

GROW UP, ALREADY

Attention, millennials: The job-spouse-house-kid standards for successful adulthood have been upended by financial markets, your parents, and your own priorities. Yet, wouldn't it be nice to know how to fold a fitted sheet? Or make a budget? Welcome to adulting school. **By Jessica Goldstein**

On my first night of adulting school in June, my fellow attendees and I must leave our drinks on the tiki-bar patio to gather around a Subaru in a parking lot in downtown Portland, Maine. Jared, a representative from a local dealership, is going to teach us car maintenance basics. The marquee lesson: How to change a tire.

The Adulting School recently rebranded itself; now it's the Adulting Collective, in an effort by its founders—Katie Brunelle, 36, a former teacher, and Rachel Weinstein, 41, a psychotherapist—to sound less condescending toward the millennials in their target audience (ages 18 to 36, give or take) and more neighborly—like, Hey, we're all in this kibbutz called life together. If it takes a village to raise a child, their logic goes, maybe it also takes a village to make an adult, especially because, as many people signed up for this class tell me, “adulting” is not something a person can ever actually complete. As Weinstein put it over wine earlier that day, “Adulting is a life-long pursuit.” You can be adulting throughout the entirety of what, in a simpler time, one might have considered “adulthood.” In this way, a noun that has been turned into a verb can never become a noun again—much like real adults can never return to childhood. The whole thing is very poetic and existential, but tonight's class is not focused on such lofty thoughts. At the moment, Jared is asking if anyone has ever removed a wiper blade.

Out of about 15 people gathered here—all of whom, I feel obligated to report, are either friends or friends-of-friends of Brunelle and Weinstein's—only two hands go up.

Jared's demonstration of this particular skill takes all of 87 seconds. In even less time, you could have looked it up on YouTube.

So it's a little early to say if Brunelle and Weinstein's vision for the Adulting Collective can come to pass: a nationwide movement that will consist of workshops not just here in



Portland but also in cities across the country, as well as a website with a premium membership tier that will cost \$20 a month. Brunelle frames this as the equivalent of five Starbucks, but you might be more inclined to do the math as two Netflixes. This first adulting course set participants back \$5; the following night's, a 15-minute talk on how to look at art, was free.

On the website, those in the process of adulting—which, remember, is all of us over age 18—will be able to take a quiz to determine an “adulting IQ.” (A millennial at ELLE took the quiz and answered pretty adultly on almost everything: She can cook, has no debt, is in a stable relationship, was always her dad's car mechanic/handyman helper, etc.—but her result was, “You're Calling Your Parents a Little Too Often: Let us be your GO-TO for the adulting skills you're missing!”) The collective will also offer access to courses, daily check-ins, videos, a personalized profile, private forums, and a “gamification piece.” At press time, the site has yet to launch, so I can only say it seems like not the sort of thing an adult would have time for, particularly not one who is overwhelmed by the fundamentals of auto ownership.

The Adulting Collective, née School, was born three years after Kelly Williams Brown published her *New York Times* best-seller, *Adulting: How to Become a Grown-Up in 468 Easy(ish) Steps*, based on her popular *Adulting* blog, which launched in 2011. A few adulting

initiatives exist around the country; mostly, they're hybrids of shop, home economics, and personal finance classes. Embedded in all of them is an interesting, loaded question: What does it take to be a successful adult? Are the metrics different today than they were just a generation ago? The Adulthood Collective founders and their ilk have tapped into something real—that to be culturally considered an adult, one once needed only to get a job, get married, buy a house, have offspring. But these milestones are both less desirable and less attainable for twenty- and thirtysomethings than they used to be.

Plenty of millennials have watched their parents' sacred unions come apart. On top of and partly due to this, kids today have Gumby-flexible ideas about sexuality, polyamory, independence, and so on, and also a healthy skepticism about the institution of marriage and the notion that getting hitched makes someone more of an adult. Working women, faced with the data on the financial, personal, and professional costs of having children, are delaying and opting out of parenthood at unprecedented rates. Census Bureau data from 2016 found that a record number in the U.S. are childless—almost half of women between the ages of 15 and 44 don't have kids, the highest percentage since the bureau started tracking that figure in 1976. Earlier this year, the CDC reported that, for the first time ever, women in their thirties were having more children than women in their twenties. And speaking of that was then, this is now, perhaps you've heard about the housing market?

Even for millennials to whom the spouse-house-career-kid superfecta appeals, the obstacles between here and there are formidable. Compared with Gen Xers and baby boomers, millennials have gotten a rough shake, many graduating into a rotten-to-moribund economy with Everests of student loan debt—a one-two punch from the universe that has made so many standard markers of adulthood out of reach for all but a privileged few. And with shop and home ec disappearing from many schools—not to mention parents working full-time who have no bandwidth to teach those skills; and their opposites, the helicopter parents, who dedicate so much energy to their kids that, as they age, their children struggle with independence—it's not a character indictment to note that many young people enter their twenties without having mastered the basics of cooking, cleaning, and budgeting. In that context, it's reasonable, even admirable, for this generation to reimagine what adulthood entails.

What undermines that narrative is the fact that all the adulthood materials on the market seem to be aimed at some straw man of a 25-year-old who is both intelligent enough to earn a degree at a four-year college, and obtuse enough to be flummoxed by simple tasks like, say, unclogging a toilet or filling out a W-2. Is this ur-millennial really out there? I have a feeling she exists only in trend writers' imaginations, where she is perpetually perched atop a pile of undone laundry, posing for selfies with a perfect slice of avocado toast.

“If someone wants to live in a tiny house because they value travel, that's adulthood, for them.”

Now is probably a good time to note that some people—millennials and millennial-mockers alike—find the labeling of *adulthood* to be grating and obnoxious. The word has been popping up on Twitter since 2008; it landed on Urban Dictionary in 2014. Jonathon Green, author of several slang dictionaries, says that *adulthood* sparks “this image of a little girl who has put on her mother's high heels and is going, ‘Look! I'm a grown up!’... Why has it become necessary to take what was quotidian, ordinary, assumed, and now single it out as this important experience that has to be categorized, dwelt upon, and thought about?”

There's a presumption, articulated by Green and assumed by many adulthood proselytizers, that adulthood's audience is primarily female. This built-in girliness impelled *Lenny Letter* editor Jessica Grose to deride the word in a *Washington Post* op-ed last May as sexist: “a self-infantilizing rejection of female maturity in a culture that already has almost no love for grown-up women.”

Brunelle's hunch is that she sees higher female turnout at Adulthood Collective events (anecdotally, I counted 12 women and 3 men in my tire-changing class) because women have an easier time “admitting that they don't know how to do something.” Men are as confused by the fine print of lease agreements as women are, she says; they just don't cop to it.

It's possible that the Adulthood Collective's branding does not improve adulthood's rep-

utation among nonbelievers. In Portland, I asked a group of women, ages 28 to 41, if they could agree on a working definition of the term. Not only were they unable to do so, but they were adamant that they shouldn't have to, because you get to decide what adulthood means for yourself. “From our perspective,” Weinstein says, “adulthood is really however you want to live your adult life, but choosing consciously. If you don't want to buy a house, don't want to have a big savings account, don't want to have a serious career, that doesn't mean you're not adulthood. If someone wants to live in a tiny house because they value going out to restaurants and traveling, that's adulthood for them.”

This is all well and good, until the shit hits your conscious-life fan—a sudden illness, a family tragedy—and your adventures cannot be exchanged, via an old-timey barter system, for health insurance.

Deep down, disdain for these adulthood organizations likely stems from an irrefutable truth: Adulthood hits whether or not you know how to tighten lug nuts in the shape of a star. Turn 18, and you're an adult in the eyes of the law. You cannot opt out.

And, of course, the fundamentals of adulthood cannot possibly be taught at a themed happy hour. Adulthood is, at its core, about responsibility—an understanding that adults are responsible not only to and for themselves, but to their families and friends, and their colleagues, communities, and country. My time with the Adulthood Collective coincides with the day President Trump announces America's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, yet no one highlights civic engagement—or even voting—as a vital part of adulthood. (It's not just home ec and shop that aren't ubiquitous in schools anymore; civics classes are declining, too.)

But instead of (or in addition to—we're grown-ups, we can multitask) ripping into these adulthood entrepreneurs for their two-dimensional concept of adulthood, we should acknowledge their marketing savvy. There's something endearingly self-aware about a generation that's been ridiculed for its dependence on participation trophies turning something as mundane as the day-in, day-out drudgery of keeping oneself alive and not disgusting—taking out the trash, paying rent on time, showing up at work sans hangover—into an accomplishment worth advertising. Selling out is a quaint idea to millennials, a generation whose members understand that everything that exists can be named, shared, and monetized. It's a new American dream.