



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Psychosocial Development

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Chapter Title: "Psychosocial Development"

Pub. Date: 2018

Access Date: May 6, 2019

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781506307657

Online ISBN: 9781506307633

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506307633.n661>

Print pages: 1772-1774

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Psychosocial development refers to the development of personality, including social skills and attitudes. The most influential theory on psychosocial development throughout the life span is Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. According to this theory, individuals develop through eight predetermined and inter-related stages. At each stage, individuals face a psychosocial challenge or crisis, which consists of opposing psychological and sociocultural needs. A psychosocial crisis is not a catastrophe, but rather a turning point at which individuals are especially vulnerable, but also have great potential for development and well-being. How one resolves a particular crisis is affected by the resolution of preceding stages and in turn affects how successfully crises of subsequent stages are resolved. Failing to adequately resolve a crisis might result in a more unhealthy personality and lower state of well-being. However, stages can be successfully resolved at a later time and can be modified by later experiences. This entry provides a description of Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development.

Stage 1: Trust Versus Mistrust

In infancy, children are confronted with the first stage of psychosocial development, the stage of trust versus mistrust. Between birth and 18 months, infants learn whether they can trust the world around them and are trustworthy themselves. The interactions with the primary caregivers determine how infants will resolve this stage. When primary caregivers provide a secure environment, with satisfaction of the infant's basic needs as well as comfort and affection, infants learn that others are dependable and reliable and will develop optimism, trust, confidence, and security. When primary caregivers are neglectful or even abusive and fail to provide a secure environment, infants will learn that the world is an unreliable, unpredictable, and dangerous place.

This basic sense of trust or mistrust will affect infants' relationships with others. Development of a sense of trust will lead to confidence that other people will be a source of support when needed. Development of a sense of mistrust can lead to frustration, suspicion, withdrawal, and a lack of confidence. A lack of trust forms the root for development of fear and later intra- and interpersonal disturbances.

Stage 2: Autonomy Versus Shame and Doubt

In early childhood, between the ages of 1.5 and 3 years, children encounter the stage of autonomy versus shame and doubt. In this stage, children face the question whether it is okay for them to be themselves. Due to motor and verbal development, toddlers become more mobile and increasingly able to satisfy their own needs. They begin to assert their independence and discover that they have many skills and abilities.

If primary caregivers support and encourage self-sufficient behavior while at the same time they protect the child to avoid constant failure, children will develop a sense of independence, autonomy, and self-esteem. But if caregivers are too restrictive, criticizing, or demanding, children might instead develop low self-esteem and shame and doubt regarding their ability to handle difficulties. They might become reluctant to attempt new challenges and overly dependent on others.

Stage 3: Initiative Versus Guilt

Between the ages of 3 and 5 years, children are confronted with the stage of initiative versus guilt, in which they will learn whether it is OK for them to do, move, and act. Preschoolers are increasingly able to achieve tasks and goals on their own, and during play with other children, they explore their interpersonal skills to initiate activities through planning activities, making up games, and pursuing tasks.

When parents and preschool teachers support these efforts but also help preschoolers make realistic and ap-

appropriate choices, children will develop a sense of initiative, and feel secure in their ability to lead others and plan and undertake activities. Because preschoolers might also develop aggressive, risk-taking, and overly assertive behaviors to explore their limits, caregivers will often try to stop them. If parents and teachers discourage initiative too much or express criticism or control, children might feel that they are being a nuisance to others and develop a sense of guilt about their needs and desires. A sense of initiative is the basis for ambition, creativity, and purpose in adult life.

Stage 4: Industry Versus Inferiority

Between the ages of 5 and 12 years, the central question children face is whether they can make it in the world. During the elementary school period, children are capable of learning abundant new skills and knowledge. As they start recognizing their talents and discover their interests, they develop a sense of industry. Industry is the sense of being able to make and do things and feeling competent and self-confident about this.

Although parents remain important, from this stage onward the school, peers, and neighborhood also play a significant role in children's development. If children experience encouragement from their environment for their initiatives and praise for their accomplishments, they begin to demonstrate industry by being hardworking and persevering to complete tasks, and they feel confident in their competence to achieve goals. If children are ridiculed or punished for their efforts or feel incapable of meeting expectations, they will feel inferiority about their capabilities as well as low self-esteem, a lack of motivation, and lethargy.

Stage 5: Identity Versus Role Confusion

Between ages 13 and 20 years, adolescents are becoming more independent and begin to explore the roles they will occupy in adulthood and their place in society. They will experience an identity crisis or turning point in which they will reexamine their identifications formed in childhood, explore possibilities, and try to find out who they are and what they want to do in life. Adolescents must discover their own identity, while negotiating and struggling with social interactions and *fitting in*.

Initially, adolescents are preoccupied with how others see them. They are likely to experience role confusion, characterized by mixed feelings about the ways in which they will fit into society and an inability or reluctance to commit. They might experiment with various behaviors and activities. During a state called *psychosocial moratorium*, adolescents will usually have enough space and time to freely experiment and explore and subsequently develop a firm and balanced sense of identity. However, sometimes adolescents are pressured to form commitments before they have developed a clear identity through self-discovery. This can result in rebellion and feelings of unhappiness. When adolescents fail to establish a sense of identity, they might experience an extended period of role confusion and attempt to delay entrance to adulthood and withdraw from responsibilities. Alternatively, they might conform to external wishes, resulting in a foreclosed identity.

It might take well into adulthood before individuals reach an achieved identity. Contemporary Western society is characterized by a prolonged period of education and a delay of transitions into work, stable partner relationships, and family, and therefore, the period of identity formation is correspondingly prolonged.

Stage 6: Intimacy Versus Isolation

During young adulthood, between ages 20 and 40 years, individuals address the question whether they can love and seek companionship and love in friendships and romantic relationships. True intimacy is possible

only if identity formation is well on its way. Once people have established a firm identity, they are ready and able to make satisfactory long-term and reciprocal commitments to others and to accept others even when there are ideological differences. Identity-confused young adults might avoid intimacy or develop intimate relationships that are rather promiscuous. Those who do not develop intimate relationships might experience feelings of isolation, loneliness, and fear of being rejected.

Stage 7: Generativity Versus Stagnation

During middle adulthood, between ages 40 and 65 years, the question whether one can make one's life count and make a difference to society stands central. This developmental task concerns establishing and guiding the next generation and contributing to society. When individuals provide care for their children, are productive at work, or are involved in community activities and organizations, they will develop a sense of generativity, productivity, and accomplishment. Individuals who are self-centered and unable or unwilling to contribute to society develop a sense of stagnation characterized by feelings of meaninglessness and dissatisfaction with their relative lack of productivity and purpose.

Stage 8: Ego Integrity Versus Despair

Individuals face the final developmental task from age 65 onward, when they slow down productivity, or when they feel they are near the end of their life. During this stage, individuals reflect on their lives and accomplishments. Older adults who perceive their lives as unproductive or meaningless, feel guilty about their past, or feel that they failed to achieve their goals become dissatisfied. They experience a sense of despair to find a purpose to their lives, often leading to depression, hopelessness, and fear of death. Individuals who accept their life and significant others and feel contented about their contribution to society are able to develop integrity. They will develop wisdom, which enables them to look back on their life with a sense of closure and completeness and to accept death.

See also [Developmental Tasks](#); [Identity Development](#); [Personality](#); [Psychosocial Moratorium](#); [Self](#)

- psychosocial development
- preschool children
- psychosocial theories
- children
- infants
- intimacy
- shame

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506307633.n661>
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Further Readings

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