

Stages of Development Within Childhood

How do children develop emotionally? A noted psychologist, Erik Erikson, believes emotional growth takes place in stages throughout a person's life

As children develop, their needs and abilities change. These changes affect the kinds of experiences they have with people. Different things are important to children at different ages because:

- Their abilities change
- The specific needs they have for others change
- Their social circle changes
- The events and issues that dominate their thinking change

Erik Erikson, a psychologist who has studied the emotional development of human beings, has divided the continuous process of development into eight basic stages. He describes the five earliest stages in the following way.

1. Sense of Trust

The sense of basic trust, says Erikson, is a child's sense that the world and the people around him or her are dependable. Infants who get consistent care from familiar, loving people, who have their needs met, grow to feel that their immediate environment is trustworthy.

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The basic feeling of trust usually develops during the first year of the child's life. But it can be strengthened or undermined in later years. During infancy, Erikson proposes, children develop their basic view of the world as either a dependable, satisfying place or a place of pain, frustration and uncertainty. The way that people respond to the baby's physical and emotional needs affects his or her development of a sense of trust or of mistrust. Without a sense of trust, children may have trouble with the next stage, developing a sense of autonomy.

2. Sense of Autonomy

During their second and third years of life, children's energy centres on developing a mind and will of their own. Self-awareness is developing and the desire to do things for themselves.

Erikson says that when children do not have a chance to make their own choices, when adults are too strict in forcing them to do things, or do not let them do things they are capable of, children may lose faith in their own will. They feel ashamed or develop doubts about their abilities.

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Erikson does not mean that children should make every decision: there are some choices that adults must make. A young child is not ready to decide what things are safe to play with or what foods are appropriate to eat. For example, Erikson is simply saying that children *can* make many choices perfectly well, and that they will be healthier if they are given the chance to do so.

During this period, children's physical and mental abilities are growing, too. More and more occasions arise that involve a question of what they are allowed to do. They are able to toddle about and to learn to use the toilet successfully: they are beginning to understand and use language and to remember. These abilities enable young children to rule their own life more.

At the same time, adults expect more of them. As children are trying to develop more control over their world, adults are trying to direct their behaviour. Erikson maintains that if children are given some opportunities to make their own choices, without direction or control from others they will develop a sense of self-reliance – confidence in their own ability to make choices. Denied these opportunities, children have trouble learning to trust themselves or develop a sense of initiative.

3. Sense of Initiative

Sense of initiative results from a willingness to try things and the self-confidence to take risks. Around the ages of three to six, children's curiosity, imagination and need to experiment normally have a great influence on what they do and how they view others.

According to Erikson, with healthy development, a child has a sense of autonomy (feels confident of being a person in his or her own right) and a sense of trust (feels that the world is basically a good place). At this third stage children are eager to find out what kind of person they can be. They observe others keenly. They imitate behaviour, and they experiment with how they can affect their world.

This is the age when both conscience and imagination develop – when children understand better what people expect of them and, at the same time, are inventing fantasies. Some experts hold that a child quite normally may feel guilty for having thoughts about deeds he or she imagines but never carries out. They say that this combination of a developing conscience and wide-ranging imagination explains the nightmares common to this period.

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Children's sense of initiative grows when they are encouraged to make plans and are given chances to carry out their ideas and to express their fantasies safely. Excessive punishment can lead to excessive guilt.

Initiative is an attitude toward the world and toward their own abilities that children must have in order to continue learning. A child who behaves “too well” may be feeling deep unexpressed guilt or may have squelched the desire to relax and try

things. In such cases, a child may need help in addition to your loving and encouraging home, so be sure to ask your caseworker for advice.

Too often, the stresses in a foster child's world upset the balance between conscience and fantasy and the need to develop initiative. The child is left feeling guilty and worthless.

4. Sense of Industry

Erikson's fourth stage begins somewhere around six years of age and extends over the next five or six years. During this period, for most children, preoccupation with fantasy subsides. They want to be engaged in real tasks that they can complete. As with other developmental stages, seeds of this kind of interest appear much earlier. In fact, some children are trained very early to perform socially useful tasks. The exact age is not the point here. This stage begins, Erikson suggests, when the child seems to want to learn to stick to tasks, to do things well, to learn from others, and sometimes to be competitive.

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Adults can help children in this period by providing interesting ideas for work, both in school and at home, at the right level of challenge. Adults can also help them learn how to do things. Industry includes consciously putting problem-solving skills and language skills to work.

Feeling successful encourages children's sense of self-worth and eagerness to learn more. But feeling defeated leads to a sense of inferiority that can discourage future learning.

5. Sense of Identity

For all adolescents the great anxiety is: What does it all add up to? What will be my place in the larger social world? This is a difficult time for everyone involved because all of the old concerns about trust of others and self, about conscience and guilt, about success and failure come up again in complicated forms. Patience, love and understanding are needed as youngsters struggle to find their own appropriate roles, values and behaviours.

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For foster children the question “Who am I?” is a critical concern at every age, but it can be overwhelming during adolescence. The more you can affirm the child's uniqueness as an individual, the easier it will be for the child to develop a solid sense of self-worth.