



# **Encyclopedia of Human Development**

## **Psychosocial Development**

Contributors: Joseph D. Sclafani

Edited by: Neil J. Salkind

Book Title: Encyclopedia of Human Development

Chapter Title: "Psychosocial Development"

Pub. Date: 2005

Access Date: December 11, 2015

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412904759

Online ISBN: 9781412952484

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952484.n506>

Print pages: 1048-1050

©2005 SAGE Publications, Inc.. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

Psychosocial development refers to the interaction of both psychological and social forces over the development of individuals across the life span. It is in the domain of socialization influences. The best known single, unifying theory of these concepts was formulated by Erik H. Erikson (1902–1994). Psychosocial development may also include changes in altruistic, prosocial behavior and self-control.

### Erikson's Theory

Unlike Sigmund Freud, Erikson's theory describes development across the life span. His eight stages cover the psychological tasks that all individuals face from infancy through old age. Erikson's theory addresses issues about how personality develops and how people acquire their identity and role as a member of society. Erikson's emphasis on the psychosocial, rather than the Freudian psychosexual, orientation reminds us that the ego aspect of personality is actively involved in developing skills and attitudes to be a productive, responsible citizen.

Erikson's theory, sometimes referred to as “the stages of man,” is based on a belief that individuals form self-images (an identity) from both self-perceptions and others' perceptions. His is one of the few psychological theories to account for a person's place in history; everyone must accept responsibility for their individualized outcome that results from person-environment relationships. His theory is presented as a series of stages, each having a dilemma or crisis to be resolved.

**Table 1 Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development**

<i>Stage or “Crisis”</i>	<i>Approximate Age Range</i>	<i>Important Event</i>	<i>“Desired” Outcome/Trait</i>	<i>“Negative” Outcome</i>
I. Basic trust v. mistrust	v. Birth–18 months	Feeding, attachment	Hope	Fear, mistrust of others
II. Autonomy v. shame/doubt	v. 18–36 months	Toilet training	Willpower	Self-doubt
III. Initiative v. guilt	v. 3–6 years	Independence	Purpose	Guilt about thought and actions
IV. Industry v. inferiority	v. 6–12 years	School demands	Competence	Lack of competence
V. Identity v. role	v. 12–20 years	Identity and peer relations	Fidelity	Inability to establish a sense of self
VI. Intimacy v. isolation	v. 20–40 years	Love relations	Love	Fear of intimacy
VII. Generativity v. stagnation	v. 40–65 years	Parenting, mentoring	Care	Self-absorption
VIII. Ego integrity v. despair	v. 65–death	Reflection and acceptance	Wisdom	Regret and doubt

People pass through these stages independent of whether they have achieved a resolution. Unresolved conflicts or difficulties are passed on to later stages, which can

make their outcome more challenging.

Erikson's theory has been described as a continuum of crises faced over the course of human development. A new crisis or dilemma emerges as people grow and confront new psychological tasks and responsibilities. These tasks are listed in Table 1 as important events. Crises may be seen as opportunities from which to grow and attain positive outcomes, or as misfortunes that can lead to a failed, negative resolution. From each stage, a desired psychological attribute may be acquired. Table 1 summarizes Erikson's theory.

Most data and research interest have been given to stages I, V and VII. In stage I, *basic trust versus mistrust*, infants, in interactions with their caregivers, learn about the world. They must decide whether there is love and security, leading to a basic trust, or whether their needs are not met and the world is unpredictable, leading to fear and mistrust. This stage corresponds to an entire literature on the importance of attachment as a basic task of infancy. Attachment quality becomes a foundation for all future relationships the person will have over his or her life. The work of Mary Ainsworth is important to note here. She first described the various types of attachment outcomes that emerge as a result of the parent-infant interactions over the first years of life. So-called secure or insecure attachments underlie the concept of trust versus mistrust.

In the second stage, *autonomy versus shame and doubt*, Erikson states that children begin to acquire a sense of independent, self-directed behavior, often evidenced by the "terrible 2s" and use of the word, "no." Children who are overdisciplined or otherwise discouraged to be autonomous will develop shame and doubt about their new abilities.

The third stage, *initiative versus guilt*, is characterized by the toddler's need to learn and acquire self-control against the backdrop of developing many new abilities and skills. Initiative refers to the burgeoning autonomy and independence that leads to exploring all parts of their world. Guilt and unworthiness result when the toddler holds himself back because of overcontrol of his impulses and fantasies.

Stage IV is termed *industry versus inferiority*. This stage is marked by school-age children who are gaining abilities in a wide variety of tasks—projects with which they make things, learn to use tools, and gain a variety of skills. Inferiority and inadequacy result if the child does not master age-appropriate abilities and feels inadequate.

In stage V, *identity versus role confusion*, teens face decisions about their future role in life and who they are. This is a crucial stage in determining overall quality of life and may be associated with great turmoil. The need for appropriate role models and influences, as well as experiences, is obvious. James Marcia has written about four possible identity outcomes—achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. Marcia's work has extended, modernized, and elaborated on Erikson's fifth stage.

According to Marcia, a positive outcome, identity achievement, occurs after the teen has had opportunities to explore options and has committed to a set of values or goals. A teen or young adult who is still experimenting without any commitments is said to be in a moratorium or holding pattern. One who commits to a set of values without challenge or exploration has reached foreclosure. Finally, a person who lacks direction because of lack of exploration and commitment is said to be diffused. Failure to resolve these identity questions can result in a rebellious, disorienting outcome related to acting

out and experimenting with risky behavior.

In the sixth stage, *intimacy versus isolation*, Erikson states that the healthy individual needs to share himself and commit to another. At one time, this meant marriage, but a contemporary take would refer to any long-term intimate, committed relationship. Intimacy with another completes a person and adds to who they are. Failure to achieve intimacy leads to loneliness.

In stage VII, *generativity versus stagnation*, the middle-age adult attempts to give back to the next generation what they will need to develop successfully. Marriage and parenthood are the important life events to be managed. Generativity refers to nurturant, supportive behaviors such as child rearing, caring for others, and productive, meaningful work such as community service. The generative adult wishes to create something of lasting value. Generativity refers to caring behaviors to guide the next generation—mentoring, teaching, and parenting. If one does not engage in these behaviors, the result can be self-absorption and an emotionally impoverished existence, which Erikson termed *stagnation*. Stagnation is an empty feeling, referred to as an absence of meaningful accomplishment.

The final stage, *ego integrity versus despair*, is the time when an individual looks back on a complete lifetime and prepares for death. A person with ego integrity attains total self-hood, a sense of a life well lived. Despair results if a person obsesses over all their loss of roles as they age.

As can be seen by this review, Erikson's theory captures the process of socialization over the lifetime. His theory remains influential as a source of insightful descriptions of the course of human development. Other important psychosocial variables also affect personal growth and psychological well-being.

### **Other Psychosocial Developmental Variables**

*Altruism or prosocial behavior* is a key process related to psychosocial development. Altruism and prosocial behavior as used here are synonymous; these terms refer to behaviors that benefit another without an expected reward in return. Both are rooted in empathy, the ability to comprehend another person's emotional status and be able to identify and feel the way that another person feels. Behaviorally, empathy refers to a person responding emotionally in support of the other. (Sympathy, a different characteristic, refers to feelings of concern for another's situation.)

In childhood, prosocial behavior is usually associated with sociable, competent children who are also able to regulate their emotions. Parenting and role models play a key role in the development of prosocial behaviors and attitudes. Parents who are warm and responsive and show sympathy lay the groundwork for appropriate responses in their children. These responses persist into the teen years and beyond.

*Self-control* refers to an individual's capacity to resist an impulse to engage in socially disapproved or unacceptable behavior. It is an essential characteristic for citizenship, morality, and positive social relations. Self-control first emerges in infancy as seen by compliance behaviors. In early childhood, comparable to Erikson's stage II, children learn to obey adult commands and to comply with authority. Appropriate, warm and responsive parenting will create an environment in which the toddler wants to please the adults. In doing so, the child acquires a positive, eager spirit of cooperation within the

development of autonomy and self-directed behavior.

Self-control has been found to be stable throughout childhood and adolescence. Authoritative parenting, coupled with appropriate modeling, tends to produce the best outcome—good frustration tolerance, control of emotions, and low impulsivity. In adulthood, these traits are associated with success across every facet of life—in family and peer relationships, at work and in career achievement, and overall life satisfaction.

- prosocial behavior
- psychosocial development
- intimacy
- ego
- foreclosures
- toddlers
- adolescent children

Joseph D. Sclafani

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952484.n506>

*See also*

- [Erikson, Erik](#)

### **Further Readings and References**

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E. and Wall, S. (1978). Patterns of attachment. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Erikson, E. H. (R. Coles, Ed.). (2000). The Erik Erikson reader. New York: Norton.

Giesbrecht, N. (1998). Gender patterns of psychosocial development. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*. Retrieved from [http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_dls/m2294/n5-6\\_v39/21227883/p1/article.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m2294/n5-6_v39/21227883/p1/article.jhtml)

Kids Health. (2001). Teaching your child self-control. Retrieved from <http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/selfcontrol.html>

Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology*. New York: Wiley.