What does it mean to "grow up"? [1]

Dear Alice,

How does one grow up? And how can someone perceive this in themselves? I'm terrified of being a Peter/Princess Pan.

Answer

Dear Reader,

While you seem concerned about an extended stay in Never-never land, it might reassure you to know that your question conveys a level of self-reflection - a noted marker of maturity or growing up. Growing up, like a lot of other aspects of evolving identity, can be thought of as a spectrum. The feeling of moving from childhood into adulthood can have many appearances and may also change for the individual throughout their lifespan. To that end, both physiological changes in the body and attributes acquired over time likely contribute to the feeling and experience of growing up. And while various cultures may define adulthood differently, in the U.S., many professionals (therapists, educators, even lawmakers who deal with the action and culpability of an individual), tend to describe maturity as a range of behaviors and abilities. A person’s ability to learn from mistakes, take accountability for their actions, appreciate reality of the present while also planning for the future can all demonstrate capacity for emotional and intellectual maturity.

Let’s consider one of the more concrete elements of maturity in western medicine - the evolving brain. As our bodies age, certain physiological changes occur and may be thought of as signs of growing up - puberty, increase in height and shoe size, and brain development. The changes in the brain occurring between the ages of 11 and into the early and mid-20s heavily impact components of thinking such as impulse control, assessing risk versus reward, planning, and decision-making. During these formative years, the maturation of the frontal lobe area of the brain improves cognitive functioning, allowing for deeper consideration of consequences and rewards during decision-making. The brain doesn’t fully mature until a person is in their early to mid-twenties - this is just one component of how we grow up.

While the brain stops growing in the twenties, emotional and psychological development continues throughout a person’s life. The ability to balance responsibility with fun, immediate desires with long term needs, and other seemingly conflicting priorities is a trait we may only begin to appreciate and fully understand as we age and our independence and life experiences broaden.
You may be familiar with the phrase “grow up,” typically used in conversation to imply a person should be more mature in one way or another. But what are the qualities that define a mature person? One way to qualify maturity is to consider people who you think personify this attribute and take some time to ponder and consider their unique qualities. Some of these characteristics may include:

- **Humility** - a respect for individual insignificance in the grand scheme of the world; a perspective that one person is no more or less important than others
- **Gratitude** - an appreciation for the little and grand “gifts” of life, whether material or otherwise
- **Confidence** - a strong sense of self, of personal values, and of self-worth
- **Independence** - the ability to act and make decisions without the influence of others
- **Self-acceptance** - an appreciation for each person’s flaws and strengths, as well as the ability to change and grow
- **Responsibility** - an awareness of accountability and active engagement in work necessary to support and sustain ourselves, as well as our community and environment
- **Authenticity** - living in accordance with our sincere beliefs and values; presenting ourselves honestly and with genuine intentions
- **Wisdom** - knowledge and insight gained through lived experience
- **Consideration** - an understanding of each person’s impact on the larger community, and actions that reflect thoughtfulness of that understanding

If your fear of being a Princess/Peter Pan is rooted in worrying about never “growing up,” try not to be too hard on yourself. An appreciation of joy and simple pleasures in life – many of the things we readily delighted in as children, but sometimes take for granted as adults – is viewed by many as equally as important as managing responsibility and obligations of adulthood.

Perhaps the key to developing a healthy maturity and “growing up” is finding a definition that is based on those you admire. And no matter your age, hopefully you strive for a balance of living and self-reflection that allows for enjoyment and appreciation of life’s many experiences, whether past, present, or future.

Alice!

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