

Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development

What is Psychosocial Development?

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is one of the best-known theories of personality in psychology. Much like Sigmund Freud, Erikson believed that personality develops in a series of stages. Unlike Freud's theory of psychosexual stages, Erikson's theory describes the impact of social experience across the whole lifespan.

One of the main elements of Erikson's psychosocial stage theory is the development of **ego identity**.¹ Ego identity is the conscious sense of self that we develop through social interaction. According to Erikson, our ego identity is constantly changing due to new experience and information we acquire in our daily interactions with others. In addition to ego identity, Erikson also believed that a sense of competence also 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 he sometimes referred to as **ego strength** or **ego quality**.² If the stage is managed poorly, the person will emerge with a sense of inadequacy.

In each stage, Erikson believed people experience a **conflict** that serves as a turning point in development. 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.

Psychosocial Stage 1 - Trust vs. Mistrust

- The first stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development occurs between birth and one year of age and is the most fundamental stage in life.²
- Because an infant is utterly dependent, the development of trust is based on the dependability and quality of the child's caregivers.
- If a child successfully develops trust, he or she will feel safe and secure in the world. Caregivers who are inconsistent, emotionally unavailable, or rejecting contribute to feelings of mistrust in the children they care for. Failure to develop trust will result in fear and a belief that the world is inconsistent and unpredictable.

Psychosocial 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.²
- 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 body 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.
- 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.

Psychosocial Stage 3 - Initiative vs. Guilt

- During the preschool years, children begin to assert their power and control over the world through directing play and other social interaction.
- 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.³

Psychosocial Stage 4 - Industry vs. Inferiority

- This stage covers the early school years from approximately age 5 to 11.
- Through social interactions, children begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments and abilities.
- 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 ability to be successful.

Psychosocial Stage 5 - Identity vs. Confusion

- During adolescence, children are exploring their independence and developing a sense of self.
- Those who receive proper encouragement and reinforcement through personal exploration will emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self and a feeling of independence and control. Those who remain unsure of their beliefs and desires will be insecure and confused about themselves and the future.

Psychosocial Stage 6 - Intimacy vs. Isolation

- This stage covers the period of early adulthood when people are exploring personal relationships.
- Erikson believed it was vital that people develop close, committed relationships with other people. Those who are successful at this step will develop relationships that are committed and secure.
- Remember that each step builds on skills learned in previous steps. Erikson believed that a strong sense of personal identity was important to 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 suffer emotional isolation, loneliness, and depression.

Psychosocial Stage 7 - Generativity vs. Stagnation

- 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. Those who fail to attain this skill will feel unproductive and uninvolved in the world.

Psychosocial Stage 8 - Integrity vs. Despair

- This phase occurs during old age and is focused on reflecting back on life.
- Those who are unsuccessful during this phase will feel that their life has been wasted and will experience many regrets. The individual 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.

Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development Summary Chart

| Stage | Basic Conflict | Important Events | Outcome |
|--|------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| Infancy (birth to 18 months) | Trust vs. Mistrust | Feeding | Children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide reliability, care, and affection. A lack of this will lead to mistrust. |
| Early Childhood (2 to 3 years) | Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt | Toilet Training | Children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence. Success leads to feelings of autonomy, failure results in feelings of shame and doubt. |
| Preschool (3 to 5 years) | Initiative vs. Guilt | Exploration | 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. |
| School Age (6 to 11 years) | Industry vs. Inferiority | School | Children need to cope with new social and academic demands. Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority. |
| Adolescence (12 to 18 years) | Identity vs. Role Confusion | Social Relationships | 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. |
| Young Adulthood (19 to 40 years) | Intimacy vs. Isolation | Relationships | Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation. |
| Middle Adulthood (40 to 65 years) | Generativity vs. Stagnation | Work and Parenthood | 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. |
| Maturity (65 to death) | Ego Integrity vs. Despair | Reflection on Life | 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. |