

Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

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Erik Erikson (1902–1994) proposed a lifespan model of development, emphasizing how social relationships shape our sense of self. He suggested we pass through eight stages, each marked by a central conflict, or psychosocial crisis, that must be resolved for healthy personality growth.

Key Takeaways

- **Personality Develops Over the Lifespan:** Erikson saw development as continuing from infancy through old age.
- **Central Conflicts:** Each of the eight stages involves a core conflict, such as Trust vs. Mistrust or Identity vs. Role Confusion.
- **Basic Virtues:** Successfully resolving each stage leads to the development of a psychological strength or “virtue” (e.g., hope, will, fidelity).
- **Impact of Failure:** If a conflict remains unresolved, it can negatively affect future stages and overall well-being, though people can often resolve these issues later with appropriate support.

Erikson's Psychosocial Stages

Stage	Basic Conflict	Virtue	Description
Infancy 0–1 year	Trust vs. mistrust	Hope	Trust (or mistrust) that basic needs, such as nourishment and affection, will be met
Early childhood 1–3 years	Autonomy vs. shame/doubt	Will	Develop a sense of independence in many tasks
Play age 3–6 years	Initiative vs. guilt	Purpose	Take initiative on some activities—may develop guilt when unsuccessful or boundaries overstepped
School age 7–11 years	Industry vs. inferiority	Competence	Develop self-confidence in abilities when competent or sense of inferiority when not
Adolescence 12–18 years	Identity vs. confusion	Fidelity	Experiment with and develop identity and roles
Early adulthood 19–29 years	Intimacy vs. isolation	Love	Establish intimacy and relationships with others
Middle age 30–64 years	Generativity vs. stagnation	Care	Contribute to society and be part of a family
Old age 65 onward	Integrity vs. despair	Wisdom	Assess and make sense of life and meaning of contributions

Erikson's theory outlines eight stages of psychosocial development, from infancy to adulthood. At each stage, individuals face a conflict, such as trust vs. mistrust, which shapes their personality. Successfully resolving these conflicts leads to virtues like hope and integrity, while failure can result in guilt or despair.

Stage 1. Trust vs. Mistrust (0–18 Months)

During infancy, children rely entirely on caregivers for support and consistency.

If their needs (food, comfort, affection) are consistently met, the infant typically develops a sense of **trust**, believing the world is safe and predictable.

Conversely, unpredictable or neglectful care leads to **mistrust** and anxiety.

- **Conflict:** Trust vs. Mistrust
- **Age Range:** Birth to about 18 months
- **Key Activity:** Feeding and consistent caregiving
- **Virtue Gained:** Hope
- **Possible Negative Outcome:** If unresolved, the infant may grow into an anxious child who views the world as unreliable.

Here's the conflict:

- **Trust:** If the caregiver is reliable, consistent, and nurturing, the child will develop a sense of trust, believing that the world is safe and that people are dependable and affectionate.

This sense of trust allows the child to feel secure even when threatened and extends into their other relationships, maintaining their sense of security amidst potential threats.

- **Mistrust:** Conversely, if the caregiver fails to provide consistent, adequate care and affection, the child may develop a sense of mistrust and insecurity.

This could lead to a belief in an inconsistent and unpredictable world, fostering a sense of mistrust, suspicion, and anxiety.

Under such circumstances, the child may lack confidence in their ability to influence events, viewing the world with apprehension.

Fostering Trust in Infants

Goal: Help infants develop a secure sense of trust in their caregivers.

- ✓ **Respond consistently to crying and needs** (feeding, comfort, affection).
- ✓ **Make eye contact and use soothing tones** to reinforce safety.
- ✓ **Establish predictable routines** to create a sense of security.
- ✓ **Engage in skin-to-skin contact** to strengthen attachment.
- ✓ **Encourage exploration** by providing a safe environment where infants can observe and interact with their surroundings.

Infant Feeding

Feeding is a critical activity during this stage. It's one of infants' first and most basic ways to learn whether they can trust the world around them.

It sets the stage for their perspective on the world as being either a safe, dependable place or a place where their needs may not be met.

Trust:

When the caregiver consistently responds to the child's hunger cues, providing nourishment sensitively and reliably, the child learns that their needs will be met.

This consistent, dependable care helps the child feel a sense of security and trust in the caregiver and their environment.

They understand that when they have a need, such as hunger, someone will be there to provide for that need.

Mistrust:

If the caregiver is neglectful, inconsistent, or insensitive in feeding, the child may experience discomfort, distress, and hunger.

These negative experiences can lead to a sense of mistrust in their environment and caregivers.

They may start to believe that their needs may not be met, creating anxiety and insecurity.

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 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 attachment experience can affect relationships with others in later life.

The balance between trust and mistrust allows the infant to learn that while there may be moments of discomfort or distress, they can rely on their caregiver to provide support.

This helps the infant to build resilience and the ability to cope with stress or adversity in the future.

Stage 2. Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt (18 Months–3 Years)

Toddlers begin exploring their environment and asserting independence in tasks like dressing themselves or choosing foods.

If caregivers encourage these efforts, children feel a sense of **autonomy** – confidence in their ability to handle challenges.

Overly critical or controlling caregivers can make the child doubt their abilities, leading to **shame and doubt**.

- **Conflict:** Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt
- **Age Range:** 18 months to ~3 years
- **Key Activity:** Learning self-care (e.g., toilet training, dressing)
- **Virtue Gained:** Will (the will to act independently)
- **Possible Negative Outcome:** Excessive shame or doubt may result in overdependence on others and low self-esteem.

Here's the conflict:

- **Autonomy:** If encouraged and supported in their increased independence, children will become more confident and secure in their ability to survive.

They will feel comfortable making decisions, explore their surroundings more freely, and have a sense of self-control. Achieving this autonomy helps them feel able and capable of leading their lives.

- **Shame and Doubt:** On the other hand, if children are overly controlled or criticized, they may begin to feel ashamed of their autonomy and doubt their abilities.

This can lead to a lack of confidence, fear of trying new things, and a sense of inadequacy about their self-control abilities.

What Happens During This Stage?

The child is developing physically and becoming more mobile, 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.

Promoting Autonomy in Toddlers

Goal: Encourage independence while providing a supportive environment.

- ✓ **Allow choices** (“Do you want the red or blue cup?”) to develop decision-making skills.
- ✓ **Encourage self-care activities** (dressing, eating, washing hands).
- ✓ **Avoid harsh punishment**; instead, use **gentle guidance and praise** for effort.
- ✓ **Let toddlers try new tasks** at their own pace, without rushing them.
- ✓ **Reassure them after mistakes** to normalize failure as part of learning.

Mini Script for Parents:

 Less effective: “You’re taking too long. Let me do it.”

 More effective: “You’re working so hard to put on your shoes! Keep trying, I’ll help if you need.” (This supports confidence without taking over the task.)

Toilet Training

This is when children start to exert their independence, taking control over their bodily functions, which can greatly influence their sense of autonomy or shame and doubt.

- **Autonomy:** When parents approach toilet training in a patient, supportive manner, allowing the child to learn at their own pace, the child may feel a sense of accomplishment and autonomy.

They understand they have control over their own bodies and can take responsibility for their actions.

This boosts their confidence, instilling a sense of autonomy and a belief in their ability to manage personal tasks.

- **Shame and Doubt:** Conversely, if the process is rushed, if there's too much pressure, or if parents respond with anger or disappointment to accidents, the child may feel shame and start doubting their abilities.

They may feel bad about their mistakes, and this can lead to feelings of shame, self-doubt, and a lack of confidence in their autonomy.

Success and Failure In Stage Two

Erikson states parents must allow their children to explore the limits of their abilities within an encouraging environment that is tolerant of failure.

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.

The infant develops a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence.

Suppose children are criticized, overly controlled, or not given the opportunity to assert themselves.

In that case, 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.

How Can Parents Encourage a Sense of Control?

Success leads to feelings of autonomy, and failure results in shame and doubt.

Erikson states it is critical that parents allow their children to explore the limits of their abilities within an encouraging environment that 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).

The balance between autonomy and shame and doubt allows the child to understand that while they can’t always control their environment, they can exercise control over their actions and decisions, thus developing self-confidence and resilience.

Stage 3. Initiative vs. Guilt (3–5 Years)

At this stage, children devise new games, imagine different roles, and learn to plan and execute activities.

Encouragement fosters **initiative**—a willingness to try new things.

Criticism or discouragement can produce **guilt**, making children feel they are a nuisance or that their ideas are unacceptable.

- **Conflict:** Initiative vs. Guilt
- **Age Range:** 3 to ~5 years
- **Key Activity:** Play, exploration, and asking “why”
- **Virtue Gained:** Purpose
- **Possible Negative Outcome:** Excessive guilt can stifle creativity and inhibit a child’s desire to assert themselves.

Here’s the conflict:

- **Initiative:** When caregivers encourage and support children to take the initiative, they can start planning activities, accomplish tasks, and face challenges.

The children will learn to take the initiative and assert control over their environment.

They can begin to think for themselves, formulate plans, and execute them, which helps foster a sense of purpose.

- **Guilt:** If caregivers discourage the pursuit of independent activities or dismiss or criticize their efforts, children may feel guilty about their desires and initiatives.

This could potentially lead to feelings of guilt, self-doubt, and lack of initiative.

What Happens During This Stage?

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 allows children to explore their interpersonal skills through initiating activities.

The child begins to assert control and power over their environment by planning activities, accomplishing tasks, and facing challenges.

Encouraging Initiative in Preschoolers

Goal: Help children feel confident in their ability to take initiative.

- ✓ **Create opportunities for pretend play** (e.g., role-playing different careers).
- ✓ **Support curiosity** by answering "why" questions with patience.
- ✓ **Give small leadership roles** (e.g., "Can you be my helper for setting the table?").
- ✓ **Praise effort and creativity** instead of focusing only on success.
- ✓ **Encourage problem-solving** by allowing children to find solutions before stepping in.

Mini Script for Parents:

 **Less effective:** "That's not how you do it."

 **More effective:** "That's an interesting way to build your blocks! Can you tell me about it?" (Encourages creative thinking rather than discouraging their efforts.)

Exploration

Here's why exploration is important:

- **Developing Initiative:** Exploration allows children to assert their power and control over their environment. Through exploration, children engage with their surroundings, ask questions, and discover new things.

This active engagement allows them to take the initiative and make independent choices, contributing to their autonomy and confidence.

- **Learning from Mistakes:** Exploration also means making mistakes, and these provide crucial learning opportunities. Even if a child's efforts lead to mistakes or failures, they learn to understand cause and effect and their role in influencing outcomes.
- **Building Self-Confidence:** When caregivers support and encourage a child's explorations and initiatives, it bolsters their self-confidence. They feel their actions are valuable and significant, which encourages them to take more initiative in the future.
- **Mitigating Guilt:** If caregivers respect the child's need for exploration and do not overly criticize their mistakes, it helps prevent feelings of guilt. Instead, the child learns it's okay to try new things and perfectly fine to make mistakes.

Success and Failure In Stage Three

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.

Success at this stage leads to the virtue of **purpose**.

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 initiative 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, the child may feel guilty for "being a nuisance".

Too much guilt can slow the child's interaction 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.

The balance between initiative and guilt during this stage can help children understand that it's acceptable to take charge and make their own decisions, but there will also be times when they must follow the rules or guidelines set by others.

Successfully navigating this stage develops the virtue of purpose.

How Can Parents Encourage a Sense of Exploration?

In this stage, caregivers must provide a safe and supportive environment that allows children to explore freely.

This nurtures their initiative, helps them develop problem-solving skills, and builds confidence and resilience.

By understanding the importance of exploration and providing the right support, caregivers can help children navigate this stage successfully and minimize feelings of guilt.

Stage 4. Industry vs. Inferiority (5–12 Years)

As children enter school, they compare their abilities to peers and seek to demonstrate competence.

Support from teachers and parents helps them develop **industry**—confidence in skills and productivity.

Without such support, or when faced with persistent failures, children risk feeling **inferior** and unmotivated.

- **Conflict:** Industry vs. Inferiority
- **Age Range:** 5 to ~12 years
- **Key Activity:** Schoolwork, peer comparison, skill-building
- **Virtue Gained:** Competence
- **Possible Negative Outcome:** A lasting sense of inferiority can undermine confidence in academic or social settings.

Here's the conflict:

- **Industry:** If children are encouraged by parents and teachers to develop skills, they gain a sense of industry—a feeling of competence and belief in their skills.

They start learning to work and cooperate with others and begin to understand that they can use their skills to complete tasks. This leads to a sense of confidence in their ability to achieve goals.

- **Inferiority:** On the other hand, if children receive negative feedback or are not allowed to demonstrate their skills, they may develop a sense of inferiority.

They may start to feel that they aren't as good as their peers or that their efforts aren't valued, leading to a lack of self-confidence and a feeling of inadequacy.

What Happens During This Stage?

The child is coping with new learning and social demands.

Children are at the stage where they will be learning to read and write, to do sums, and to do things on their own. Teachers begin to take an important role in the child's life as they teach specific skills.

At this stage, the child's peer group will gain greater significance and become a major source of the child's self-esteem.

The child now feels the need to win approval by demonstrating specific competencies valued by society and develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

School

This stage typically occurs during the elementary school years, from approximately ages 6 to 11, and the experiences children have in school can significantly influence their development.

Here's why:

- **Development of Industry:** At school, children are given numerous opportunities to learn, achieve, and demonstrate their competencies. They work on various projects, participate in different activities, and collaborate with their peers.

These experiences allow children to develop a sense of industry, reinforcing their confidence in their abilities to accomplish tasks and contribute effectively.

- **Social Comparison:** School provides a context where children can compare themselves to their peers.

They gauge their abilities and achievements against those of their classmates, which can either help build their sense of industry or lead to feelings of inferiority, depending on their experiences and perceptions.

- **Feedback and Reinforcement:** Teachers play a crucial role during this stage. Their feedback can either reinforce the child's sense of industry or trigger feelings of inferiority.

Encouraging feedback enhances the child's belief in their skills, while persistent negative feedback can lead to a sense of inferiority.

- **Building Life Skills:** School also provides opportunities for children to develop crucial life skills, like problem-solving, teamwork, and time management. Successfully acquiring and utilizing these skills promotes a sense of industry.

- **Dealing with Failure:** School is where children may encounter academic difficulties or fail for the first time.

How they learn to cope with these situations— and how teachers and parents guide them through these challenges—can influence whether they develop a sense of industry or inferiority.

Success and Failure In Stage Four

Success leads to the virtue of **competence**, while failure results in feelings of **inferiority**.

If children are encouraged and reinforced for their initiative, they begin to feel industrious (competence) and confident in their ability to achieve goals.

If this initiative is not encouraged, if parents or teacher restricts it, 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 skill they feel society demands (e.g., being athletic), 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.

The balance between industry and inferiority allows children to recognize their skills and understand that they have the ability to work toward and achieve their goals, even if they face challenges along the way.

How Can Parents & Teachers Encourage a Sense of Exploration?

In this stage, teachers and parents need to provide consistent, constructive feedback and encourage effort, not just achievement.

This approach helps foster a sense of industry, competence, and confidence in children, reducing feelings of inferiority.

✓ **Praise persistence, not just achievement** → “You worked really hard on that math problem!”

✓ **Encourage teamwork** → “Let’s work together to solve this.”

✓ **Give children responsibility** → “Can you be in charge of watering the plants?”

📌 **Mini Script for Parents:**

✗ Less effective: “You got it wrong. Try again.”

✓ More effective: “I love how hard you’re trying! Let’s see if we can figure it out together.” (Focuses on effort rather than mistakes.)

📌 **Mini Script for Teachers:**

✗ Less effective: “This is too hard for you.”

✓ More effective: “I see you’re stuck—what’s one thing we could try?” (Encourages problem-solving instead of giving up.)

Stage 5. Identity vs. Role Confusion (12–18 Years)

During adolescence, the focus is on discovering “Who am I?”

Teens explore different roles, values, and goals.

When they are free to experiment—and receive guidance without pressure—they often develop a strong sense of **identity**.

If they feel restricted, confused, or overwhelmed, they may experience **role confusion**.

- **Conflict:** Identity vs. Role Confusion
- **Age Range:** 12 to ~18 years
- **Key Activity:** Experimenting with roles, peer influence, self-reflection
- **Virtue Gained:** Fidelity (the ability to remain true to oneself and others)
- **Possible Negative Outcome:** A weak sense of identity can lead to insecurity, confusion, or even rebellion.

Here's the conflict:

- **Identity:** If adolescents are supported in their exploration and given the freedom to explore different roles, they are likely to emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self and a feeling of independence and control.

This process involves exploring their interests, values, and goals, which helps them form their own unique identity.

- **Role Confusion:** If adolescents are restricted and not given the space to explore or find the process too overwhelming or distressing, they may experience role confusion.

This could mean being unsure about one's place in the world, values, and future direction. They may struggle to identify their purpose or path, leading to confusion about their personal identity.

What Happens During This Stage?

During adolescence, the transition from childhood to adulthood is most important.

Children are becoming more independent and looking at the future regarding careers, relationships, families, housing, etc.

The individual wants to belong to a society and fit in.

Teenagers explore who they are as individuals, seek to establish a sense of self, and may experiment with different roles, activities, and behaviors.

According to Erikson, this is important to forming a strong identity and developing a sense of direction in life.

The adolescent mind is essentially a mind or moratorium, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, 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. During this stage, 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.

Social Relationships

Given the importance of social relationships during this stage, it's crucial for adolescents to have supportive social networks that encourage healthy exploration of identity.

It's also important for parents, teachers, and mentors to provide guidance as adolescents navigate their social relationships and roles.

Here's why:

- **Formation of Identity:** Social relationships provide a context within which adolescents explore different aspects of their identity.

They try on different roles within their peer groups, allowing them to discover their interests, beliefs, values, and goals. This exploration is key to forming their own unique identity.

- **Peer Influence:** Peer groups often become a significant influence during this stage. Adolescents often start to place more value on the opinions of their friends than their parents.

How an adolescent's peer group perceives them can impact their sense of self and identity formation.

- **Social Acceptance and Belonging:** Feeling accepted and fitting in with peers can significantly affect an adolescent's self-esteem and sense of identity.

They are more likely to develop a strong, positive identity if they feel accepted and valued. Feeling excluded or marginalized may lead to role confusion and a struggle with identity formation.

- **Experiencing Diversity:** Interacting with a diverse range of people allows adolescents to broaden their perspectives, challenge their beliefs, and shape their values.

This diversity of experiences can also influence the formation of their identity.

- **Conflict and Resolution:** Social relationships often involve conflict and the need for resolution, providing adolescents with opportunities to explore different roles and behaviors.

Learning to navigate these conflicts aids in the development of their identity and the social skills needed in adulthood.

Ways to Encourage Identity Exploration in Teens

(For Parents, Educators, and Counselors)

Teenagers in Erikson's Identity vs. Role Confusion stage need guidance to develop a strong sense of self. Here's how caregivers can support this process:

✓ 1. Encourage Self-Expression

- Allow teens to explore personal style, interests, and beliefs without judgment.
- Support **artistic, musical, or athletic activities** where they can express individuality.

✓ 2. Expose Them to Diverse Experiences

- Encourage **travel, volunteer work, or internships** to widen their perspectives.
- Discuss **different career paths** without pressuring them into a single direction.

✓ 3. Promote Critical Thinking About Identity

- Ask open-ended questions: *"What kind of person do you want to be?"*
- Suggest **journaling or vision boards** to clarify personal goals.
- Recommend books or media featuring diverse life paths and role models.

✓ 4. Foster Healthy Friendships and Social Bonds

- Encourage participation in **clubs, sports, or community groups**.
- Help teens recognize **positive vs. toxic relationships** and set boundaries.

✓ 5. Support Emotional Resilience

- Teach coping strategies for **handling peer pressure and failure**.
- Normalize that **identity development is a lifelong process**—they don't have to "figure it all out" immediately.
- **Support healthy risk-taking**

 **Tip:** Parents should balance guidance with autonomy—teens need space to explore, but also a secure base to return to for support.

Success and Failure In Stage Five

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 adolescents may feel uncomfortable about their bodies 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 on the outcome of their explorations.

Adolescents who establish a strong sense of identity can maintain consistent loyalties and values, even amidst societal shifts and changes.

Erikson described 3 forms of identity crisis:

1. severe (identity confusion overwhelms personal identity)
2. prolonged (realignment of childhood identifications over an extended time)
3. aggravated (repeated unsuccessful attempts at resolution)

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.

However, if adolescents don’t have the support, time, or emotional capacity to explore their identity, they may be left with unresolved identity issues, feeling unsure about their roles and uncertain about their future.

This could potentially lead to a weak sense of self, role confusion, and lack of direction in adulthood.

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.

Stage 6. Intimacy vs. Isolation (Young Adulthood, 18–40 Years)

Young adults seek close bonds and relationships that involve mutual care and trust.

Successful formation of these intimate connections leads to **intimacy**—the willingness to be open, vulnerable, and committed.

Struggling to form meaningful relationships can cause **isolation**, characterized by loneliness and sometimes depression.

- **Conflict:** Intimacy vs. Isolation
- **Age Range:** 18 to ~40 years
- **Key Activity:** Forming romantic relationships, deep friendships, emotional intimacy
- **Virtue Gained:** Love
- **Possible Negative Outcome:** Chronic isolation may lead to alienation and difficulty maintaining relationships.

Here's the conflict:

- **Intimacy:** Individuals who successfully navigate this stage are able to form intimate, reciprocal relationships with others.

They can form close bonds and are comfortable with mutual dependency. Intimacy involves the ability to be open and share oneself with others, as well as the willingness to commit to relationships and make personal sacrifices for the sake of these relationships.

- **Isolation:** If individuals struggle to form these close relationships, perhaps due to earlier unresolved identity crises or fear of rejection, they may experience isolation.

Isolation refers to the inability to form meaningful, intimate relationships with others. This could lead to feelings of loneliness, alienation, and exclusion.

Success and Failure In Stage Six

Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation.

Successfully navigating this stage develops the virtue of **love**. Individuals who develop this virtue have the ability to form deep and committed relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

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.

However, if individuals struggle during this stage and are unable to form close relationships, they may feel isolated and alone. This could potentially lead to a sense of disconnection and estrangement in adulthood.

Avoiding intimacy and fearing commitment and relationships can lead to isolation, loneliness, and sometimes depression.

Stage 7. Generativity vs. Stagnation (40–65 Years)

In mid-adulthood, individuals focus on guiding the next generation, whether through parenting, mentoring, or community involvement.

Successfully contributing to others' growth fosters **generativity**—the sense of productivity and accomplishment.

Feeling unproductive or disconnected, by contrast, produces **stagnation**.

- **Conflict:** Generativity vs. Stagnation
- **Age Range:** 40 to ~65 years
- **Key Activity:** Parenting, career, community engagement
- **Virtue Gained:** **Care** (concern for future generations)
- **Possible Negative Outcome:** A sense of stagnation can trigger self-absorption, lack of personal growth, or midlife crisis.

Here's the conflict:

- **Generativity:** If individuals feel they are making valuable contributions to the world, for instance, through raising children or contributing to positive changes in society, they will feel a sense of generativity.

Generativity involves concern for others and the desire to contribute to future generations, often through parenting, mentoring, leadership roles, or creative output that adds value to society.

- **Stagnation:** If individuals feel they are not making a positive impact or are not involved in productive or creative tasks, they may experience stagnation.

Stagnation involves feeling unproductive and uninvolved, leading to self-absorption, lack of growth, and feelings of emptiness.

What Happens During This Stage?

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 by raising our children, being productive at work, and participating in community activities and organizations. We develop a sense of being a part of the bigger picture through generativity.

Work & Parenthood

Both work and parenthood are important in this stage as they provide opportunities for adults to extend their personal and societal influence.

- **Work:** In this stage, individuals often focus heavily on their careers. Meaningful work is a way that adults can feel productive and gain a sense of contributing to the world.

It allows them to feel that they are part of a larger community and that their efforts can benefit future generations. If they feel accomplished and valued in their work, they experience a sense of generativity.

However, if they're unsatisfied with their career or feel unproductive, they may face feelings of stagnation.

- **Parenthood:** Raising children is another significant aspect of this stage. Adults can derive a sense of generativity from nurturing the next generation, guiding their development, and imparting their values.

Through parenthood, adults can feel they're making a meaningful contribution to the future.

On the other hand, individuals who choose not to have children or those who cannot have children can also achieve generativity through other nurturing behaviors, such as mentoring or engaging in activities that positively impact the younger generation.

Success and Failure In Stage Seven

If adults can find satisfaction and a sense of contribution through these roles, they are more likely to develop a sense of generativity, leading to feelings of productivity and fulfillment.

Successfully navigating this stage develops the virtue of **care**.

Individuals who develop this virtue feel a sense of contribution to the world, typically through family and work, and feel satisfied that they are making a difference.

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

We become stagnant and feel unproductive by failing to find a way to contribute. These individuals may feel disconnected or uninvolved with their community and with society as a whole.

This could potentially lead to feelings of restlessness and unproductiveness in later life.

Stage 8. Ego Integrity vs. Despair (65+ Years)

In late adulthood, people reflect on their lives and accomplishments.

If they view their experiences as meaningful, they achieve **ego integrity**—a sense of satisfaction and readiness to face life's end.

Those who feel they've fallen short may experience **despair**, marked by regret, bitterness, or fear of death.

- **Conflict:** Ego Integrity vs. Despair
- **Age Range:** 65 years and up
- **Key Activity:** Life review, reflection on achievements, acceptance of mortality
- **Virtue Gained:** Wisdom
- **Possible Negative Outcome:** Persistent despair and regret can lead to depression or hopelessness.

Here's the conflict:

- **Ego Integrity:** If individuals feel they have lived a fulfilling and meaningful life, they will experience ego integrity.

This is characterized by a sense of acceptance of their life as it was, the ability to find coherence and purpose in their experiences, and a sense of wisdom and fulfillment.

- **Despair:** On the other hand, if individuals feel regretful about their past, feel they have made poor decisions, or believe they've failed to achieve their life goals, they may experience despair.

Despair involves feelings of regret, bitterness, and disappointment with one's life, and a fear of impending death.

What Happens During This Stage?

This stage takes place after age 65 and involves reflecting on one's life and either moving into feeling satisfied and happy with one's life or feeling a deep sense of regret.

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 retired people.

Success and Failure In Stage Eight

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.

Individuals who reflect on their lives and regret not achieving their goals will experience bitterness and despair.

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.

This could potentially lead to feelings of fear and dread about their mortality.

A continuous state of ego integrity does not characterize wise people, but they experience both ego integrity and despair.

Thus, late life is characterized by integrity and despair as alternating states that must be balanced.

Critical Evaluation of Erikson's Theory

Support

- **Lifespan Coverage:** Erikson extends personality development beyond childhood, highlighting critical adult transitions.
- **Practical Insights:** Many find real-world relevance in the idea of psychosocial crises, from trust in infancy to generativity in midlife.
- **Face Validity:** Individuals often see themselves in these stages, suggesting a high intuitive appeal.

Criticism

1. Vagueness on Mechanisms

Erikson's theory does not specify in detail **how** individuals successfully resolve each psychosocial crisis. For instance, the theory outlines potential outcomes (e.g., a sense of trust vs. mistrust) but doesn't describe exactly which life experiences or interventions lead to the "successful" side of the crisis.

Erikson (1964) acknowledged that his model was more a **descriptive overview** than a comprehensive explanation of the processes driving psychosocial growth.

As a result, it can be difficult to determine how people move from one stage to the next, or how to "correct" a crisis if it was not resolved positively.

2. Sequence and Age Ranges

While Erikson provided broad age brackets for each stage, critics argue that not everyone progresses through these stages at the same rate or in a strictly linear order.

Some individuals might reach particular milestones earlier or later depending on personal, familial, or cultural factors.

Researchers have also questioned whether all eight psychosocial crises are truly universal.

For example, some adults might revisit adolescent-style identity exploration when making career changes in midlife.

Similarly, studies suggest **cultural context** can shift the emphasis or timing of certain stages, meaning Erikson's neat age-based sequence doesn't necessarily apply to everyone.

3. Western Bias

Erikson developed his model primarily from observations of **White, middle-class children and families in the United States and Europe**.

His stages often assume Western values of individualism, autonomy, and achievement.

In more **collectivist societies**, identity is shaped largely by familial, communal, and cultural norms, which may alter how crises like "Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt" unfold.

Anthropological and cross-cultural research indicates that concepts of self and social responsibility vary significantly, raising doubts about the universal application of Erikson's model across different cultural frameworks.

- **Japan (Collectivist Culture):** Identity formation is often shaped by social expectations, leading to later-stage identity shifts (e.g., career changes in middle adulthood rather than adolescence).
- **Indigenous Cultures:** Generativity may be expressed through *oral traditions, storytelling, or preserving cultural heritage*, rather than through career achievements.

Recurrence of Crises

Another point of critique is that crises (such as identity exploration) can **reappear at later life stages**.

For instance, people often revisit identity questions during major life transitions—like retirement or becoming an empty nester—calling into question the theory’s strictly **stage-based, linear approach**.

Logan (1986) and Osborne (2009) argue that retirement, for example, can spark a renewed focus on self-definition that closely resembles the identity crisis of adolescence.

This cyclical or “spiral” view suggests Erikson’s stages may not be as final or neatly resolved as the model implies.

Erikson vs Maslow

How does Maslow’s hierarchy of needs differ from Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development?

Maslow	Erikson
<u>Maslow</u> proposed a series of motivational stages, each building on the previous one (i.e., cannot progress without satisfying the previous stage).	Erikson proposed a series of predetermined stages related to personality development. The stages are time related.
Progression through the stages is based on life circumstances and achievement (i.e., it is flexible).	Progression through the stages is based a person’s age (i.e., rigid). During each stage an individual attains personality traits, either beneficial or pathological.
There is only one goal of achievement, although not everyone achieves it.	The goal of achievement vary from stage to stage and involve overcoming a psychosocial crisis.
Individuals move up the motivational stages / pyramid in order to reach self-actualisation. The first four stages are like stepping stones.	Successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and the acquisition of basic virtues. Basic virtues are characteristic strengths used to resolve subsequent crises.

Erikson vs Freud

Freud (1905) proposed a five-stage model of psychosexual development spanning infancy to puberty, focused on the maturation of sexual drives.

While groundbreaking, Freud’s theory had limitations Erikson (1958, 1963) aimed to overcome.

1. Erikson expanded the timeline through the full lifespan, while Freud focused only on the first few years of life. This more holistic perspective reflected the ongoing social challenges confronted into adulthood and old age.
2. Whereas Freud highlighted biological, pleasure-seeking drives, Erikson incorporated the influence of social relationships, culture, and identity formation on personality growth. This broader psychosocial view enhanced realism.
3. Erikson focused on the ego's growth rather than the primacy of the id. He saw personality developing through negotiation of social conflicts rather than only frustration/gratification of innate drives.
4. Erikson organized the stages around psychosocial crises tied to ego maturation rather than psychosexual erogenous zones. This reformulation felt more relevant to personal experiences many could identify with.
5. Finally, Erikson emphasized healthy progression through the stages rather than psychopathology stemming from fixation. He took a strengths-based perspective focused on human potential.

Joan Erikson's Ninth Stage

In the later years of his life, Erik Erikson and his wife Joan Erikson reflected on the complex challenges faced in extreme old age (80+ years).

After Erik's passing, Joan Erikson expanded the psychosocial model by introducing a ninth stage, which describes how elderly individuals must confront new and intensified psychosocial conflicts due to physical decline, dependency, and loss of societal roles.

Unlike the previous eight stages, which emphasize progress and resolution, the ninth stage is about revisiting earlier conflicts in reverse order, often under dramatically different circumstances.

Understanding the Ninth Stage

Joan Erikson (1997) proposed that in extreme old age, individuals relive earlier psychosocial conflicts as they face new limitations and challenges.

This means:

- **Trust vs. Mistrust resurfaces** → Can I trust my caregivers to provide for me?
- **Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt resurfaces** → Can I maintain independence, or do I feel helpless and ashamed?
- **Industry vs. Inferiority resurfaces** → Am I still valuable, or do I feel useless?

- **Identity vs. Role Confusion resurfaces** → Who am I if I can no longer work, care for my family, or be independent?
- **Intimacy vs. Isolation resurfaces** → As my friends and loved ones pass away, am I still connected to others?

These questions highlight how old conflicts resurface in a new context, forcing elderly individuals to re-evaluate their self-worth, autonomy, and sense of purpose.

Key Themes in the Ninth Stage:

1. Loss of Control & Rebuilding Trust

As physical abilities decline, elderly individuals must rely more on caregivers, family, or medical professionals. This reintroduces the Trust vs. Mistrust conflict, as seniors wonder:

- *Can I trust others to care for me with dignity?*
- *Am I a burden to my family?*

Caregivers play a critical role in ensuring trust and security by offering consistent, respectful, and compassionate care.

2. Revisiting Identity & Purpose

Many older adults struggle with a loss of personal identity as they retire or become physically dependent. This can create feelings of role confusion, leading to questions like:

- *Who am I if I am no longer working or raising a family?*
- *What is my purpose now?*

To combat this, seniors need new ways to define themselves, such as engaging in storytelling, mentoring, or volunteering.

3. Embracing Generativity in a New Form

Since traditional productivity (e.g., careers, parenting) is no longer possible, seniors must find new ways to feel valuable.

- Sharing life wisdom with younger generations
- Recording memoirs or oral histories
- Engaging in creative arts, gardening, or community work

By continuing to contribute in meaningful ways, elderly individuals can maintain a sense of generativity despite physical limitations.

4. Achieving Ego Integrity vs. Falling into Despair Again

As Erikson's Ego Integrity vs. Despair conflict reaches its peak, seniors must reflect on whether they lived a fulfilling life.

- Those who accept their life journey with peace gain a sense of wisdom and closure.
- Those who focus on regrets and unfulfilled dreams may experience deep despair, depression, and fear of death.

This highlights the importance of life-review therapy and legacy projects in helping seniors find meaning and resolution.

Supporting Individuals in the Ninth Stage

Here's how caregivers, family, and healthcare professionals can help seniors navigate this stage with dignity and meaning:

- ✓ **Encourage Life Review Therapy** – Help seniors reflect on their experiences in a positive way through guided storytelling or journaling.
- ✓ **Promote Intergenerational Activities** – Foster connections with younger generations through mentoring or family storytelling.
- ✓ **Foster Dignity and Choice** – Allow seniors to make their own decisions where possible (e.g., meal choices, clothing, daily activities).
- ✓ **Create Meaningful Roles** – Engage them in volunteering, hobbies, or faith-based activities to reinforce self-worth and purpose.
- ✓ **Support Emotional Well-Being** – Provide compassionate emotional support to ease feelings of isolation, despair, or anxiety about mortality.

Applications of Erikson's Theory

1. Clinical Settings: Psychosocial Assessment and Therapy

Mental health professionals frequently use Erikson's theory to understand clients' emotional challenges and life transitions.

The model helps therapists, counselors, and medical practitioners identify psychosocial crises that may underlie a person's struggles, allowing for targeted interventions.

Using Assessment Tools in Therapy

One of the most widely used tools is the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI), a self-report questionnaire designed to measure an individual's resolution of Erikson's psychosocial conflicts.

It helps clinicians assess a client's current psychosocial stage by identifying unresolved crises related to trust, autonomy, purpose, identity, intimacy, generativity, or despair.

This information enables therapists to tailor interventions, such as:

- **Addressing unresolved trust issues** in individuals who struggle with relationships by revisiting childhood attachment patterns.
- **Fostering autonomy** in patients recovering from major health crises, helping them regain confidence in their ability to control their lives.
- **Rebuilding identity** in clients experiencing role confusion after a life-altering event, such as career loss, divorce, or trauma.

Cultural Sensitivity in Therapy

Erikson's framework also provides a lens for culturally sensitive mental health care. Many psychosocial conflicts are experienced differently depending on cultural background. For example:

- **Adolescents in collectivist cultures** may experience *identity vs. role confusion* differently, as they often prioritize family expectations over personal exploration.
- **Older adults in interdependent communities** may resolve *ego integrity vs. despair* through communal relationships rather than individual life reflection.

By applying Erikson's theory with cultural awareness, counselors and social workers can support clients in navigating their psychosocial crises in ways that align with their values and social environments.

Interprofessional Collaboration in Healthcare

Mental health providers often collaborate with other healthcare professionals to apply Erikson's theory in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and long-term care facilities. For instance:

- **Occupational therapists** working with stroke patients may focus on restoring *autonomy* by developing individualized self-care routines.

- **Geriatric counselors** may implement **reminiscence therapy** for older adults struggling with *ego integrity vs. despair*, helping them find meaning in their past experiences.
- **Social workers** can help **parents of children with disabilities** develop strategies that reinforce *initiative vs. guilt* and *industry vs. inferiority*, boosting their child's confidence and ability to adapt to challenges.

2. Education and Parenting: Supporting Healthy Development

Erikson's theory is widely used in education, child development, and parenting guidance, as it provides a roadmap for understanding emotional and social growth.

Guiding Parental Support

Parents and caregivers can use Erikson's stages to support their children's emotional well-being by recognizing the importance of age-appropriate encouragement. For example:

- **Infancy (Trust vs. Mistrust):** Responsive caregiving (e.g., comforting a crying baby, providing consistent routines) fosters security and trust in the world.
- **Toddlerhood (Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt):** Allowing children to make small choices (e.g., picking clothes, feeding themselves) encourages independence and confidence.
- **Early Childhood (Initiative vs. Guilt):** Praising creativity and problem-solving skills helps children develop a sense of initiative rather than fear of failure.
- **Adolescence (Identity vs. Role Confusion):** Encouraging teens to explore different career paths, hobbies, and social roles supports their journey toward identity formation.

By understanding the psychosocial needs at each stage, parents can create environments that nurture emotional resilience and self-confidence.

Application in Schools

Teachers and school counselors also apply Erikson's theory to **support student development** in both academic and social settings. For example:

- **Elementary school educators** can structure learning activities that promote *industry vs. inferiority* by emphasizing effort over performance, fostering a growth mindset.

- **Middle school and high school counselors** can assist students experiencing *identity vs. role confusion* by offering mentorship programs, career exploration activities, and self-reflection exercises.
- **Special education professionals** can tailor learning plans to support children struggling with autonomy or competence, ensuring they receive the encouragement they need to develop confidence.

By aligning teaching strategies with students' developmental stages, educators create a more supportive and effective learning environment.

Final Takeaways for Parents and Teachers:

- ✓ Encourage independence without pressure.
- ✓ Let children make small choices within limits.
- ✓ Praise effort, creativity, and persistence.
- ✓ Allow identity exploration without judgment.

3. Gerontology: Addressing Life Transitions and Aging

Erikson's model remains highly relevant in later life stages, particularly during retirement and end-of-life reflection.

Many older adults revisit earlier psychosocial conflicts as they navigate aging, loss, and changing social roles.

Retirement and Identity Reevaluation

One of the most significant transitions in later life is retirement, which often triggers a renewed focus on identity—similar to the challenges faced in adolescence.

Retirees may ask themselves:

- Who am I if I'm no longer defined by my career?
- How do I find purpose now that my children are grown?
- What impact have I made, and what legacy do I leave behind?

By recognizing these parallels between adolescent identity exploration and later-life identity shifts, older adults can reframe their retirement experience as an opportunity for reinvention rather than loss.

Addressing Unresolved Psychosocial Conflicts

Unresolved psychosocial crises from earlier in life often resurface in old age, influencing emotional well-being. For example:

- **A person who experienced mistrust in infancy** may struggle with *fear of dependency* when facing medical issues or assisted living.
- **An adult who never developed a clear sense of identity** may experience heightened *role confusion* when leaving the workforce or losing a spouse.
- **Those who lacked generativity** may feel stagnation and regret, wondering whether they contributed meaningfully to their families or society.

By acknowledging these lifelong psychological patterns, mental health professionals, caregivers, and family members can help seniors navigate aging with greater self-awareness and emotional resilience.

Interventions for Enhancing Ego Integrity

For older adults struggling with ego integrity vs. despair, structured reflection and reminiscence therapy can be valuable. Some approaches include:

- **Life Story Work:** Encouraging seniors to document or share their life stories (through writing, audio recordings, or art) to help them see the value of their experiences.
- **Legacy Projects:** Helping individuals create something meaningful—such as mentoring younger generations, writing memoirs, or engaging in community service—to reinforce a sense of purpose.
- **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for Late-Life Adjustment:** Addressing feelings of regret or fear of mortality through cognitive restructuring and positive reframing techniques.

By using these interventions, healthcare professionals and caregivers can help older adults transition into their later years with a greater sense of fulfillment and peace.

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