

LESSON

What Does It Mean to Come of Age?

Introductory Lesson

Overview

About This Lesson

Adolescence is a dynamic time of growth, change, and possibility, a time when young people explore their identities, seek new experiences and relationships, and form values that will shape their futures. Before teaching a text set from the *Coming of Age in a Complex World* collection, it can be beneficial to give students an opportunity to explore the concept of “coming of age” with their peers. This exploration, which includes guided personal reflection and a collaborative activity to define coming of age, can lead to rich discussions about what it means to experience adolescence, what expectations adults hold for young people on the cusp of adulthood, and what unique challenges and opportunities the current generations of students face now and will face in the future.

Essential Question

- What does it mean to “come of age” in the world today?

Guiding Questions

- What experiences mark the transition from childhood to adulthood?
- What are some of the positive aspects of coming of age during this moment in history? What are some of the challenges?

Preparing to Teach

A Note to Teachers

1. **Preparing to Teach a Coming-of-Age Unit with a Facing History On-Demand Webinar**
Before embarking on a coming-of-age unit, we recommend that you watch the webinar [Coming of Age: Student Perspectives on Reading, Writing, and Finding Their Voice](#), featuring *New York Times* Learning Network’s Katherine Schulten. Over the course of the hour, you will learn practical and engaging strategies that you can apply to your own

classroom. You will also hear from two student winners of an annual multimedia contest run by the *New York Times* Learning Network, who share what it is like to grow up in the world today. They may inspire you to enter your students in the contest in the future! Check out the Learning Network's [contests page](#) to learn more.

2. Introducing the Conceptual Framing for a Coming-of-Age Unit

We have designed this lesson to prepare students to engage with the resources and activities in Facing History's Coming of Age in a Complex World collection. The purpose of this lesson is to develop students' conceptual understanding of the transition from childhood to adulthood. We encourage you to teach this lesson before students engage with the text sets and unit guides in the collection.

3. Incorporating Concept Maps throughout Your Coming-of-Age Unit

In the second activity, Define Coming of Age in a Group Activity, students collaborate to create concept maps and working definitions of "coming of age." If you have space in your classroom, consider keeping students' posters up on display and referring to them over the course of the unit by asking: "What new, different, or deeper understanding do you have about coming of age after reading/watching/discussing/learning about ___? What makes you say that?" This routine will allow students to add new ideas to their maps and reflect over time in their journals on their deepening thinking about coming of age.

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Reflect On What It Means to Come of Age

Let students know that in this lesson, they will be thinking about what it means to come of age in the world today. Briefly explain that the phrase "coming of age" is used to describe the transition from childhood to adulthood. To get them started and build a schema for the next activity, have students reflect on the following questions in their [journals](#):

- What are some examples of experiences that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood?
- What is your favorite story about a young person coming of age? (It could be a film, TV show, book, song, fairytale, play, etc.) Why does it resonate with you?

2. Define Coming of Age in a Group Activity

Divide the class into small groups and explain that you will be guiding them through the steps of the Make Meaning thinking routine to help them develop a working definition of “coming of age.”¹ Each group needs a piece of chart paper.

- **Round 1:** Instruct group members to share one word that they associate with “coming of age” and write it on their group’s paper. Within each group, students should go one at a time. Each student needs to contribute a unique word so as to add to their group’s collective meaning of the term.
- **Round 2:** Instruct each student to add to someone else’s word with a new word or phrase. They should write the new word or phrase on the paper, connect the ideas with a line, and verbally explain their connection.
- **Round 3:** Prompt groups to discuss and annotate any connections they notice between the ideas. They can use lines, arrows, words, phrases, and color to indicate the connections on their chart paper.
- **Round 4:** Have each student pose a question about “coming of age” and add it to their paper. If possible, have them use a different-color pen or large sticky notes for the questions to help separate them from the web of ideas.
- **Round 5:** Ask the small groups to develop a working definition of “coming of age.” Let them know that they should collaborate on this task and should not consult a dictionary. They can write their definition on their chart paper or use a new color or large sticky note to distinguish the definitions from the web of ideas and questions.

Facilitate a class [gallery walk](#) so students can examine each other’s posters. Debrief by asking students to name the similarities and unique ideas that they notice.

3. Discuss What It Means to Come of Age in the Present Moment

Discuss the following questions as a class. Encourage students to support their ideas with examples from the activities in this lesson or their own lived experiences.

- In what ways is coming of age a common experience across generations, and in what ways is the experience specific to one’s particular generation?

¹ Adapted from Ron Ritchhart and Mark Church, *The Power of Making Thinking Visible: Practices to Engage and Empower All Learners* (Jossey-Bass, 2020), 76–85.

- What are some of the positive aspects of coming of age during this moment in history? What are some of the challenges?
- What is something that you would like the adults in your life—caregivers, teachers, coaches, mentors, employers, community members—to know about what it’s like to come of age during this time?