

6 different pathways to adulthood

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Only in very few life phases do individuals face as many life transitions in such a short time as young adults at the age of 19-30. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is characterised by frequent changes in status or social roles, such as leaving the parental home, starting a career, entering into working life, forming a partnership and becoming a parent. Assuming civic and social responsibility is also an integral part of the lives of young adults at this particular life phase.

Professor Katariina Salmela-Aro's research team has investigated the transition from adolescence to adulthood through key changes in social roles. Funded by the Academy of Finland, the [longitudinal study](#) has investigated how [young adults](#) have found their place in the different life domains of education, employment, residence, partnership and parenthood. This is a complex set of domains involving a number of different overlapping phases and transitions.

Salmela-Aro's team has identified six different pathways to adulthood among Finnish university students. The largest group is formed by those with a [career](#) and a family (referred to as traditionalists, 24% of respondents) who experienced all key life transitions from adolescence to adulthood in an expected order. Fast starters (15%) were characterised by a fast transition in all of the key life domains (studies, work, partnership, parenthood). People in the fast partnership and late parenthood pathway (15%) started their partnership early, already during their university studies, but became parents relatively late.

People in the career with unsteady partnerships pathway (15%) moved

early from studies to employment but entered into a partnership relatively late and experienced several partnerships and repeated break-ups. Those in the single with slow career ("floundering") pathway (15%) were young adults who had difficulties in the key developmental task of forming and committing to a partnership but were also slow in starting their careers. The slow starters (19%) typically postponed both their career and their family transitions compared to the other groups.

"Our results reveal that young adults with fast or on-time achievement of age-graded developmental tasks experienced higher [life satisfaction](#) at the end of the follow-up than those with off-time and postponed major role transitions. Those with prolonged university studies and who were single experienced lower life satisfaction later in their lives, whereas those who combined career and family experienced higher life satisfaction," Salmela-Aro sums up.

The Pathways to [Adulthood](#) research project involved a sample of 182 students at the University of Helsinki who had started their university studies in 1991. The project is part of the ongoing Helsinki Longitudinal Student Study (HELS).

More information: The results of the study will be published in an article in the *Advances in Life Course Research*: Salmela-Aro, K. et al., Mapping pathways to adulthood among Finnish university students: Sequences, patterns, variations in family- and work-related roles. *Advances in Life Course Research* (2011)

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