

## Coming of Age

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### Abstract:

As children grow, their personalities and values are very heavily influenced by what surrounds them. Their life at home and the people they are surrounded with can have a significant impact on who they are and whom they become. The focus of this text will be some of the socioeconomic factors that influence one's education, academic success and mental health while growing up. The factors I will be looking at are the parents' level of education, income and assets, health and home atmosphere and neighbourhood they are situated in.

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Family income and status are factors with the most significant influence potential since it is something that affects a person's life since day one. People coming from families with a higher social status and an above-average income usually have highly educated parents, which can be a significant influence in the academic success and, later on, reflect on the child's coming of age process. There is a common belief that children brought up by a highly educated set of parents tend to do better at school with above-average linguistic skills while children with less-educated parent tend to fall behind their peers when it comes to academic success and social skills. According to the *American Psychology Association* children coming from low-income families are more likely to be neglected and exposed to violence which has a considerable impact on their overall health but especially on the psychological aspect of their mental health. One of the subfactors connected to the family income/status is the domestic crowding, often happening in families with a lower income that harms the child's psychological and social development most likely because of the lack of attention and time spent on working with the child. As opposed to the statistics in *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* Joanie Maloney, a Cambridge graduate, does not earn much money and the absence of her partner means that the family income is lower than average, but that did not stop her daughter from excelling at school and trying to show that all you need is the willpower to push yourself further to succeed.

Family support and home atmosphere are the factors of inevitable influence. Growing up in a stable home usually has a positive effect on a child's social skills which can, later on, reflect on one's way of perceiving others. Having constant emotional support leads to a feeling of stability and safety which is important for a child's mental wellbeing. Emotional development in early stages of life is critical, as it impacts one's character development as they grow older. Therefore, everyone needs to have a safe environment where it is possible to be able to express and talk about their emotional state. Parents should make it clear to their children that they are not taking care of them as a favour that should be repaid later on in life or that they see them as a chore; otherwise this could have a lasting negative impact on the individual growing up in that kind of environment. This negative impact can be seen in Nnenna's relationship with her mother after Nnenna's wish to study in France. It seems like her mother is afraid of being alone and being forgotten by her daughter; therefore she resorts to going against Nnenna's wish and being demeaning towards her and treating her like a child, "She's just a child," said Joanie, not looking at Nnenna's shocked, humiliated expression, unable to bring herself to look at Mr Black. 'She's just a child. How could you do

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<sup>1</sup> American Psychology Association, '*Children, Youth, Families and Socioeconomic Status*', < <https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/children-families> > [ accessed 28 November 2019].

that to her?”<sup>2</sup>. Even by the end of the book, their relationship is not as good as it was at the beginning due to this mistreatment.

The article states that children coming from poor backgrounds are usually situated in impoverished neighbourhoods which has a direct influence on their behavioural development. Those children are more likely to be faced with adversity than their peers which can, later on, influence their academic success. They are more likely to start kindergarten with underdeveloped linguistic skills, a statistic supported by a study conducted by Stanford University. They concluded that children from impoverished backgrounds could be up to six months behind on language development, leading to falling behind their peers coming from wealthier families. On the other hand, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* shows us that it does not, and it is not always like that, because Nnenna’s mother did not make much money meaning they did not live in a wealthy neighbourhood and yet Nnenna was hardworking, both in and out of school. As long as enough motivation is there, breaking out of “social norms” is possible for every child.

Mental and physical health, not just of the child but also of the family members, play a massive role in the coming of age. If a child is going through a tough time with their health or a family member’s health, it can take a massive emotional toll on the child. This could affect the way they interact with other people, especially their peers, and it could massively influence the way they might start prioritising things. They might start thinking that because someone else in their home has it harder than them, they have no right to complain or seek attention, this kind of thinking could later in life lead to always putting other people first no matter what. Similarly, mental health can remarkably influence their performance at school. School, in general, can be quite a stressful experience which can cause an increase in the level of anxiety, which if not treated, can later on lead to more serious mental issues such as clinical depression. In the *Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, we can see the way Nnenna puts her mother first by never pressuring her to talk about her father so she would not upset her, instead of keeping her curiosity to herself which leads to Nnenna continually questioning her own identity. ‘By the time Nnenna emerged from Steph’s father’s shop, she felt like a new woman. She felt extraordinary. She felt powerful. She felt sore but confident in her new identity.’<sup>3</sup> In this quotation, we can see that Nnenna is trying to fulfil the missing parts of her identity by having sexual intercourse with her significant other. ‘More than that, it would mean that Joanie’s interdiction had no power over her; this was more than sex, it was a prison break.’<sup>4</sup> She did not only use sex to fulfil her identity but also as a tool to spite her mother, trying to indirectly punish her for refusing to talk about her father.

As previously mentioned, mental health can have a significant influence on one’s performance at school, but so can school environment on mental health. School plays a

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<sup>2</sup> Okechukwu Nzelu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, (London: Dialogue Books, 2019), p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Nzelu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, p.79.

<sup>4</sup> Nzelu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, p.79.

significant role when it comes to growing up. It might seem like school's only chore is to educate us, but there is so much more to it. Being the place where children spend a considerable amount of time, the school does not teach theoretical knowledge only, but also social skills that will be necessary later in life. School induced anxiety could be the product of parental pressure, not being accepted by your peers and not being able to keep up with the workload. Therefore, it essential to have encouraging teachers that care about their students and a supportive group of friends. We can see the importance of the teacher support in the book when Nnenna's teacher suggested studying in France, showing that he believed in her and her abilities. 'She's the best student I've ever taught, very mature indeed, as you'll know. She's perfectly well equipped to handle anything university could throw at her.'<sup>5</sup> This helped Nnenna become more confident and go against her mother, who was against her studying in a foreign country.

In conclusion, all of the previously mentioned factors have a predisposition to affect one's coming of age and character development, while some of them could have a positive impact there are some with possible negative outcomes. What matters the most in a child's coming of age, just as shown in the book, is the support they get from the people surrounding them, especially if all the factors are going against you.

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<sup>5</sup> Nzelu, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, p.43.