



Lessons from Erikson

Stephen B. Graves PhD & Elizabeth Larkin EdD

To cite this article: Stephen B. Graves PhD & Elizabeth Larkin EdD (2006) Lessons from Erikson, Journal of Intergenerational Relationships, 4:2, 61-71

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1300/J194v04n02_05



Published online: 22 Sep 2008.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 15676



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 9 View citing articles [↗](#)

Lessons from Erikson:
A Look at Autonomy
Across the Lifespan

Stephen B. Graves, PhD
Elizabeth Larkin, EdD

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this paper is to examine issues related to autonomy across the life span and to draw comparisons between a young child's search for autonomy and an older adult's efforts to maintain autonomy. The paper includes an introduction of the challenges for young children and older adults as related to autonomy. A definition of autonomy and an explanation of Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development are included. Each of Erikson's stages is reviewed with consideration given to traits, characteristics, and needs of the young child and older adult. Similarities and differences between young children and older adults in their search for autonomy are examined. The

Stephen B. Graves is Professor, University of South Florida, 5700 North Tamiami Trail, PMC101, Sarasota, FL 34243 (E-mail: sgraves@sar.usf.edu).

Elizabeth Larkin is Associate Professor, University of South Florida, 5700 North Tamiami Trail, PMC101, Sarasota, FL 34243 (E-mail: llarkin@sar.usf.edu).

Journal of Intergenerational Relationships, Vol. 4(2) 2006
Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JIR>

© 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.

doi:10.1300/J194v04n02_05

paper concludes with implications for caregivers regarding their practices with young children and older adults. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Autonomy, young children, older adults, intergenerational programs

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine issues related to autonomy across the life span and to draw comparisons between a young child's search for autonomy and an older adult's efforts to maintain autonomy. The paper will define autonomy and explore several features of this psychosocial developmental stage as described by Erik Erikson (1950). The next section will be a discussion of strategies used by young children and older adults in their search for autonomy. The paper concludes with implications for practice in intergenerational programs for young children and older adults.

Definition of Autonomy

Autonomy is defined as "the quality or state of being self-governing; a self-governing state; self-directing freedom and especially moral independence" (Webster, 1983, p. 118). When applying this definition to young children and older adults, some very interesting similarities and differences arise. In a very young child's life, the capacity for self-governance and self-direction is just emerging. Children are completely dependent on parents and caregivers to set limits and direct behavior because they have yet to learn discretion. In the case of typical older adults' lives, self-governance and self-direction have already been firmly established and they are accustomed to being independent. For older adults, moral independence also has presumably been realized, and they are capable of making autonomous judgments about right and wrong behavior. There is little dependence on others to judge right or wrong as there is with a young child. However, if an older adult has dementia, the process of maintaining this aspect of autonomy may be compromised. From this standpoint, a serious physical limitation affects the ability to maintain self-governance and self-direction.

Definition of Young Children and Older Adults

In this article, we use the generally accepted definition of young children as those youngsters between birth and age eight (NAEYC). It is much more complex attempting to define an age range for older adults. Retirement age no longer applies because some stop working before 55 or 65, while others stay in the work force well beyond that age marker. Rather than defining a specific age, we address the issue of autonomy from the point of view of Erikson’s last two stages, Middle Adulthood and Late Adulthood. Although Erikson focuses on autonomy as the main theme in toddlerhood, the search for autonomy is a continuous thread throughout the lifespan.

PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Erikson emphasized developmental change throughout the life course with an identification of eight stages of development. Each stage consists of a unique developmental task that presents the developing individual with a crisis that must be resolved. According to Erikson, each crisis does not have to be catastrophic but provides one with both increased vulnerability and enhanced potential. The more success one has resolving each developmental crisis, the healthier the evolving person will be (Hopkins, 2000). The eight stages, according to Erikson (1950) are

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| • Trust vs. mistrust | Infancy |
| • Autonomy vs. shame and doubt | Ages one to three years |
| • Initiative vs. guilt | Early childhood |
| • Industry vs. inferiority | Middle and late childhood |
| • Identity vs. identity confusion | Adolescence |
| • Intimacy vs. isolation | Early adulthood |
| • Generativity vs. stagnation | Middle adulthood |
| • Integrity vs. despair | Late adulthood |

In Erikson’s theoretical framework, the first stage of life marks the development of hope, an outgrowth of a positive ratio of trust versus mistrust. Erikson (1950) described this stage in the baby as the first demonstration of social engagement and trust. When a mother is consistently responsive to her baby’s needs in her care, the child experiences comfort, predictability, and a feeling of inner security. Erikson believed

these responsive interactions placed the child in a general state of trust, ready to explore the world. This state of trust becomes the foundation for the development of autonomy.

Parental faith and hope, which supports trust in the newborn, has for hundreds of years found its expression in religion. According to Erikson (1950), "trust born of care, is in fact, the touchstone of the actuality of a given religion" (p. 250). All religions have in common the childlike surrender to a higher being who provides earthly needs and spiritual healing. In a religious context, individual trust becomes a common faith and mistrust becomes a commonly understood evil. For the very young child, the development of trust becomes the capacity for developing faith later in life. Since the foundation of faith and trust is built upon the responsiveness of care the baby receives, there is a balance of power that emerges between the baby and the adult in the reciprocal process of bonding and caring.

For the older adult, spiritual autonomy and moral independence may be very strong components of self-esteem and self-directedness. The responsive caring that respects the individual's rights engenders trust. The maintenance of autonomy for older adults shifts toward the moral domain as physical control declines. In other words, the older adult strives to maintain spiritual autonomy in order to maintain trust, as he grows increasingly dependent on others to care for his physical needs. Self-directedness takes the form of independent choice and attitudes rather than the physical action and exploration of a toddler.

In the second stage called autonomy vs. shame and doubt, Erikson viewed muscular maturation as the foundation for experimentation with two sets of social modalities: holding on and letting go. It is at this stage when a child begins to explore and move away from the trusting environment of his/her mother. To hold a child too close at this time can become a restrictive or restraining pattern, or alternatively, it can become a pattern of care typified by the term "to have and to hold." To let go too much can be destructive in the sense of neglect, or it can become a relaxed *laissez faire* approach "to let be" or "to let pass." For the parent or caregiver, striking a balance between these forces in the young child's life presents a tremendous challenge just as it can in an older adult's life. For the older adult, respecting individual rights and maintaining moral autonomy is imperative, even as physical independence may decline. For the child, the goal is to allow curiosity to blossom without crossing the boundaries of physical safety or social mores.

External control in the early childhood years must be meted out with firmness and reassurance. As the child moves away from the parent and

explores the environment, the parent must be vigilant in her efforts to encourage and support curiosity and exploration in a context of trust and confidence in the child's abilities. Firmness is required to protect the child, as the child's ability to hold on and let go with discretion is not yet developed. As significant others in the environment encourage the child to be independent, they also protect the child from experiencing excessive shame and doubt. If the child lacks firmness and support in the development of autonomy, the child may become manipulative and develop what Erikson called a "precocious conscience," thinking they are more in control than they really are. One risk is that the child may become obsessive with his/her own power and control, constantly testing limits to check on the rigidity of those limits. Once again, this marks a specific challenge for the parent to strike a delicate balance in this dance of setting the boundaries for the developing child's explorations. The young child must experience support and encouragement for his curiosity to blossom productively. At the same time, parents and caregivers also protect and guide the young child who is seeking greater independence and autonomy.

Becoming obsessive with power and control is equally a risk with the older adult. For an older citizen who has lost some capacity for power and control over daily activities, the ability to make choices and maintain a measure of control over moral decisions in one's life may be extremely important in the quest for maintaining autonomy. The perception of a lack of ability to exercise control has been shown to have serious negative effects on older adults as it leads to a decrease in self-esteem or even depression (Langer, 1983).

Erikson perceived shame to be an emotion insufficiently studied in our culture because it is so easily absorbed by guilt in the child's early years. Shame is usually thought of as being exposed, caught with one's pants down, sinking into the ground, or being invisible. In other words, according to Erikson, the term means to be completely exposed but not ready to be looked at—self-conscious. Too much shame in a young child's life may lead to a strong determination to get away with things, or worse, it may lead to defiance and shamelessness. Erikson's (1950) clinical observations led him to believe that doubt has much to do with a consciousness of having a front and a back—and especially a "behind." The behind with its libidinal focus in the sphincters and buttocks cannot be seen by the child and is dominated by the will of others. Thus, Erikson (1950) identified *will* as the basic strength to be developed at this autonomy vs. shame and doubt stage.

This stage, therefore, becomes decisive for the ratio of love and hate, cooperation and willfulness, freedom of self-expression and its suppression. From a sense of self-control without loss of self-esteem comes a lasting sense of good will and pride; from a sense of loss of self-control and of foreign over-control comes a lasting propensity for doubt and shame. (p. 254)

Healthy older adults may show concern about a possible shameful “loss of face” or being attacked “from behind.” Like a young child who feels self-conscious or invisible, an older adult can also experience similar feelings when they are not able to exert control over self-care and physical functions. If the significant adults in a young child’s life provide a sense of dignity, appropriate independence and good will, then it is likely that the child will develop autonomy, for example in the process of toilet training. A solid foundation of autonomy will then prevent undue shame or doubt in later life. Similarly, caregivers of older adults must respect the need for dignity, moral independence, and good will to protect against shame and doubt. Over-control may lead to shame and doubt for both generations.

Erikson’s seventh stage involves the person in middle adulthood. This stage, generativity vs. stagnation, is one that includes teaching younger generations as well as learning from them. This stage involves a shift in focus from concern for one’s own life toward the lives of children and grandchildren or younger protégés. The mature person needs to be needed, and can provide guidance as well as encouragement to others. Generativity is the concern for creating and guiding the next generation. In contrast to the young child who pushes to gain independence, the older adult holds on to maintain independence within the context of family and familiar friends. The older adult often seeks to stay connected with peers and relies on interdependent relationships with family and friends.

Erikson’s eighth and final stage of the life course is integrity vs. despair, which comes in late adulthood. Sometimes called the ego’s propensity for order and meaning in life, it is at this stage that the true acceptance of one’s self and life’s work are achieved. During this stage, we reflect on the kind of person we have been and how our lives have been spent. Integrity results from reflection that yields a positive review that life has been spent in worthwhile activities and accomplishments. If the reflection yields a negative outlook that life has not been spent well, then the person may have feelings of despair and fear death.

Trust, the first ego step, is defined as assured reliance on another's integrity, and integrity is the last step in his framework of human development. Thus, it is a life cycle that illustrates a generational connection and supports the need for intergenerational programs. In paraphrasing the relationship of adult integrity and infantile trust, Erikson (1950) stated that "healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death" (p. 269).

STRATEGIES TO MAINTAIN AUTONOMY

We must recognize that there is an extremely strong push toward independence in the first few years of life. The typically developing toddler is experiencing many new skills in motor development and language development, and is building a vocabulary filled with terms like "No!" "Mine," "I," "Me," and "I do it myself." For the first time, toddlers are experiencing some control over their world and they are enjoying the effects of asserting themselves (Graves, Gargiulo, & Sluder, 1996). In this confidence-building and independence-seeking time when the child requires much encouragement, tolerance, and understanding from parents and teachers, he avidly learns to do things independently and to exert control over the environment both physically and linguistically. Parents and caregivers must be consistent in their efforts to encourage and support the child's explorations while keeping the child safe and protected throughout his experimentation with cause and effect.

While the general search for autonomy in a young child's life is very predictable and similar among children, the older adult's journey toward the maintenance of autonomy is a different challenge and varies with individuals who have lived uniquely different lives. Those older adults, who have been through a variety of life-changing experiences, may take on very different behaviors in their efforts toward maintaining autonomy. Spending time with grandchildren and reveling in their accomplishments, regardless how small, is a critically important activity for some older adults. The role of teacher, guide, and caregiver for the younger generation contributes positively toward the feeling of spiritual autonomy and leads into the feeling of integrity. Conversely, the older adult who has lost a long-time spouse or who is suffering from a terminal illness may have a very different profile than others at this time of life. Stressors like these have the potential for lowering self-esteem,

limiting feelings of control, and ultimately, compromising the process of maintaining autonomy.

Unlike the young child, the older adult has experienced a variety of roles and role sequences. Two important roles, which contribute to a satisfying life course, are occupational careers and marital-family roles. For most people, family life marks the most lasting and most intimate social relationships over a large part of the lifespan. It also sometimes marks changing commitments and responsibilities. The personality is nurtured and shaped strongly by the family in which one is reared (Vygotsky, 1978). But with adulthood and marriage comes a cycle of developmental phases as children are born into the married couple's home, grow from dependency to autonomy, then depart from the home leaving the married couple alone again. Unlike the predictable, sequential stages of a young child's life, each stage of family life involves coping with particular responsibilities posed by the family as a whole. These interact with other roles that must be filled at the same time. One must remember Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective that suggests interactions within a family have the potential to reciprocally influence each member and the whole family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Marriage and parenthood are major forces for change in personal habits, goals, values, and beliefs. Very few other relational transitions, except possibly divorce, widowhood, and homosexuality demand comparable adaptations. Coping with these transitions requires a healthy bank of positive experiences deeply rooted in a foundation of trust, autonomy, and self-direction. Occupational careers are a major source in providing continuity in one's identity as well as in lifestyle and economic stability (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990). Careers may have great continuity and coherence for some, while others may experience tremendous shifts and upheaval. Career stages and demands can also put a huge amount of stress on a person's relationships with spouse and children (Clausen, 1986).

The older adult's yielding of the occupational role does not pose a serious threat to most people's sense of identity or self-esteem if they have an integrated sense of autonomy. Factors such as losing friends, ill health, losing a spouse, and changing residences to institutional settings can be highly stressful for older adults because it puts their maintenance of autonomy in jeopardy. Losing the ability to make choices added to increasing social isolation will create stress. Thus, older adults experiencing these changes often require much adaptation. Accommodating to a situation that causes one to feel numb and powerless means resolving the need for autonomy with that ability to accept dependence. In the final analysis, some adaptation demands recognition, acceptance, even

resignation, without relinquishing one's personhood and the value of one's life experiences (Rodin, Schooler, & Schaie, 1990).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In intergenerational programs, it is essential for caregivers to have a strong knowledge base concerning children's growth, development and learning, as well as adult developmental needs. It is imperative for teachers to realize that the toddler who has experienced trust will be exploring, experimenting, and asserting his/her independence. Teachers, caregivers, and older adults can play important roles in this process for young children, while in intergenerational programs, they also protect against excessive noise of violation of social mores. The older adults may depend on caregivers to control the environment (i.e., children's behavior) when they cannot do it themselves. Caregivers must reach a balance in providing a safe, stimulating environment that encourages exploration but also protects and maintains security for the developing child (Berk, 2003; Santrock, 2004), especially where older adults do not want to discipline or be over-stimulated by children (Larkin & Newman, 2001). The young child seeking autonomy is passing through a stage filled with motor skill development and language development activities. In addition, the toddler is still becoming a social being, and caregivers assist in the development of social and emotional skill building. Older adults, together with caregivers, are also capable of contributing to the cultural transference of social knowledge. Much exploration at this age is an attempt to discover how to identify feelings, how to express feelings, and what is acceptable behavior in social relationships. These lessons are not learned easily and require much feedback and guidance from adults and caregivers over time. Responses to a child's behavior in these interactions are very important in the child's search for autonomy just as they are to the older adult's need to maintain dignity, respect, competence, spiritual and moral autonomy. This is the time when young children are realizing their will and older adults are discovering the remaining power of their will. If youngsters are restrained too much or punished too harshly, they may likely develop shame and doubt rather than autonomy; if older adult's are limited too much, they may become depressed, sad, or willful.

In working with older adults, caregivers must realize the signs adults display in their search for autonomy as they seek to fulfill the imperatives of generativity and integrity. When older adults are reflective and

retrospective about their lives, they need to share their stories with peers and caregivers who understand the cultural context of their belief systems. For example, there are cultural differences regarding the role of older adults in society and expectations for their autonomy. As already mentioned, the older adult needs to be needed as well as taken care of, and be able to give to the next generation. Caregivers who provide genuine support for the older adult's positive views of their own productivity, creativity, moral independence and integrity assist in the process of successful aging. Just as the caregivers for young children provide a safe, secure environment in which the child can exercise her independence and autonomy, the caregiver for older adults also provides an accepting, secure environment that is appropriately responsive to the older adult's feelings of control, self-directedness, and spiritual autonomy. Intergenerational programs provide an ideal environment to support both needs if staff are well prepared and understand these developmental issues.

REFERENCES

- Berk, L.E. (2003). *Child development*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clausen, J.A. (1986). *The life course: A sociological perspective*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Coles, R. (1970). Erik Erikson: *The growth of his work*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Erikson, E. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Erikson, E. (1982). *The life cycle completed*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Evans, R.I. (1967). *Dialogue with Erik Erikson*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Fiske, M. & Chiriboga, D.A. (1990). *Change and continuity in adult life*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.
- Graves, S.B., Gargiulo, R.M., & Sluder, L.C. (1996). *Young children: An introduction to early childhood education*. Minneapolis/St. Paul: West.
- Hopkins, J.R. (2000). Erikson, E.H. In A. Kazden (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of psychology*. Washington, DC & New York: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press.
- Langer, E.J. (1983). *The psychology of control*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Larkin, E., & Newman, S. (2001). Benefits of intergenerational staffing in preschools. *Educational Gerontology*, 27 (5), 373-385.
- NAEYC. Available: www.naeyc.org.
- Rodin, J., Schooler, C., & Schaie, K.W. (Eds.) (1990). *Self-directedness: Cause and effects throughout the life course*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Santrock, J.W. (2004). *Child development*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Webster's ninth new collegiate dictionary*. (1983). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc.

Received: 11/04/04

Revised: 04/15/05

Accepted: 07/01/05