

# Stages of Psychosocial Development

By Erik Erickson

Erikson maintained that personality develops in a predetermined order through eight stages of psychosocial development, from infancy to adulthood. During each stage, the person experiences a psychosocial crisis which could have a positive or negative outcome for personality development. For Erikson (1958, 1963), these crises are of a psychosocial nature because they involve psychological needs of the individual (i.e., psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (i.e., social).

According to the theory, successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and the acquisition of basic virtues. Basic virtues are characteristic strengths which the ego can use to resolve subsequent crises. Failure to successfully complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and therefore an unhealthier personality and sense of self. These stages, however, can be resolved successfully later.

Stage	Psychosocial Crisis	Basic Virtue	Age
1.	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope	0 - 1½
2.	Autonomy vs. Shame	Will	1½ - 3
3.	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose	3 - 5
4.	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competency	5 - 12
5.	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Fidelity	12 - 18
6.	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love	18 - 40
7.	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care	40 - 65
8.	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom	65+

## Critical Evaluation

By extending the notion of personality development across the lifespan, Erikson outlines a more realistic perspective of personality development (McAdams, 2001). Based on Erikson's ideas, psychology has reconceptualized the way the later periods of life are viewed. Middle and late adulthood are no longer viewed as irrelevant, because of Erikson, they are now considered active and significant times of personal growth. Erikson's theory has good face validity. Many people find that they can relate to his theories about various stages of the life cycle through their own experiences. However, Erikson is rather vague about the causes of development. What kinds of experiences must people have to successfully resolve various psychosocial conflicts and move from one stage to another? The theory does not have a universal mechanism for crisis resolution.

Indeed, Erikson (1964) acknowledges his theory is more a descriptive overview of human social and emotional development that does not adequately explain how or why this development occurs. For example, Erikson does not explicitly explain how the outcome of one psychosocial stage influences personality at a later stage. However, Erikson stressed his work was a ‘tool to think with rather than a factual analysis.’ Its purpose then is to provide a framework within which development can be considered rather than testable theory. One of the strengths of Erikson's theory is its ability to tie together important psychosocial development across the entire lifespan. Although [support](#) for Erikson's stages of personality development exists (McAdams, 1999), [critics](#) of his theory provide evidence suggesting a lack of discrete stages of personality development (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

Psychosocial theory does not focus on the obvious physical changes that occur as children grow up, but rather on the socioemotional factors that influence an individual's psychological growth.<sup>2</sup> At each point in development, people cope with a psychosocial crisis. In order to resolve this crisis, children and adults are faced with mastering the developmental task primarily to that stage. If this skill is successfully achieved, it leads to an ability that contributes to lifelong well-being. For example, achieving [trust is the primary task](#) of the very first stage of development.<sup>3</sup> It is an ability that contributes to emotional health throughout life during both childhood and adulthood. Failing to master these critical tasks, however, can result in social and emotional struggles that last a lifetime.

## 1. Trust vs. Mistrust

Trust vs. mistrust is the first stage in Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This stage begins at birth continues to approximately 18 months of age. During this stage, the infant is uncertain about the world in which they live and looks towards their primary caregiver for stability and consistency of care. If the care the infant receives is consistent, predictable, and reliable, they will develop a sense of trust which will carry with them to other relationships, and they will be able to feel secure even when threatened.

If these needs are not consistently met, mistrust, suspicion, and anxiety may develop. If the care has been inconsistent, unpredictable and unreliable, then the infant may develop a sense of mistrust, suspicion, and anxiety. In this situation the infant will not have confidence in the world around them or in their abilities to influence events.

### Success and Failure In Stage One

Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **hope**. By developing a sense of trust, the infant can have hope that as new crises arise, there is a real possibility that other people will be there as a source of support. Failing to acquire the virtue of hope will lead to the development of fear. This infant will carry the basic sense of mistrust with them to other relationships.

It may result in anxiety, heightened insecurities, and an over feeling of mistrust in the world around them. Consistent with Erikson's views on the importance of trust, research by [Bowlby](#) and [Ainsworth](#) has outlined how the quality of the early experience of [attachment](#) can affect relationships with others in later life.

## 2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

Autonomy versus shame and doubt is the second stage of Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. This stage occurs between the ages of 18 months to approximately 3 years. According to Erikson, children at this stage are focused on developing a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence.

Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **will**. If children in this stage are encouraged and supported in their increased independence, they become more confident and secure in their own ability to survive in the world. If children are criticized, overly controlled, or not given the opportunity to assert themselves, they begin to feel inadequate in their ability to survive, and may then become overly dependent upon others, [lack self-esteem](#), and feel a sense of shame or doubt in their abilities.

### What Happens During This Stage?

The child is developing physically and becoming more mobile, and discovering that he or she has many skills and abilities, such as putting on clothes and shoes, playing with toys, etc. Such skills illustrate the child's growing sense of independence and autonomy. For example, during this stage children begin to assert their independence, by walking away from their mother, picking which toy to play with, and making choices about what they like to wear, to eat, etc.

### What Can Parents Do to Encourage a Sense of Control?

Erikson states it is critical that parents allow their children to explore the limits of their abilities within an encouraging environment which is tolerant of failure. For example, rather than put on a child's clothes a supportive parent should have the patience to allow the child to try until they succeed or ask for assistance. So, the parents need to encourage the child to become more independent while at the same time protecting the child so that constant failure is avoided.

A delicate balance is required from the parent. They must try not to do everything for the child, but if the child fails at a particular task they must not criticize the child for failures and accidents (particularly when toilet training). The aim has to be "self control without a loss of self-esteem" (Gross, 1992).

## 3. Initiative vs. Guilt

Initiative versus guilt is the third stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. During the initiative versus guilt stage, children assert themselves more frequently through directing play and other social interaction. These are particularly lively, rapid-developing years in a child's life. According to Bee (1992), it is a "time of vigor of action and of behaviors that the parents may see as aggressive." During this period the primary feature involves the child regularly interacting with other children at school. Central to this stage is play, as it provides children with the opportunity to explore their interpersonal skills through initiating activities.

Children begin to plan activities, make up games, and initiate activities with others. If given this opportunity, children develop a sense of initiative and feel secure in their ability to lead others

and make decisions. Conversely, if this tendency is squelched, either through criticism or control, children develop a sense of guilt. The child will often overstep the mark in his forcefulness, and the danger is that the parents will tend to punish the child and restrict his initiatives too much. It is at this stage that the child will begin to ask many questions as his thirst for knowledge grows. If the parents treat the child's questions as trivial, a nuisance or embarrassing or other aspects of their behavior as threatening then the child may have feelings of guilt for "being a nuisance".

Too much guilt can make the child slow to interact with others and may inhibit their creativity. Some guilt is, of course, necessary; otherwise the child would not know how to exercise self-control or have a conscience. A healthy balance between initiative and guilt is important. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **purpose**, while failure results in a sense of guilt.

## 4. Industry vs. Inferiority

Erikson's fourth psychosocial crisis, involving industry (competence) vs. Inferiority occurs during childhood between the ages of five and twelve. Children are at the stage where they will be learning to read and write, to do sums, to do things on their own. Teachers begin to take an important role in the child's life as they teach the child specific skills. It is at this stage that the child's peer group will gain greater significance and will become a major source of the child's self-esteem. The child now feels the need to win approval by demonstrating specific competencies that are valued by society and begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

If children are encouraged and reinforced for their initiative, they begin to feel industrious (competent) and feel confident in their ability to achieve goals. If this initiative is not encouraged, if it is restricted by parents or teacher, then the child begins to feel inferior, doubting his own abilities and therefore may not reach his or her potential. If the child cannot develop the specific skills they feel society is demanding (e.g., being athletic) then they may develop a sense of Inferiority. Some failure may be necessary so that the child can develop some modesty. Again, a balance between competence and modesty is necessary. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **competence**.

## The Social World Expands

School and social interaction play an important role during this time of a child's life.<sup>1</sup> A child's social world expands considerably as they enter school and gain new friendships with peers. Through social interactions, children begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments and abilities. During the earlier stages, a child's interactions centered primarily on caregivers, family members, and others in their immediate household. As the school years begin, the realm of social influence increases dramatically.

Friends and classmates play a role in how children progress through the industry versus inferiority stage. Through proficiency at play and schoolwork, children are able to develop a sense of competence and pride in their abilities. By feeling competent and capable, children are able to also form a strong self-concept. During social interactions with peers, some children may discover that their abilities are better than those of their friends or that their talents are highly

prized by others.<sup>4</sup> This can lead to feelings of confidence. In other cases, kids may discover that they are not quite as capable as the other kids, which can result in feelings of inadequacy.

## **Schoolwork Helps Build Competency and Confidence**

At earlier stages of development, children were largely able to engage in activities for fun and to receive praise and attention. Once school begins, actual performance and skill are evaluated. Grades and feedback from educators encourage kids to pay more attention to the actual quality of their work. During the industry versus inferiority stage, children become capable of performing increasingly complex tasks. As a result, they strive to master new skills. Children who are encouraged and commended by parents and teachers develop a feeling of competence and belief in their abilities. Those who receive little or no encouragement from parents, teachers, or peers will doubt their ability to be successful.

Children who struggle to develop this sense of competence may emerge from this stage with feelings of failure and inferiority. This can set the stage for later problems in development. People who don't feel competent in their ability to succeed may be less likely to try new things and more likely to assume that their efforts will not measure up under scrutiny.

## **Events at This Stage Can Build or Undermine Self-Confidence**

According to Erikson, this stage is vital in developing [self-confidence](#).<sup>5</sup> During school and other social activities, children receive praise and attention for performing various tasks such as reading, writing, drawing, and [solving problems](#). Kids who do well in school are more likely to develop a sense of competence and confidence. They feel good about themselves and their ability to succeed. Children who struggle with schoolwork may have a harder time developing these feelings of sureness. Instead, they may be left with feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.

## **How Can Parents and Teachers Foster Success During the Industry vs. Inferiority Stage?**

At this stage, it is important for both parents and teachers to offer support and encouragement. However, adults should be careful not to equate achievement with acceptance and love. Unconditional love and support from adults can help all children through this stage, but particularly those who may struggle with feelings of inferiority.

Children who are overpraised, on the other hand, might develop a sense of arrogance. Clearly, balance plays a major role at this point in development. Parents can help kids develop a sense of realistic competence by avoiding [excessive praise](#) and rewards, encouraging efforts rather than outcome, and helping kids develop a growth [mindset](#). Even if children struggle in some areas of school, encouraging kids in areas in which they excel can help foster feelings of competence and achievement.<sup>6</sup>

## Example

Perhaps the best way to visualize how the industry vs inferiority stage might impact a child is to look at an example. Imagine two children in the same 4<sup>th</sup>-grade class. Olivia finds science lessons difficult, but her parents are willing to help her each night with her homework. She also asks the teacher for help and starts to receive encouragement and praise for her efforts. Jack also struggles with science, but his parents are uninterested in assisting him with his nightly homework. He feels bad about the poor grades he receives on his science assignments but is not sure what to do about the situation.

His teacher is critical of his work but does not offer any extra assistance or advice. Eventually, Jack just gives up, and his grades become even worse. While both children struggled with this aspect of school, Olivia received the support and encouragement she needed to overcome these difficulties and still build a sense of mastery. Jack, however, lacked the social and emotional encouragement he needed. In this area, Olivia will likely develop a sense of industry where Jack will be left with feelings of inferiority.

## 5. Identity vs. Role Confusion

The fifth stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is identity vs. role confusion, and it occurs during adolescence, from about 12-18 years. During this stage, adolescents search for a sense of self and personal identity, through an intense exploration of personal values, beliefs, and goals. During adolescence, the transition from childhood to adulthood is most important. Children are becoming more independent, and begin to look at the future in terms of career, relationships, families, housing, etc. The individual wants to belong to a society and fit in.

The adolescent mind is essentially a mind or moratorium, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult (Erikson, 1963, p. 245). This is a major stage of development where the child has to learn the [roles](#) he will occupy as an adult. It is during this stage that the adolescent will re-examine his identity and try to find out exactly who he or she is. Erikson suggests that two identities are involved: the sexual and the occupational. According to Bee (1992), what should happen at the end of this stage is “a reintegrated sense of self, of what one wants to do or be, and of one’s appropriate sex role”. During this stage the body image of the adolescent changes. Erikson claims that the adolescent may feel uncomfortable about their body for a while until they can adapt and “grow into” the changes. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **fidelity**.

Fidelity involves being able to commit one's self to others on the basis of accepting others, even when there may be ideological differences. During this period, they explore possibilities and begin to form their own identity based upon the outcome of their explorations. Failure to establish a sense of identity within society ("I don't know what I want to be when I grow up") can lead to role confusion. Role confusion involves the individual not being sure about themselves or their place in society. In response to role confusion or **identity crisis**, an adolescent may begin to experiment with different lifestyles (e.g., work, education or political

activities). Also pressuring someone into an identity can result in rebellion in the form of establishing a negative identity, and in addition to this feeling of unhappiness.

## **6. Intimacy vs. Isolation**

Intimacy versus isolation is the sixth stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This stage takes place during young adulthood between the ages of approximately 18 to 40 yrs. During this stage, the major conflict centers on forming intimate, loving relationships with other people. During this stage, we begin to share ourselves more intimately with others.

We explore relationships leading toward longer-term commitments with someone other than a family member. Successful completion of this stage can result in happy relationships and a sense of commitment, safety, and care within a relationship. Avoiding intimacy, fearing commitment and relationships can lead to isolation, loneliness, and sometimes depression. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **love**.

## **7. Generativity vs. Stagnation**

Generativity versus stagnation is the seventh of eight stages of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This stage takes place during middle adulthood (ages 40 to 65 yrs). Psychologically, generativity refers to "making your mark" on the world through creating or nurturing things that will outlast an individual. During middle age individuals experience a need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often having mentees or creating positive changes that will benefit other people.

We give back to society through raising our children, being productive at work, and becoming involved in community activities and organizations. Through generativity we develop a sense of being a part of the bigger picture. Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world. By failing to find a way to contribute, we become stagnant and feel unproductive. These individuals may feel disconnected or uninvolved with their community and with society as a whole. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **care**.

## **8. Ego Integrity vs. Despair**

Ego integrity versus despair is the eighth and final stage of Erik Erikson's stage theory of psychosocial development. This stage begins at approximately age 65 and ends at death. It is during this time that we contemplate our accomplishments and can develop integrity if we see ourselves as leading a successful life. Individuals who reflect on their life and regret not achieving their goals will experience feelings of bitterness and despair. Erikson described ego integrity as "the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be" (1950, p. 268) and later as "a sense of coherence and wholeness" (1982, p. 65). As we grow older (65+ yrs) and become senior citizens, we tend to slow down our productivity and explore life as a retired person.

Erik Erikson believed if we see our lives as unproductive, feel guilt about our past, or feel that we did not accomplish our life goals, we become dissatisfied with life and develop despair, often

leading to depression and hopelessness. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **wisdom**. Wisdom enables a person to look back on their life with a sense of closure and completeness, and also accept death without fear. Wise people are not characterized by a continuous state of ego integrity, but they experience both ego integrity and despair. Thus, late life is characterized by both integrity and despair as alternating states that need to be balanced.