

The Developmental Stages of Erik Erikson

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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. His developmental stages were based on his philosophy that: (1) the world gets bigger as we go along and (2) failure is cumulative.

He organized life into eight stages that extend from birth to death (many developmental theories only cover childhood). Then, 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.

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

NOTE: If you'd like to experience growing up with the positive affirmations we need for each stage of development, read [Words of Encouragement for Everyone](#). And listen to an excerpt from a CD that can be helpful for everyone who wonders what it would be like to hear the affirmations we all need at each developmental stage.

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 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.

HELP FOR PARENTS



**WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT
EVERYONE NEEDS**
A Complete Affirmations for the Stage of
Infancy in the Home Program
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Music by Arlene Harder
Recording by Linda Wolford

Through touch and loving care, parents help their babies build a foundation of trust. Then as their children move through each stage of growth, parents need to help them develop other skills they will need in order to become resourceful, resilient and compassionate adults.

Parents can do this if they know what affirmations children need at each stage. To help parents — and even those who aren't parents — learn the affirmations they may have missed hearing when they were growing up, I have created a unique CD called "Words of Encouragement Everyone Needs." Here is an excerpt from the first stage.

To learn more about helping children grow up healthy and emotionally strong, I suggest you visit [Affirmations for Your Child](#) and [Encouraging Words for Everyone](#).

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 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.