

Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

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Erik Erikson was an ego psychologist who developed one of the most popular and influential theories of development. While his theory was impacted by psychoanalyst [Sigmund Freud's work](#), Erikson's theory centered on psychosocial development rather than [psychosexual development](#).

The stages that make up his theory are as follows:¹

- **Stage 1:** [Trust vs. Mistrust](#)
- **Stage 2:** [Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt](#)
- **Stage 3:** [Initiative vs. Guilt](#)
- **Stage 4:** [Industry vs. Inferiority](#)
- **Stage 5:** [Identity vs. Confusion](#)
- **Stage 6:** [Intimacy vs. Isolation](#)
- **Stage 7:** [Generativity vs. Stagnation](#)
- **Stage 8:** [Integrity vs. Despair](#)

Let's take a closer look at the background and different stages that make up Erikson's psychosocial theory.

Overview

So what exactly did Erikson's theory of psychosocial development entail? [Much like Sigmund Freud](#), Erikson believed that personality developed in a series of stages.

Unlike Freud's theory of psychosexual stages, however, Erikson's theory described the impact of social experience across the whole lifespan. Erikson was interested in how social interaction and relationships played a role in the development and growth of human beings.

Each stage in Erikson's theory builds on the preceding stages and paves the way for following periods of development. In each stage, Erikson believed people experience a [conflict](#) that serves as a turning point in development.²

In Erikson's view, these conflicts are centered on either developing a psychological quality or failing to develop that quality. During these times, the potential for personal growth is high but so is the potential for failure. If people successfully deal with the conflict, they emerge from the stage with psychological strengths that will serve them well for the rest of their lives.³ If they fail to deal effectively with these conflicts, they may not develop the essential skills needed for a strong sense of self.

Mastery Leads to Ego Strength

Erikson also believed that a sense of competence motivates behaviors and actions. Each stage in Erikson's theory is concerned with becoming competent in an area of life.

If the stage is handled well, the person will feel a sense of mastery, which is sometimes referred to as ego strength or ego quality. If the stage is managed poorly, the person will emerge with a sense of inadequacy in that aspect of development.

| Psychosocial Stages: A Summary Chart | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| Age | Conflict | Important Events | Outcome |
| Infancy (birth to 18 months) | Trust vs. Mistrust | Feeding | Hope |
| Early Childhood (2) | Autonomy vs. Shame | Toilet Training | Will |
| Preschool (3 to 5 years) | Initiative vs. Guilt | Exploration | Purpose |
| School Age (6 to 11 years) | Industry vs. Inferiority | School | Confidence |
| Adolescence (12 to 18 years) | Identity vs. Role | Social Relationship | Fidelity |
| Young Adulthood (19 to 40 years) | Intimacy vs. Isolation | Relationships | Love |
| Middle Adulthood (40 to 65 years) | Generativity vs. Stagnation | Work and Parenthood | Care |
| Maturity (65 to death) | Ego Integrity vs. Despair | Reflection on Life | Wisdom |

A brief summary of the eight stages

Stage 1: Trust vs. Mistrust

The first stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development occurs between birth and 1 year of age and is the most fundamental stage in life. Because an infant is utterly dependent, developing trust is based on the dependability and quality of the child's caregivers.

At this point in development, the child is utterly dependent upon adult caregivers for everything they need to survive including food, love, warmth, safety, and nurturing. If a caregiver fails to provide adequate care and love, the child will come to feel that they cannot trust or depend upon the adults in their life.

Outcomes

If a child successfully develops trust, the child will feel safe and secure in the world.² Caregivers who are inconsistent, emotionally unavailable, or rejecting contribute to feelings of mistrust in the children under their care. Failure to develop trust will result in fear and a belief that the world is inconsistent and unpredictable.

During the first stage of psychosocial development, children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide reliability, care, and affection. A lack of this will lead to mistrust.

No child is going to develop a sense of 100% trust or 100% doubt. Erikson believed that successful development was all about striking a balance between the two opposing sides. When this happens, children acquire hope, which Erikson described as an openness to experience tempered by some wariness that danger may be present.

Subsequent work by researchers including John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth demonstrated the importance of trust in forming [healthy attachments](#) during childhood and adulthood.

Stage 2: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

The second stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development takes place during early childhood and is focused on children developing a greater sense of personal control.

The Role of Independence

At this point in development, children are just starting to gain a little independence. They are starting to perform basic actions on their own and

making simple decisions about what they prefer. By allowing kids to make choices and gain control, parents and caregivers can help children develop a sense of autonomy.²

Potty Training

The essential theme of this stage is that children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence. Potty training plays an important role in helping children develop this sense of autonomy.

Like Freud, Erikson believed that toilet training was a vital part of this process. However, Erikson's reasoning was quite different than that of Freud's. Erikson believed that learning to control one's bodily functions leads to a feeling of control and a sense of independence. Other important events include gaining more control over food choices, toy preferences, and clothing selection.

Outcomes

Children who struggle and who are shamed for their accidents may be left without a sense of personal control. Success during this stage of psychosocial development leads to feelings of autonomy; failure results in feelings of shame and doubt.

Finding Balance

Children who successfully complete this stage feel secure and confident, while those who do not are left with a sense of inadequacy and self-doubt. Erikson believed that achieving a balance between autonomy and shame and doubt would lead to will, which is the belief that children can act with intention, within reason and limits.

Stage 3: Initiative vs. Guilt

The third stage of psychosocial development takes place during the preschool years. At this point in psychosocial development, children begin to assert their power and control over the world through directing play and other social interactions.

Children who are successful at this stage feel capable and able to lead others. Those who fail to acquire these skills are left with a sense of guilt, self-doubt, and lack of initiative.

Outcomes

The major theme of the third stage of psychosocial development is that children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment.

Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose. Children who try to exert too much power experience disapproval, resulting in a sense of guilt.

When an ideal balance of individual initiative and a willingness to work with others is achieved, the ego quality known as purpose emerges.

Stage 4: Industry vs. Inferiority

The fourth psychosocial stage takes place during the early school years from approximately ages 5 to 11. Through social interactions, children begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments and abilities.

Children need to cope with new social and academic demands. Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority.

Outcomes

Children who are encouraged and commended by parents and teachers develop a feeling of competence and belief in their skills. Those who receive little or no encouragement from parents, teachers, or peers will doubt their abilities to be successful.

Successfully finding a balance at this stage of psychosocial development leads to the strength known as competence, in which children develop a belief in their abilities to handle the tasks set before them.

Stage 5: Identity vs. Confusion

The fifth psychosocial stage takes place during the often turbulent teenage years. This stage plays an essential role in developing a sense of personal identity which will continue to influence behavior and development for the rest of a person's life. Teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself, while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self.

During adolescence, children explore their independence and develop a sense of self.² Those who receive proper encouragement and reinforcement through personal exploration will emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self and feelings of independence and control. Those who remain unsure of their beliefs and desires will feel insecure and confused about themselves and the future.

What Is Identity?

When psychologists talk about identity, they are referring to all of the beliefs, ideals, and values that help shape and guide a person's behavior. Completing this stage successfully leads to fidelity, which Erikson described as an ability to live by society's standards and expectations.

While Erikson believed that each stage of psychosocial development was important, he placed a particular emphasis on the development of ego identity. Ego identity is the [conscious](#) sense of self that we develop through social interaction and becomes a central focus during the identity versus confusion stage of psychosocial development.

According to Erikson, our ego identity constantly changes due to new experiences and information we acquire in our daily interactions with others. As we have new experiences, we also take on challenges that can help or hinder the development of identity.

Why Identity Is Important

Our personal identity gives each of us an integrated and cohesive sense of self that endures through our lives. Our sense of personal identity is shaped by our experiences and interactions with others, and it is this identity that helps guide our actions, beliefs, and behaviors as we age.

Stage 6: Intimacy vs. Isolation

Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation. This stage covers the period of early adulthood when people are exploring personal relationships.²

Erikson believed it was vital that people develop close, committed relationships with other people. Those who are successful at this step will form relationships that are enduring and secure.

Building On Earlier Stages

Remember that each step builds on skills learned in previous steps. Erikson believed that a strong [sense of personal identity](#) was important for developing intimate relationships. Studies have demonstrated that those with a poor sense of self tend to have less committed relationships and are more likely to struggle with emotional isolation, [loneliness](#), and depression.

Successful resolution of this stage results in the virtue known as love. It is marked by the ability to form lasting, meaningful relationships with other people.

Stage 7: Generativity vs. Stagnation

Adults need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often by having children or creating a positive change that benefits other people.

Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world.

During adulthood, we continue to build our lives, focusing on our career and family. Those who are successful during this phase will feel that they are contributing to the world by being active in their home and community.² Those who fail to attain this skill will feel unproductive and uninvolved in the world.

Care is the virtue achieved when this stage is handled successfully. Being proud of your accomplishments, watching your children grow into adults, and developing a sense of unity with your life partner are important accomplishments of this stage.

Stage 8: Integrity vs. Despair

The final psychosocial stage occurs during old age and is focused on reflecting back on life.² At this point in development, people look back on the events of their lives and determine if they are happy with the life that they lived or if they regret the things they did or didn't do.

Erikson's theory differed from many others because it addressed development throughout the entire lifespan, including old age. Older adults need to look back on life and feel a sense of fulfillment. Success at this stage leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair.

At this stage, people reflect back on the events of their lives and take stock. Those who look back on a life they feel was well-lived will feel satisfied and ready to face the end of their lives with a sense of peace. Those who look back and only feel regret will instead feel fearful that their lives will end without accomplishing the things they feel they should have.

Outcomes

Those who are unsuccessful during this stage will feel that their life has been wasted and may experience many regrets. The person will be left with feelings of bitterness and despair.

Those who feel proud of their accomplishments will feel a sense of integrity. Successfully completing this phase means looking back with few regrets and a general feeling of satisfaction. These individuals will attain wisdom, even when confronting death.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Erikson's Theory

Erikson's theory also has its limitations and attracts valid criticisms. What kinds of experiences are necessary to successfully complete each stage? How does a person move from one stage to the next?

Criticism

One major weakness of psychosocial theory is that the exact mechanisms for resolving conflicts and moving from one stage to the next are not well described or developed. The theory fails to detail exactly what type of experiences are necessary at each stage in order to successfully resolve the conflicts and move to the next stage.

One of the strengths of psychosocial theory is that it provides a broad framework from which to view development throughout the entire lifespan. It also allows us to emphasize the social nature of human beings and the important influence that social relationships have on development.

Researchers have found evidence supporting Erikson's ideas about identity and have further identified different sub-stages of identity formation.⁴ Some research also suggests that people who form strong personal identities during adolescence are better capable of forming intimate relationships during early adulthood. Other research suggests, however, that identity formation and development continues well into adulthood.⁵