

The Developmental Stages of Erik Erikson

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.

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.