

STAGES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Adapted from *A Child's Journey through Placement*, by Vera I. Fahlberg, MD, and
Childhood and Society, by Erik H. Erikson



Pathways to
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Age 0 to 18 months / Emotional Stage – Sense of Trust (trust in others)

At this stage, the child's primary task is to develop a sense of trust in his caregiver. Infants develop security and trust as a result of consistent, reliable care from one nurturing caregiver. The baby signals discomfort through crying, and the parent responds to meet the need while also interacting with the baby in a pleasurable way. As this happens over and over again, needs become associated with nurturing and gratifying responses. The repeated successful completion of this "arousal-relaxation" cycle is critical for children to develop a sense of trust and security, and to become attached to the caregiver. These interchanges also help to organize the child's nervous system and set the stage for learning how to learn. When the child signals a need and the need is met by the caregiver, the child begins to learn basic cause and effect. Gradually, the child is able to distinguish between different states of discomfort, such as being hungry, wet, tired or in pain. Children make great gains in physical development in the first year of life, with changes happening on almost a daily basis. Language also begins to emerge, with children first responding to sounds, especially the voice of their primary caretaker, which progresses to infants being able to make a variety of sounds. Vocalizations increase when someone talks or plays with them.

The parent's job during the child's first year of life is to meet the child's basic needs on demand, and to provide stimulation that will encourage the child to use all of his senses and enhance motor development. Parents need to be consistently available and responsive to the child's needs in order for the child to develop a sense of trust, which allows them to begin to attend to their environment and continue to develop.

18 months to 3 years / Emotional Stage – Sense of Autonomy (trust in self)

At this stage, the child's primary task is to start to separate psychologically from his primary caregiver and to begin to develop a sense of self. He learns to follow simple directions, but is increasingly able to achieve simple tasks himself. The toddler is also capable of showing a greater variety of emotions, including frustration, anger, sadness, fear and affection. Language, which began in the first year of life, becomes more functional, with jabbering and other sounds giving way to simple words. Language development is essential because it allows the child to express emotions rather than acting them out, as well as to understand and remember what is said to him. Frequent words in the toddler vocabulary are *me*, *mine* and *no*. At about 18 months of age, a child can begin to tolerate brief separations from the caretaker. A toddler will typically go through a stubborn, oppositional and self-centered stage which is a necessary part of trying to separate his own identity from his caretaker's. Social emotions start to emerge, including pride, pity, sympathy, modesty and shame. The child experiences pride in being able to "do it myself," and also show signs of embarrassment in other situations. Learning that something is a "no no" is a first step in acknowledging right versus wrong, which is a precursor to conscience development. The toddler is becoming more aware of physical sensations and toilet training becomes possible. Their physical development is increasing in other areas as well, and they are able to begin to jump, run and climb. Toddlers are increasingly able to play alone or along side other children.

The parent's role at this stage is to encourage, without pressure, the development of new skills, and to help the toddler feel "big" and capable. At the same time, it is the parent's responsibility to insure the child's safety, and to provide proper supervision and appropriate limit-setting. Stable routines are important, coupled with games and experiences that allow the child increasing opportunities to be independent and "in charge." Reasoning with a toddler does not work, but using "No" and switching



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activities is effective.

Age 3 to 6 years / Emotional Stage – Sense of Initiative (right and wrong)

At this stage, the child's primary task is to develop a sense of initiative, as well as a growing understanding of right and wrong. The focus is on the child becoming more able to function in a small group setting, starting with the family. Play is the primary job of the preschooler, and it is used to work through larger internal questions and concerns. For example, the child may pretend to be the baby or student on some occasions, and at other times, the mother or teacher as they sort through the differences between being dependent and independent. Playing at being the "good guy" and the "bad guy" is a similar imaginative way of working through larger questions of right and wrong. Magical thinking is an important part of the child's thought processes at this stage, as is egocentric thinking. A child at this age thinks that wishes make things come true, and they also think that they are responsible for everything that happens to them and other important people in their lives. Abandonment fears are strong in the earlier part of this stage, but lessen toward the latter part of the stage. Other key areas of development include increased verbal ability (lots of questions!), physical aggression and bossiness as a result of a self-centered view of the world, increased abilities in self-care (dressing themselves) and increased motor skills. Cooperative play with others begins during this stage. There is also a greater awareness of and curiosity about the differences between the two sexes.

Because play is the primary way in which children are accomplishing the tasks of this stage, the parent needs to provide the child with opportunities for both individual and group play. The parent also needs to help the child to differentiate between fantasy and reality, not by stopping imaginary play, but simply by identifying when something is "pretend" and when it is real. It is also important for the parent to avoid reinforcing certain types of magical thinking, such as a child's notion that they caused adult problems by wishing something to be so when they were upset or angry at the parent. Parents also need to be able to address their child's curiosity about sexuality in an accepting manner.

Age 6 to 10 years / Emotional Stage – Sense of Industry (conscience development)

At this stage, the child's primary task is to develop a sense of industry as he begins to encounter situations outside of the immediate family. A great deal of energy is devoted to learning in school, developing motor skills through sports and games, and social interactions with same-sex peers. The early part of the stage brings many new experiences to the child that can lead to periods of stress and frustration, as well as possible regression to earlier behaviors. As they acquire new skills, children at this stage become able to concentrate for longer periods. The child becomes more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, usually through trial and error. Emotions are difficult to express in words at first, but the child is starting to be able to talk about feelings after the fact. Children at this stage are keenly aware of what is "fair" or "unfair" in life, and losing is difficult. A lot of thinking is going on in the latter part of this stage, which may appear as daydreaming. There is curiosity about themselves as babies and young children, and enjoyment in hearing about their own escapades. Friends are very important and start to compete with family time. Conscience development takes big steps at this stage, progressing to the point where children are more able to rely on internal feelings of guilt instead of the external control of their parent's presence.

The parents' role at this stage is to provide a secure home base that allows the child to cope with the increasing challenges they are facing. Allowing plenty of time with peers is important, as well as opportunities to explore a variety of interests. Praise is helpful in encouraging positive behavior, as is physical closeness. Providing opportunities to correct mistakes is important, as well as appropriate outlets for energy and emotions. Reasoning through problems by leading children through the steps of events is now possible. Clear messages about family values help with conscience development at this stage.

Age 10 to 18 years / Emotional Stage – Sense of Identity (own place in the world)



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At this stage, the child's primary task is to develop a sense of identity as he begins the transition from childhood to adulthood. He is maturing physically, intellectually and psychologically, and ideally will gain the skills necessary to become a successful adult. On the intellectual level, the adolescent is becoming able to reason logically without needing an adult to lead him through the steps. He can think abstractly about things he has not experienced directly. On the psychological level, the adolescent is re-working many of the same tasks of the toddler and preschool years. This time, he is separating himself psychologically from the family, and beginning to find his own place in the world. Much of his emotional energy is shifting from his parents to peer relationships and other people outside of the family. Meanwhile, the adolescent is also maturing physically and sexually, leading to a great deal of focus on his own body as well as a growing interest in the opposite sex. This is a long developmental stage, beginning before the teen years and actually extending well into the twenties before emotional and financial independence is achieved. It is also a complex stage...the adolescent is no longer a child, but is not yet an adult and he is having to shift from one set of expectations for his behavior to another.

In early adolescence, the focus is on becoming comfortable with changes of the body, psychological separation, gaining self-control and the early stages of identity formation. Behaviors will swing between extremes of moody and withdrawn, to more engaged and involved; from irresponsible to responsible; rebellious at home while being overly compliant with peers; sexual and aggressive impulses; and pulling back from the family while still needing to feel connected and a sense of belonging to the family. Magical and egocentric thinking resurface in early adolescence, resulting in the teen swinging between very inflated views about their abilities to feelings of incompetence and overwhelm. Identity questions in the early part of adolescence center around "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?"

In the later stages of adolescence, the focus shifts to acquiring skills, continued identity formation and preparing for emancipation, while remaining connected to the family. Oppositional behaviors, while still present, generally become less pronounced as the teen becomes more self-assured. The teen starts to realize that it's okay for them to be different from their parents and peers, and to be more tolerant of differences in others. Energy is more focused on developing educational and vocational skills, as well as basic self-care skills such as cooking, shopping, budgeting, hygiene, etc. Social and communication skills are also important at this stage because they will be the foundation of meaningful interpersonal relationships. Identity questions in the latter part of adolescence shift to questions of "What can I do or be?" and "What do I believe in?"

The parent's job at this stage is to continue to provide a stable family environment for their child while they are experiencing the extremes in emotions and big changes that accompany adolescence. Similar to the toddler years, it is important for the adolescent to have consistent parent figures that they can oppose and separate from. Having reasonable expectations of behaviors and having some areas in which the teen can rebel safely will help both the parent and the teen during this stage. Parents need to model responsible adult behavior and appropriate ways in which to get needs met. Increasing opportunities for the adolescent to take control and responsibility for their own choices allows him to learn the consequences of his actions while still within the safety of the family. Helping the teen to see multiple options in situations expands their thinking beyond the extremes and limitations of either/or thought patterns. Providing opportunities for appropriate interaction with peers and dating, and facilitating skill development in all areas will assist the teen in the transition to adulthood.