

Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development

Erik Erikson—a psychologist— theorized that there several stages of psychosocial development. His theory identifies eight stages through which a healthily developing human should pass from infancy to late adulthood. In each stage, the person confronts, and hopefully masters, new challenges. Each stage builds upon the successful completion of earlier stages. The challenges of stages not successfully completed may be expected to reappear as problems in the future. Erikson's stage theory characterizes an individual advancing through the eight life stages as a function of negotiating his or her biological forces and sociocultural forces. Each stage is characterized by a psychosocial crisis of these two conflicting forces .

Stages of Development

1. Hopes: trust vs. mistrust (birth – 2 years)

Existential Question: Can I Trust the World?

The first stage of Erik Erikson's theory centers on the infant's basic needs being met by the parents and this interaction leading to trust or mistrust. Trust, as defined by Erikson, is "an essential truthfulness of others as well as a fundamental sense of one's own trustworthiness." The infant depends on the parents, especially the mother, for sustenance and comfort. The child's relative understanding of world and society come from the parents and their interaction with the child. A child's first trust is always with the parent or caregiver. If the parents expose the child to warmth, regularity, and dependable affection, the infant's view of the world will be one of trust. Should the parents fail to provide a secure environment and to meet the child's basic needs; a sense of mistrust will result. Development of mistrust can lead to feelings of frustration, suspicion, withdrawal, and a lack of confidence.

According to Erik Erikson, the major developmental task in infancy is to learn whether or not other people, especially primary caregivers, regularly satisfy basic needs. If caregivers are consistent sources of food, comfort, and affection, an infant learns trust: others are dependable and reliable. If they are neglectful, or perhaps even abusive, the infant instead learns mistrust: the world is an undependable, unpredictable, and possibly a dangerous place.

2. Will: autonomy vs. shame and doubt (2–4 years)

Existential Question: Is It OK to Be Me?

As the child gains control over eliminative functions and motor abilities, they begin to explore their surroundings. The parents still provide a strong base of a security from which the child can venture out to assert their will. The parents' patience and encouragement helps foster autonomy in the child. Children at this age deeply enjoy exploring the world around them and they are constantly learning about their environment. Caution must be taken at this age, as children may explore things that are dangerous to their health and safety.

At this age, children develop their first interests. For example, a child who enjoys music may like to play with the radio. Children who enjoy the outdoors may be interested in animals and plants. Highly restrictive parents, however, are more likely to instill in the child a sense of doubt, and reluctance to attempt new challenges. As they gain increased muscular coordination and mobility, toddlers become capable of satisfying some of their own needs. They begin to feed themselves, wash and dress themselves, and use the bathroom. If caregivers encourage self-sufficient behavior, toddlers develop a sense of autonomy—a sense of being able to handle many problems on their own. But if caregivers demand too much too soon or –alternatively –refuse to let children perform tasks of which they are capable, or ridicule early attempts at self-sufficiency, children may instead develop shame and doubt about their ability to handle problems.

3. Purpose: initiative vs. guilt (preschool, 4–5 years)

Existential Question: Is it OK for Me to Do, Move, and Act?

Initiative adds to autonomy the quality of undertaking, planning, and attacking a task for the sake of just being active and on the move. The child is learning to master the world around them, learning basic skills and principles of physics. Things fall down, not up. Round things roll. They learn how to zip and tie, count and speak with ease. At this stage, the child wants to begin and complete their own actions for a purpose. Guilt is a confusing new emotion. They may feel guilty over things that logically should not cause guilt. They may feel guilt when this initiative does not produce desired results.

The development of courage and independence are what set preschoolers, ages three to six years of age, apart from other age groups. Young children in this category face the challenge of initiative versus guilt. As described in Bee and Boyd (2004), the child during this stage faces the complexities of planning and developing a sense of judgment. During this stage, the child learns to take initiative and prepare for leadership; the child seeks to be someone who achieves goals. Activities sought out by a child in this stage may include risk-taking behaviors, such as crossing a street alone or riding a bike without a helmet.

Within instances requiring initiative, the child may also develop negative behaviors. These behaviors are a result of the child developing a sense of frustration for not being able to achieve a goal as planned and may engage in behaviors that seem aggressive, ruthless, and overly assertive to parents. Aggressive behaviors, such as throwing objects, hitting, or yelling, are examples of observable behaviors during this stage. “Less violent” forms of aggression, such as name-calling or eye-rolling, also indicate that the child is frustrated with a person or situation; something is preventing the child from achieving his or her desired goals.

Preschoolers are increasingly able to accomplish tasks on their own, and can start new things. With this growing independence, the child has many choices about activities to be pursued. Sometimes children take on projects they can readily accomplish, but at other times they undertake projects that are beyond their capabilities or that interfere with other people's plans and activities. If parents and preschool teachers encourage and support children's efforts, while also helping them make realistic and appropriate choices, children develop initiative-independence in planning and undertaking activities. But if, instead, adults discourage the pursuit of independent activities or dismiss them as silly and bothersome, children develop guilt about their needs and desires.

4. Competence: industry vs. inferiority (5–12 years)

Existential Question: Can I Make it in the World of People and Things?

The aim to bring a productive situation to completion gradually supersedes the whims and wishes of play. In other words, the child no longer wants to play or complete minor goals; instead, the child wishes to play or explore for the purpose of successfully achieving a larger goal. For instance, the child may no longer attend basketball practice simply because practice is fun; he or she attends practice with the hope of becoming a better player in the short-and long-term and – likely – with the goal of winning games. The failure to master earlier stages (trust, autonomy, and industrious skills) may cause the child to doubt his or her future, leading to shame, guilt, and the experience of defeat and inferiority.

"Children at this age are becoming more aware of themselves as individuals." They work hard at "being responsible, being good, and doing it right." At this stage, children are eager to learn and accomplish more complex skills: reading, writing, telling time. They also get to form moral values, recognize cultural and individual differences, and are able to manage most of their personal needs and grooming with minimal assistance. At this stage, children might express their independence by talking back and being

disobedient and rebellious.

Erikson viewed the elementary school years as critical for the development of self-confidence. Ideally, elementary school provides many opportunities for children to achieve the recognition of teachers, parents, and peers by producing things: drawing pictures, solving addition problems, writing sentences, and so on. If children are encouraged to make and do things and are then praised for their accomplishments, they begin to demonstrate industry by being diligent, persevering at tasks until completed, and putting work before pleasure. If children are instead ridiculed or punished for their efforts or if they find they are incapable of meeting their teachers' and parents' expectations, they develop feelings of inferiority about their capabilities.

At this age, children start recognizing their special talents and continue to discover interests as their education improves. They may begin to choose to do more activities to pursue that interest, such as joining a sport if they know they have athletic ability, or joining the band if they are good at music. If not allowed to discover their own talents in their own time, they will develop a sense of lack of motivation, low self-esteem, and lethargy. They may become "wandering souls" if they are not allowed to develop interests.

5. Fidelity: identity vs. role confusion (adolescence, 13–19 years)

Existential Question: Who Am I and What Can I Be?

The adolescent is newly concerned with how they appear to others and who they are becoming. The adolescent cares deeply about what others think about him; he may make choices that are outside of his actual self in order to appear different to his peers. For instance, the adolescent may choose to smoke – even if he doesn't truly want to smoke – if he believes it will make him appear "cooler" to his peers. However, the adolescent does not only care about peer approval; the adolescent also cares about his own life path and where he is heading. The ability to settle on a school, for example, is pleasant. In later stages of adolescence, the child develops a sense of sexual identity. As they make the transition from childhood to adulthood, adolescents ponder the roles they will play in the adult world. Initially, they are apt to experience some role confusion – mixed ideas and feelings about the specific ways in which they will fit into society – and may experiment with a variety of behaviors and activities (e.g. tinkering with cars, baby-sitting for neighbors, affiliating with certain political or religious groups). Eventually, Erikson proposed, most adolescents achieve a sense of identity regarding who they are and where their lives are headed.

Erikson is credited with coining the term "Identity Crisis." Each stage has its own 'crisis'; however, this particular stage (adolescence) arguably has the most significant crisis, as a person is transitioning from a child to an adult. Adolescents "are confronted by the need to re-establish [boundaries] for themselves and to do this in the face of an often potentially hostile world." This is often challenging since commitments are being asked for before particular identity roles have formed. (For example, schools may require you to commit to them before you are certain that you want to go to school). At this point, one is in a state of "identity confusion", but society normally makes allowances for youth to "find themselves." For instance, society may not require a 16-year-old to decide on his future career, but instead allows the adolescent to study many subjects at school so he can find himself; the adolescent enjoys the freedom to explore and he is not entirely certain who he wants to become.

The problem of adolescence is one of role confusion: am I a child or an adult? Given the right conditions – and Erikson believes these are essentially having enough space and time, a psychosocial moratorium, when a person can freely experiment and explore – what may emerge is a firm sense of identity, an emotional and deep awareness of who he or she is.

As in other stages, bio-psycho-social forces are at work. No matter how one has been raised, one's personal ideologies are now chosen for oneself. Often, this leads to conflict with adults over religious and political orientations. Another area where teenagers are deciding for themselves is their career choice, and often parents want to have a decisive say in that role. If society is too insistent, the teenager will acquiesce to internal wishes, effectively forcing him or her to 'foreclose' on experimentation and, therefore, true self-discovery. Once someone settles on a worldview and vocation, will he or she be able to integrate this aspect of self-definition into a diverse society? According to Erikson, when an adolescent has balanced both perspectives of "What have I got?" and "What am I going to do with it?" he or she has established their identity: Dependent on this stage is the quality of fidelity—the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions and confusions of value systems.

Given that the next stage (Intimacy) is often characterized by marriage, many are tempted to cap off the fifth stage at 20 years of age. However, these age ranges are actually quite fluid, especially for the achievement of identity, since it may take many years to become grounded, to identify the object of one's fidelity, to feel that one has "come of age."

6. Love: intimacy vs. isolation (young adulthood, 20–24, or 20–39 years)

Existential Question: Can I Love?

The Intimacy vs. Isolation conflict is emphasized around the age of 30. At the start of this stage, identity vs. role confusion is coming to an end, though it still lingers at the foundation of the stage (Erikson, 1950). Young adults are still eager to blend their identities with friends. They want to fit in. Erikson believes we are sometimes isolated due to intimacy. We are afraid of rejections such as being turned down or our partners breaking up with us. We are familiar with pain and, to some of us, rejection is so painful that our egos cannot bear it. Erikson also argues that "Intimacy has a counterpart: Distantiation: the readiness to isolate and if necessary, to destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to our own, and whose territory seems to encroach on the extent of one's intimate relations" (1950).

Once people have established their identities, they are ready to make long-term commitments to others. They become capable of forming intimate, reciprocal relationships (e.g. through close friendships or marriage) and willingly make the sacrifices and compromises that such relationships require. If people cannot form these intimate relationships – perhaps because of their own needs – a sense of isolation may result; arousing feelings of darkness and angst.

7. Care: generativity vs. stagnation (middle adulthood, 25–64, or 40–64 years)

Existential Question: Can I Make My Life Count?

Generativity is the concern of guiding the next generation. Socially-valued work and disciplines are expressions of generativity. The adult stage of generativity has broad application to family, relationships, work, and society. "Generativity, then is primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation... the concept is meant to include... productivity and creativity." During middle age the primary developmental task is one of contributing to society and helping to guide future generations. When a person makes a contribution during this period, perhaps by raising a family or working toward the betterment of society, a sense of generativity, productivity, and accomplishment results. In contrast, a person who is self-centered and unable or unwilling to help society move forward develops a feeling of stagnation: dissatisfaction with the relative lack of productivity.

- Central tasks of middle adulthood
 - Express love through more than sexual contacts.

- Maintain healthy life patterns.
- Develop a sense of unity with mate.
- Help growing and grown children to be responsible adults.
- Relinquish central role in lives of grown children.
- Accept children's mates and friends.
- Create a comfortable home. .
- Be proud of accomplishments of self and mate/spouse.
- Reverse roles with aging parents. .
- Achieve mature, civic and social responsibility.
- Adjust to physical changes of middle age. .
- Use leisure time creatively.

8. Wisdom: ego integrity vs. despair (late adulthood, 65 – death)

Existential Question: Is it OK to Have Been Me?

As we grow older and become senior citizens we tend to slow down our productivity and explore life as a retired person. It is during this time that we contemplate our accomplishments and are able to develop integrity if we see ourselves as leading a successful life. If we see our life as unproductive, or feel that we did not accomplish our life goals, we become dissatisfied with life and develop despair, often leading to depression and hopelessness.

The final developmental task is retrospection: people look back on their lives and accomplishments. They develop feelings of contentment and integrity if they believe that they have led a happy, productive life. They may instead develop a sense of despair if they look back on a life of disappointments and unachieved goals.

This stage can occur out of the sequence when an individual feels they are near the end of their life (such as when receiving a terminal disease diagnosis).