

Facilitate a Positive Resolution of Erikson's Eight Stages of Human Development

ACCORDING TO psychologist Erik Erikson, human psychosocial development is a combined result of the interaction between people's bodies and minds and their social interactions with important people in their lives. Erikson's theory on human development divides life into eight stages. In this unit, you will learn more about the stages of Erikson's theory and how conflict and resolution affect a person's development.



Objective:



Summarize Erikson's eight stages of human development.

Key Terms:



autonomy
despair
generativity
guilt
identity
identity confusion

industry
inferiority
initiative
integrity
intimacy
isolation

mistrust
shame
stagnation
trust

Erikson's Human Development Theory

Erikson believed that humans, regardless of their culture, are faced with and resolve specific conflicts at certain times in their lives. There is a sensitive time when each conflict can most

easily be resolved, but no resolution is permanent. Conflicts are revisited throughout life. Although changes in the resolutions later in life are possible, they are more difficult.

According to Erikson's theory, failure and success are cumulative. A positive resolution of one conflict makes a successful resolution of the next conflict more likely. A negative resolution of a conflict makes a successful resolution of the next conflict less likely.

EIGHT STAGES

Erikson's theory breaks human life into eight distinct stages. Each stage is marked by a specific conflict. The stages include trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus identity confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and integrity versus despair.

Trust Versus Mistrust

Trust is an infant's understanding that the world is a safe and predictable place. **Mistrust** is an infant's understanding that the world is a dangerous and unpredictable place. The conflict revolves around the question: "Is the world is a safe, welcoming, and predictable place?"

The age range for this stage is birth through the second year. A child's primary social relationship during this stage involves the person providing primary care, such as the mother, father, or child care provider. The goal of this stage is to establish a basic attitude toward life.

If a child's primary care provider feeds, changes, and comforts the baby quickly, consistently, and with kindness and compassion, the interaction is positive. The infant develops a sense that the world is a pleasant place that will reliably meet all physical and social needs. As a result, the baby cries less and waits more patiently. As an adult, the individual will experience life with an optimistic attitude.

The interaction is negative if the primary caregiver ignores the child's cries for food, changing, and comfort, or if the caregiver meets the needs inconsistently or abruptly. In this case, the baby develops a sense that the world is a frightening place that may or may not meet basic physical and social needs. The baby cries more in an effort to receive food or comfort. The caregiver may avoid the baby's crying, which leads to more crying and avoidance. As an adult, this individual will view life with a pessimistic attitude.



FIGURE 1. According to Erikson's theory, an infant will learn to trust or mistrust.

Autonomy Versus Shame

Autonomy refers to a toddler's willing choice to behave in a socially expected way. **Shame** refers to a toddler's feeling of humiliation or disgrace in regard to the perceived inability to meet the social expectations of others. The conflict in this stage revolves around the question: "Can the child find pleasure in choosing to do what society expects regarding toileting, feeding, and self-control?"

The age range for this stage is two to three years or until toilet training is mastered. The primary social relationship involves parents or a child care teacher. The goal is to develop self-control and independence.

In a positive interaction, the caregiver has high but reasonable expectations for the child. The caregiver allows the child freedom and support in completing all appropriate self-help tasks. The toddler finds personal pleasure in choosing to meet the expectations of society. Therefore, the toddler willingly uses the toilet, wears clothing, uses utensils to eat, and conforms to other expectations of society. As an adult, this individual will willingly adhere to laws, rules, and societal expectations.

In a negative interaction, the caregiver has low expectations and disparages the child with punishment or ridicule for his or her efforts. The caregiver may help the child too much, which sends the message that the child is not capable, or may be too restrictive, which does not give the child the opportunity to make choices. The child feels shame over unacceptable actions and has doubts about his or her abilities. The toddler may refuse to use the toilet, keep clothes or shoes on, or eat neatly. As an adult, this individual defies laws and refuses to conform to expectations of society, religion, and family.



FIGURE 2. According to Erikson's theory, a toddler will experience autonomy or shame.

Initiative Versus Guilt

Initiative is the confidence a child feels in his or her personal ability to independently form and execute a successful and acceptable plan of action for setting and achieving goals. **Guilt** is the child's feelings of remorse or shame over inappropriate or socially unacceptable actions. The conflict of this stage revolves around the question: "Can a child choose the action parents and society consider correct?"

The age range for this stage is three to five years. The primary social relationships involve family members, neighbors, preschool classmates, and teachers. The goal of this stage is the development of a conscience.

Positive interaction at this stage involves the caregiver modeling adherence to rules of society—allowing freedom for the child to set goals and plan solutions—and ensuring that the child experiences the consequences of inappropriate action. This helps the child to see things from another’s perspective. The child develops a sense of right and wrong, while gaining confidence in his or her ability to plan and initiate actions to achieve personal goals. The child plays well with others, is empathetic, and is willing to try new things. As an adult, this individual will choose to operate within the guidelines of society and will confidently try for a better job, more education, or new relationships.

Negative interaction at this stage involves the caregiver being controlling and making decisions for the child, even if the caregiver is just trying to protect the child from negative consequences. In this outcome, the child is self-centered and avoids taking on new experiences in life for fear of failure. The child may bully others, cheat at games, and act impulsively. As an adult, this individual will avoid productive risks (e.g., attending college, applying for a new job, or forming new relationships) because he or she expects to fail. This person also may be less than ethical in personal and business behaviors.

Industry Versus Inferiority

Industry refers to the choice to be productive, hard working, and diligent. **Inferiority** refers to feelings of failure and inadequacy in completing work projects. The conflict of this stage is the question: “Will a child choose to develop and utilize skills to work with others within a set of rules to accomplish a common goal?”

The age range for this stage is five to 12 years. The primary social relationships are typically at school with teachers and friends. The goal of this stage is to develop a work ethic.

In positive interactions, parents and teachers structure demands so the child has a chance to experience success. They also encourage interactions with peers as well as independence. The child finds pleasure in working with others to meet standards. In this outcome, the child works well with others and may be competent using computers and books, completing assignments, and enjoying school. As an adult, this individual will have a career rather than a job and will be motivated by a desire to excel.

In negative interactions, parents and teachers set unrealistically high expectations, express harsh criticism, and give no opportunities to work with others—creating restrictive or controlling environments. The child develops feelings of inadequacy and a resentment or reluctance to work according to set standards. The child may avoid work assignments for fear of failure and may act up in class to deflect attention from assumed deficits. Other students may not



FIGURE 3. According to Erikson’s theory, between the ages of 5 and 12, children are deciding between industry and inferiority.

want this child as a work partner. As an adult, this individual is motivated by the need for a paycheck. However, he or she may resent the need to work and do just what is necessary to keep the job. The adult may see work as the only value of his or her life, focusing on it at the expense of family and social opportunities.

Identity Versus Identity Confusion

Identity refers to a blending of the adolescent's perception of the child he or she was and the adult he or she will become. It includes personal, sexual, political, and occupational identity that is autonomous and based on personal choices. **Identity confusion** refers to an adolescent's confused or coerced opinion about the past, current, and future personal, sexual, political, and occupational identity. The conflict of this stage is the question: "Will the adolescent incorporate his or her own experiences and the example of others into a strong perception of his or her own identity and place within society?"

The age range for this stage is 13 to 18 years. The goal is to develop a stable sense of self and self-image.

In positive interactions, parents and teachers expose teenagers to a variety of career choices and adult roles, giving them the freedom and time to make decisions and accepting choices once they are made. The teenager is allowed to try on different identities but avoids making decisions about education, sex, drugs, and safety that may later limit choices. In this outcome, the teenager develops a strong sense of self—socially (race and gender identification) and personally (perception of personal abilities). The teenager will be socially mature and confident in asserting personal opinions. He or she will set high goals for achievement, develop occupational aspirations, and begin career preparation. As an adult, this individual will get along well with others and will be confident (not overbearing) in choices about religion, politics, values, and gender roles.

In negative interactions, parents and teachers may make assumptions that teenagers will go in a certain direction, such as the family business. Adults may rush teenagers into life decisions, forbid experimentation, and reject their choices. In this outcome, teenagers may make personal choices that limit their other options. For example, they may drop out of school, get married at a young age, or use drugs. The teenager may develop feelings of isolation and depression. As adults, they may find their teenage decisions have left them trapped in a



FURTHER EXPLORATION...

ONLINE CONNECTION: Testing Erikson's Theory

Erikson's Theory of Development suggests that an adult's personality traits may be the direct result of interactions that person had as a child.

Visit the following Web site to view a video that uses a young woman named Ashley as an example to demonstrate Erikson's theory. The creator of the video compares observations about the young woman with reports from her mother about what Ashley was like as a child to determine if the theory applies.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdPPXGadRAU>

low-wage job, an unhappy marriage, jail, or with a drug addiction. Any of those factors makes it difficult to positively resolve other conflicts later in life.

Intimacy Versus Isolation

Intimacy is the ability to build close personal relationships without losing a sense of self. **Isolation** is a feeling of loneliness because of the withdrawal from situations where close relationships are possible. The conflict of this stage is the question: “Will an adult will be able to establish intimate relationships while maintaining a strong, independent, and stable sense of self?”

The age range for this stage is 18 to 30 years. The primary relationships are with self, family, peers, and romantic interests. All of the previous stages reflect primarily what was “done to us” by caregivers. The remaining stages still are shaped by social relationships, but the primary influence is “what we do for ourselves.” The goal of this stage is to cultivate productive and intimate adult relationships.

Positive interaction in this stage includes parents encouraging the relationship to move from parent/child to adult/adult. Positive personal action involves the young adult committing himself or herself to developing relationships based on caring trust and mutual respect between intimate partners. In this outcome, the young adult chooses to give and receive love and is able to do so without losing a sense of self. The young adult may seek and find rewarding friendships and a committed, intimate relationship.

Negative interaction in this stage includes parents maintaining control in their relationship with young adult children and discouraging them from forming adult friendships and intimate relationships. The young adult may resentfully obey, as a way to retain parental approval, or the adult may enter into a relationship where the partner takes on the role of parent rather than partner. In this outcome, the young adult may avoid forming or sustaining long-term relationships, which may lead to feelings of isolation. The young adult may be divorced, in an unrewarding relationship, or move from relationship to relationship.

Generativity Versus Stagnation

Generativity refers to actions (e.g., productive work, creative endeavors, and raising a family) that contribute to the well-being of the next generation. **Stagnation** is self-absorbed behavior that is concerned only with satisfying personal desires. The conflict of this stage is the question: “Will a person work productively and creatively to nurture and preserve family, community, and the world?”



FIGURE 4. According to Erikson's theory, between the ages of 18 and 30, people learn intimacy or isolation.

The age range of this stage is 30 to 65. The primary social relationship is with self, work, and the community. The goal of this stage is to make the world a better place for family and posterity.

Positive interactions occur when society dictates cultural expectations for good parents, employees, and citizens. Family members express appreciation for support, and the workplace provides validation for work efforts. But the adult must make the choice to value these expectations and make the effort to meet them. In this outcome, the adult develops a sense of commitment to bettering the situation of his or her family, community, and world. The adult may work to provide for his or her family. He or she may also help children attend college, recycle, volunteer, and support a church or other social organizations.

Negative interactions occur when an adult's family, employer, or society rejects the individual's efforts. The adult may then reject any responsibility to others and seek to satisfy personal wants and needs. In this outcome, the adult develops a self-centered attitude with little regard for the betterment of others. The adult may be on welfare or exert just enough effort to keep a minimal job. This person may be a deadbeat parent, may opt not to vote, and may spend time and money on personal desires without considering others.

Integrity Versus Despair

Integrity is a feeling of pride and satisfaction with the way you have led your life and in your accomplishments as well as a calm acceptance that life is ending. **Despair** is a feeling of despondency and hopelessness at goals never reached, along with bitterness and depression regarding the end of life. The conflict of this stage is the question: "Will a person accept that life is ending but feel that through work and/or children that his or her life has been meaningful?"

The age range of this stage is 65 years and older. The primary relationship is with self, extended family, or a caregiver. The goal of this stage is to come to terms with the value of one's own life and accept its end.

In a positive interaction, an older adult's family treats him or her with respect and spends time reminiscing about the successes of the past. The caregiver, if one is required, respects the older adult's opinions and wishes. The older adult expresses appreciation for assistance and continues to be involved in his or her life. In this outcome, the older adult is optimistic, has self-control, and reflects on relationships and accomplishments with pride. The older adult may share wisdom by passing on stories, family history,



FIGURE 5. According to Erikson's theory, the last stage of life is integrity versus despair.

and advice to younger family members. The older adult also may make plans for the end of his or her life.

In a negative interaction, the older adult is treated with a lack of respect by family and caregivers and is sometimes abused. In this outcome, the older adult may feel hopeless and despondent and may be fearful about the end of life. The individual may be demanding and hard to please. He or she may be angry with the world or totally apathetic and withdrawn.

Summary:



Psychologist Erik Erikson believed that human psychosocial development is a combined result of the interaction between people's bodies and minds and their social interactions with important people in their lives. His theory divided life into eight stages.

People face a specific conflict in each stage of life, and the outcome of those conflicts determines what kind of people they will become. The eight stages include trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus identity confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and integrity versus despair.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What are Erikson's eight stages of human development?
2. Are conflict outcomes permanent in Erikson's theory?
3. What is the age range of each stage?
4. What people are involved in the primary relationships in each stage?
5. What are the positive and negative outcomes of each conflict?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Relate at least one of Erikson's stages of human development to your own life. Choose a partner, and discuss the relevant conflict and how you think the outcome affected your personality. Ask your partner if he or she agrees with your findings regarding your personality traits. Sometimes we see ourselves differently than others do. You could also ask your parents about specific parts of your childhood that may affect who you are today.

Web Links:



Erikson's Psychosocial Stages Summary Chart

http://psychology.about.com/library/bl_psychosocial_summary.htm

Erik Erikson and Child Development

http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=7927&cn=28