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The Developmental Stages of Erik Erikson

By [Arlene F. Harder, MA, MFT](#)

"It is human to have a long childhood; it is civilized to have an even longer childhood. Long childhood makes a technical and mental virtuoso out of man, but it also leaves a life-long residue of emotional immaturity in him."
— Erik Homburger Erikson (1902-1994)

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

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

ARE WE GIVEN A SECOND CHANCE TO LEARN?

While the first premise of Erik Erikson's developmental stages, i. e., the world gets bigger and more complex as we go along, is fairly obvious, but we might take exception to the last, i.e., failure is cumulative.

It is true that in many cases an individual who has to deal with horrendous circumstances as a child may be unable to negotiate later stages as easily as someone who didn't have many challenges early on. For example, we know that orphans who weren't held

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

Erikson's basic philosophy might be said to rest on two major themes: (1) the world gets bigger as we go along and (2) failure is cumulative. While the first point is fairly obvious, we might take exception to the last. True, in many cases an individual who has to deal with horrendous circumstances as a child may be unable to negotiate later stages as easily as someone who didn't have as many challenges early on. For example, we know that orphans who weren't held or stroked as infants have an extremely hard time connecting with others when they become adults and have even died from lack of human contact.

However, there's always the chance that somewhere along the way the strength of the human spirit can be ignited and deficits overcome. Therefore, to give you an idea of another developmental concept, be sure to see [Stages of Growth for Children and Adults](#), based on Pamela Levine's work. She saw development as a spiraling cycle rather than as stages through which we pass, never to visit again.

As you read through the following eight stages with their sets of opposites, notice which strengths you identify with most and those you need to work on some more.

1. Infancy: Birth to 18 Months

Ego Development Outcome: Trust vs. Mistrust
Basic strength: Drive and Hope

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

Incidentally, many studies of suicides and suicide attempts

or stroked as infants have an extremely hard time connecting with others when they become adults and have even died from lack of human contact.

However, there's always the chance that somewhere along the way the strength of the human spirit can be ignited and deficits overcome. Therefore, I like the concept of development as a spiraling cycle rather than as stages through which we pass, never to visit again.

You can see how this concept of developmental stages works in [Words of Encouragement for Everyone . . . Especially Parents Who Want to Know How to Encourage Their Children](#), a four-minute presentation of how affirmations appropriate to each period of growth is the best way to navigate developmental cycles.

Also see [Integrating All of Life's Lessons](#) developed for the [Childhood Affirmations](#) website. And be sure to listen to an excerpt from a CD titled [Words of Encouragement Everyone Needs](#)

[Note: If you don't

point to the importance of the early years in developing the basic belief that the world is trustworthy and that every individual has a right to be here.

Not surprisingly, the most significant relationship is with the maternal parent, or whoever is our most significant and constant caregiver.

2. Early Childhood: 18 Months to 3 Years

Ego Development Outcome: Autonomy vs. Shame
Basic Strengths: Self-control, Courage, and Will

During this stage we learn to master skills for ourselves. Not only do we learn to walk, talk and feed ourselves, we are learning finer motor development as well as the much appreciated toilet training. Here we have the opportunity to build self-esteem and **autonomy** as we gain more control over our bodies and acquire new skills, learning right from wrong. And one of our skills during the "Terrible Two's" is our ability to use the powerful word "NO!" It may be pain for parents, but it develops important skills of the will.

It is also during this stage, however, that we can be very vulnerable. If we're shamed in the process of toilet training or in learning other important skills, we may feel great **shame and doubt** of our capabilities and suffer low self-esteem as a result.

The most significant relationships are with parents.

3. Play Age: 3 to 5 Years

Ego Development Outcome: Initiative vs. Guilt
Basic Strength: Purpose

During this period we experience a desire to copy the adults around us and take **initiative** in creating play situations. We make up stories with Barbie's and Ken's, toy phones and miniature cars, playing out roles in a trial universe, experimenting with the blueprint for what we believe it means to be an adult. We also begin to use that wonderful word for exploring the world—"WHY?"

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

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As you examine the legacy given to you by your parents and grandparents, you may discover strengths you underestimated. You may also realize you didn't hear important affirmations you would benefit from today. But it's never too late to learn what you may have missed.

Incidentally, several people have been credited with organizing the stages of growth in this way. I first learned about this cycle of stages from material written by Pam Levine and expanded by Sheryn Scott, Ph.D. Later I discovered these concepts further elaborated by Jane Illsley Clarke and Connie Dawson in [Growing Up Again: Parenting Ourselves, Parenting Our Children](#).

and goals, we may easily experience **guilt**.

The most significant relationship is with the basic family.

4. School Age: 6 to 12 Years

Ego Development Outcome: Industry vs. Inferiority
Basic Strengths: Method and Competence

During this stage, often called the Latency, we are capable of learning, creating and accomplishing numerous new skills and knowledge, thus developing a sense of **industry**. This is also a very social stage of development and if we experience unresolved feelings of inadequacy and **inferiority** among our peers, we can have serious problems in terms of competence and self-esteem.

As the world expands a bit, our most significant relationship is with the school and neighborhood. Parents are no longer the complete authorities they once were, although they are still important.

5. Adolescence: 12 to 18 Years

Ego Development Outcome: Identity vs. Role Confusion
Basic Strengths: Devotion and Fidelity

Up to this stage, according to Erikson, development mostly depends upon **what is done to us**. From here on out, development depends primarily upon **what we do**. And while adolescence is a stage at which we are neither a child nor an adult, life is definitely getting more complex as we attempt to find our own **identity**, struggle with social interactions, and grapple with moral issues.

Our task is to discover who we are as individuals separate from our family of origin and as members of a wider society. Unfortunately for those around us, in this process many of us go into a period of withdrawing from responsibilities, which Erikson called a "moratorium." And if we are unsuccessful in navigating this stage, we will experience **role confusion** and upheaval.

A significant task for us is to establish a philosophy of life and in this process we tend to think in terms of ideals, which are conflict free, rather than reality, which is not. The problem is that we don't have much experience and find it easy to substitute ideals for experience. However, we can also develop strong devotion to friends and causes.

It is no surprise that our most significant relationships are

with peer groups.

6. Young adulthood: 18 to 35

Ego Development Outcome: Intimacy and Solidarity vs. Isolation

Basic Strengths: Affiliation and Love

In the initial stage of being an adult we seek one or more companions and love. As we try to find mutually satisfying relationships, primarily through marriage and friends, we generally also begin to start a family, though this age has been pushed back for many couples who today don't start their families until their late thirties. If negotiating this stage is successful, we can experience **intimacy** on a deep level.

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

Our significant relationships are with marital partners and friends.

7. Middle Adulthood: 35 to 55 or 65

Ego Development Outcome: Generativity vs. Self absorption or Stagnation

Basic Strengths: Production and Care

Now work is most crucial. Erikson observed that middle-age is when we tend to be occupied with creative and meaningful work and with issues surrounding our family. Also, middle adulthood is when we can expect to "be in charge," the role we've longer envied.

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

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

Significant relationships are within the workplace, the

community and the family.

8. Late Adulthood: 55 or 65 to Death

Ego Development Outcome: Integrity vs. Despair

Basic Strengths: Wisdom

Erikson felt that much of life is preparing for the middle adulthood stage and the last stage is recovering from it. Perhaps that is because as older adults we can often look back on our lives with happiness and are content, feeling fulfilled with a deep sense that life has meaning and we've made a contribution to life, a feeling Erikson calls **integrity**. Our strength comes from a wisdom that the world is very large and we now have a detached concern for the whole of life, accepting death as the completion of life.

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

The significant relationship is with all of mankind—"my-kind."

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