Erik Erikson's Stages Psychosocial Development

Our personality traits come in opposites. We think of ourselves as optimistic or pessimistic, independent or dependent, emotional or unemotional, adventurous or cautious, leader or follower, aggressive or passive. Many of these are inborn temperament traits, but other characteristics, such as feeling either competent or inferior, appear to be learned, based on the challenges and support we receive in growing up.

The man who did a great deal to explore this concept is Erik Erikson. Although he was influenced by Freud, he believed that the ego exists from birth and that behavior is not totally defensive. Based in part on his study of Sioux Indians on a reservation, Erikson became aware of the massive influence of culture on behavior and placed more emphasis on the external world, such as depression and wars. He felt the course of development is determined by the interaction of the body (genetic biological programming), mind (psychological), and cultural (ethos) influences. His developmental stages were based on his philosophy that: (1) the world gets bigger as we go along and (2) failure is cumulative.

He organized life into eight stages that extend from birth to death (many developmental theories only cover childhood). Then, since adulthood covers a span of many years, Erikson divided the stages of adulthood into the experiences of young adults, middle aged adults and older adults. While the actual ages may vary considerably from one stage to another, the ages seem to be appropriate for the majority of people.

1. Infancy: Birth to 18 Months
Ego Development Outcome: Trust vs. Mistrust Basic strength: Drive and Hope
Erikson also referred to infancy as the Oral Sensory Stage (as anyone might who watches a baby put everything in her mouth) where the major emphasis is on the mother's positive and loving care for the child, with a big emphasis on visual contact and touch. If we pass successfully through this period of life, we will learn to trust that life is basically okay and have basic confidence in the future. If we fail to experience trust and are constantly frustrated because our needs are not met, we may end up with a deep-seated feeling of worthlessness and a mistrust of the world in general.

2. Early Childhood: 18 Months to 3 Years
Ego Development Outcome: Autonomy vs. Shame Basic Strengths: Self-control, Courage, and Will
During this stage we learn to master skills for ourselves. Not only do we learn to walk, talk and feed ourselves, we are learning finer motor development as well as the much appreciated toilet training. Here we have the opportunity to build self-esteem and autonomy as we gain more control over our bodies and acquire new skills, learning right from wrong. And one of our skills during the "Terrible Two's" is our ability to use the powerful word "NO!" It may be pain for parents, but it develops important skills of the will.

3. Play Age: 3 to 5 Years
Ego Development Outcome: Initiative vs. Guilt Basic Strength: Purpose During this period we experience a desire to copy the adults around us and take initiative in
creating play situations. We make up stories with Barbie's and Ken's, toy phones and miniature cars, playing out roles in a trial universe, experimenting with the blueprint for what we believe it means to be an adult. We also begin to use that wonderful word for exploring the world — "WHY?"

While Erikson was influenced by Freud, he downplays biological sexuality in favor of the psychosocial features of conflict between child and parents. Nevertheless, he said that at this stage we usually become involved in the classic "Oedipal struggle" and resolve this struggle through "social role identification." If we're frustrated over natural desires and goals, we may easily experience guilt.

4. School Age: 6 to 12 Years
Ego Development Outcome: Industry vs. Inferiority Basic Strengths: Method and Competence  During this stage, often called the Latency, we are capable of learning, creating and accomplishing numerous new skills and knowledge, thus developing a sense of industry. This is also a very social stage of development and if we experience unresolved feelings of inadequacy and inferiority among our peers, we can have serious problems in terms of competence and self-esteem. As the world expands a bit, our most significant relationship is with the school and neighborhood. Parents are no longer the complete authorities they once were, although they are still important.

5. Adolescence: 12 to 18 Years
Ego Development Outcome: Identity vs. Role Confusion Basic Strengths: Devotion and Fidelity  Up to this stage, according to Erikson, development mostly depends upon what is done to us. From here on out, development depends primarily upon what we do. And while adolescence is a stage at which we are neither a child nor an adult, life is definitely getting more complex as we attempt to find our own identity, struggle with social interactions, and grapple with moral issues. Our task is to discover who we are as individuals separate from our family of origin and as members of a wider society. Unfortunately for those around us, in this process many of us go into a period of withdrawing from responsibilities, which Erikson called a "moratorium." And if we are unsuccessful in navigating this stage, we will experience role confusion and upheaval.

A significant task for us is to establish a philosophy of life and in this process we tend to think in terms of ideals, which are conflict free, rather than reality, which is not. The problem is that we don't have much experience and find it easy to substitute ideals for experience. However, we can also develop strong devotion to friends and causes. It is no surprise that our most significant relationships are with peer groups.

6. Young Adulthood: 18 to 35
Ego Development Outcome: Intimacy and Solidarity vs. Isolation Basic Strengths: Affiliation and Love  In the initial stage of being an adult we seek one or more companions and love. As we try to find mutually satisfying relationships, primarily through marriage and friends, we generally also begin to start a family,
though this age has been pushed back for many couples who today don't start their families until their late thirties. If negotiating this stage is successful, we can experience intimacy on a deep level.

If we're not successful, isolation and distance from others may occur. And when we don't find it easy to create satisfying relationships, our world can begin to shrink as, in defense, we can feel superior to others.

7. Middle Adulthood: 35 to 55 or 65  
Ego Development Outcome: Generativity vs. Self absorption or Stagnation  
Basic Strengths: Production and Care  
Now work is most crucial. Erikson observed that middle-age is when we tend to be occupied with creative and meaningful work and with issues surrounding our family. Also, middle adulthood is when we can expect to "be in charge," the role we've longer envied.

The significant task is to perpetuate culture and transmit values of the culture through the family (taming the kids) and working to establish a stable environment. Strength comes through care of others and production of something that contributes to the betterment of society, which Erikson calls generativity, so when we're in this stage we often fear inactivity and meaningless.

As our children leave home, or our relationships or goals change, we may be faced with major life changes — the mid-life crisis — and struggle with finding new meanings and purposes. If we don't get through this stage successfully, we can become self-absorbed and stagnate.

8. Late Adulthood: 55 or 65 to Death  
Ego Development Outcome: Integrity vs. Despair  
Basic Strengths: Wisdom  
Erikson felt that much of life is preparing for the middle adulthood stage and the last stage is recovering from it. Perhaps that is because as older adults we can often look back on our lives with happiness and are content, feeling fulfilled with a deep sense that life has meaning and we've made a contribution to life, a feeling Erikson calls integrity. Our strength comes from a wisdom that the world is very large and we now have a detached concern for the whole of life, accepting death as the completion of life.

On the other hand, some adults may reach this stage and despair at their experiences and perceived failures. They may fear death as they struggle to find a purpose to their lives, wondering "Was the trip worth it?" Alternatively, they may feel they have all the answers (not unlike going back to adolescence) and end with a strong dogmatism that only their view has been correct.
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Hope: Trust vs. Mistrust (Infants, 0 to 1 year)
Psychosocial Crisis: Trust vs. Mistrust
Virtue: Hope

Will: Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt (Toddlers, 2 to 3 years)
Psychosocial Crisis: Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt
Main Question: "Can I do things myself or must I always rely on others?"
Virtue: Will

Purpose: Initiative vs. Guilt (Preschool, 4 to 6 years)
Psychosocial Crisis: Initiative vs. Guilt
Main Question: "Am I good or am I bad?"
Virtue: Purpose
Related Elements in Society: ideal prototypes/roles

Competence: Industry vs. Inferiority (Childhood, 7 to 11 years)
Psychosocial Crisis: Industry vs. Inferiority
Main Question: "Am I successful or worthless?"
Virtue: Competence
Related Elements in Society: division of labour

Fidelity: Identity vs. Role Confusion (Adolescents, 12 to 19 years)
Psychosocial Crisis: Identity vs. Role Confusion
Main Question: "Who am I and where am I going?"
Ego quality: Fidelity
Related Elements in Society: ideology

Love: Intimacy vs. Isolation (Young Adults, 20 to 34 years)
Main Question: "Am I loved and wanted?" or "Shall I share my life with someone or live alone?"
Virtue: Love
Related Elements in Society: patterns of cooperation (often marriage)

Care: Generativity vs. Stagnation (Middle Adulthood, 35 to 65 years)
Psychosocial Crisis: Generativity vs. Stagnation
Main Question: "Will I produce something of real value?"
Virtue: Care
Related Elements in Society: parenting, educating, or other productive social involvement

Wisdom: Ego Integrity vs. Despair (Seniors, 65 years onwards)
Psychosocial Crisis: Ego Integrity vs. Despair
Main Question: "Have I lived a full life?"
Virtue: Wisdom