselves for laughing so much at the Fox television show *New Girl*, now in its second season. Our laughs are partially rooted in the fact that we fit loosely into the age cohort of the characters (well, close enough). The show stars Zooey Deschanel as Jess, the new roommate in an apartment with three guys. Fox's website describes the show as "a modern look at friendship and romance" that focuses on the "exploits of a smart, spirited and single young woman, her three male roommates and her beautiful best friend." The humorous dynamics of a gender-imbalanced living situation are not a new premise for a sitcom, but the show does feel of the moment.

Among Jess and her roommates Nick, Winston and Schmidt, only Schmidt holds a conventional job with benefits, and he's portrayed as a social oddity. Nick is a law school dropout turned bartender. Winston flounders between being a nanny and assisting a dysfunctional radio personality. Jess has been laid off from her teaching job and is at loose ends. All the roommates are single and childless. All flit between sexual partners and resist committed relationships. All are a million miles from the job, mortgage and parenting realities that fill my days.

The characters of *New Girl* seem to fit the category that psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett terms "emerging adulthood." Arnett believes that contemporary industrialized society has fostered a new developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood. Emerging adults postpone marriage and parenthood "until at least their late twenties, and spend their late teens through their mid-twenties in self-

focused exploration as they try out different possibilities in love and work” (to quote Arnett’s website).

Arnett’s thesis is not uncontroversial. Some would argue that young adults have always been engaged in these developmental tasks. A 30-year-old adolescent would be no surprise to the Augustine of the *Confessions*. Others fear that creating this new category is a way of legitimizing immaturity and irresponsibility. Perhaps we should simply call on emerging adults to grow up.

New Girl’s emerging adults act out their lives in accordance with Arnett’s thesis, but they also incorporate elements of the critiques. They are indeed engaged in “self-focused exploration” in work and love, and in a disturbing way the show mostly portrays this selfish and limitless self-exploration as an unquestioned good. Yet in other ways the show presents these emerging adults as longing for the goods of adulthood—goods which they seem culturally programmed to mock and flee.

For example, though Jess claims to embrace being laid off, the circumstance pushes her into depression. The signal that the crisis has been averted comes when Schmidt compliments Jess for putting on “tailored, grown-up clothing” again. It turns out that Jess wants meaningful work after all.

This contradictory dynamic is displayed again in an episode involving a pregnancy scare for Schmidt and Jess’s friend Cece. The scenes with Cece and Schmidt play on their supposed incompatibility: she’s a model, he’s a former fat guy. They hide that they are sleeping together and insist that they do not have a relationship, that what they are doing is only about sex. Yet when it turns out that Cece is not pregnant, the show gives us a wistful moment: Schmidt, for all his talk of being unburdened, wants marriage and fatherhood, and the audience is clearly meant to see that this “just sex” relationship ought to be so much more.

I had the privilege to learn from Arnett in a faculty seminar, and I was moved by his compassion for emerging adults. Arnett rejects the perjorative term *extended adolescence* because he’s trying sympathetically to understand the situation in which contemporary young adults dwell. This flies in the face of my natural reaction to the adolescent behaviors of twentysomethings (and I find that when I treat my students as adults, they rise to the occasion). But Arnett’s advice to be empathetic makes me a better and happier teacher. The same students I am challenging deserve my understanding.

There is no way to legitimize the willful refusal of adult responsibilities, but there are good Christian reasons for being gentle with immaturity. Irenaeus describes human beings as created by God as good but immature. He sees maturity as the goal toward which Christ is leading us, and he praises God for accommodating our immaturity. In the incarnation “the one who was the perfect bread of the Father offered himself to us as milk for children.” Immaturity is not a weakness to be despised but an appropriate and tender good; the immature are to be nurtured toward the richer goods open only to the mature.

Young adults are swimming in powerful cultural currents that work against maturation. *New Girl* uses humor to display these currents, and it shows characters who want something more in a world that tells them to resist adulthood with all their might. There are implications here for discipleship and for Christians who teach, parent, pastor and work with emerging adults.