Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development

The [Piaget stages of development](http://www.webmd.com/children/piaget-stages-of-development) is a blueprint that describes the stages of normal intellectual development, from infancy through adulthood. This includes thought, judgment, and knowledge. The stages were named after [psychologist](http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/guide-to-psychiatry-and-counseling) and developmental biologist Jean Piaget, who recorded the intellectual development and abilities of infants, children, and [teens](http://teens.webmd.com/default.htm).

Piaget's four stages of intellectual (or cognitive) development are:

* Sensorimotor. Birth through ages 18-24 months
* Preoperational. Toddlerhood (18-24 months) through early childhood (age 7)
* Concrete operational. Ages 7 to 12
* Formal operational. Adolescence through adulthood

Piaget acknowledged that some children may pass through the stages at different ages than the averages noted above and that some children may show characteristics of more than one stage at a given time. But he insisted that cognitive development always follows this sequence, that stages cannot be skipped, and that each stage is marked by new intellectual abilities and a more complex understanding of the world.

**Sensorimotor Stage**

During the early stages, infants are only aware of what is immediately in front of them. They focus on what they see, what they are doing, and physical interactions with their immediate environment.

Because they don't yet know how things react, they're constantly experimenting with activities such as shaking or throwing things, putting things in their mouths, and learning about the world through trial and error. The later stages include goal-oriented behavior which brings about a desired result.

Between ages 7 and 9 months, infants begin to realize that an object exists even if it can no longer be seen. This important milestone -- known as object permanence -- is a sign that memory is developing.

After infants start crawling, standing, and walking, their increased physical mobility leads to increased cognitive development. Near the end of the sensorimotor stage (18-24 months), infants reach another important milestone -- early [language development](http://www.webmd.com/parenting/baby/tc/language-development-in-newborns-topic-overview), a sign that they are developing some symbolic abilities.

**Preoperational Stage**

According to Piaget, children in the Preoperational stage of development build on skills learned and mastered during the Sensorimotor stage. During this stage, young children's play becomes increasingly imaginary and filled with fantasies. As children develop cognitively, their play will move from simple make-believe to plots involving more characters and scenarios, games with sophisticated rules, etc. According to Piaget, playing isn't just fun; it is an important part of brain development.

According to Piaget, young children go through two distinct phases or sub-stages in cognitive development during this stage. First, they enter the Preconceptual sub-stage between the ages of 2 & 4. During the Preconceptual sub-stage, children master the ability to picture, remember, understand, and replicate objects in their minds that are not immediately in front of them. In other words, children can create mental images of objects and store them in their minds for later use. Before this period, during the Sensorimotor stage, infants and toddlers understood their world as containing only what they were immediately experiencing and nothing else. According to Piaget, if a toddler was playing with a kitten and it left his line of vision, the child would be unable to create a mental picture of that kitten. To the toddler, the idea of the kitten (and therefore the kitten itself) would no longer exist. Young children who have entered the Preconceptual sub-stage can draw a picture of or pretend to play with a kitten that is no longer there.

The next sub-stage in Piaget's Preoperational cognitive development stage is the Intuitive Thought sub-stage, which spans ages 4-7 years. Children in this substage of development learn by asking questions such as, "Why?" and "How come?" Piaget labeled this "intuitive thought" because he believed that children at this stage tend to be so certain of their knowledge and understanding that they are unaware of how they gained this knowledge in the first place (i.e., knowing by intuition).

### **Concrete Operational Stage**

At this time, elementary-age and preadolescent children -- ages 7 to 11 -- demonstrate logical, concrete reasoning.

Children's thinking becomes less egocentric and they are increasingly aware of external events. They begin to realize that one's own thoughts and feelings are unique and may not be shared by others or may not even be part of reality.

During this stage, however, most children still can't think abstractly or hypothetically. The development of logical, concrete thought can usually only be applied to objects that are real or can be seen.

**Formal Operational Stage**

Adolescents who reach this fourth stage of intellectual development -- usually at age 11-plus -- are able to logically use symbols related to abstract concepts, such as algebra and science. They can think about multiple variables in systematic ways, formulate hypotheses, and consider possibilities. They also can ponder abstract [relationships](http://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/default.htm) and concepts such as justice.

Although Piaget believed in lifelong intellectual development, he insisted that the formal operational stage is the final stage of cognitive development, and that continued intellectual development in adults depends on the accumulation of knowledge.

**Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development**

Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development is an eight-stage theory that describes how personality develops and changes throughout the course of the entire lifespan. As each person progresses through life, from infancy up until death, they confront different challenges that can either be mastered or that can lead to difficulties. While each stage builds on the experiences of earlier stages, Erikson didn’t believe that mastering each stage was necessary in order to move on to the next. Like other stage theorists, Erikson believed that these stages occurred in a predetermined order, a concept known as the epigenetic principle.

Erikson’s theory bears some resemblances to Freud’s psychosexual stage theory, but with some key differences. Freud focused on the influence of the id, while Erikson focused on the ego. Freud believed that personality was largely shaped by the time a child reached age five, while Erikson’s theory spans the entire lifespan.

Another important difference is that while Freud stressed the importance of childhood experiences and unconscious desires, Erikson placed a greater emphasis on the role of social and cultural influences.

There are three key components of Erikson’s theory:

* **Ego identity:** Our continually changing sense of self that emerges due to our social interactions and experiences.
* **Ego strength:** This develops when people successfully master each stage of development.
* **Conflict:** At each stage of development, people face some type of conflict that serves as a turning point in the developmental process.

**Stage 1: Trust versus Mistrust**

Is the world safe and predictable or dangerous and chaotic? Erikson believed that the first stage of psychosocial development was centered on answering this important question.

An infant enters the world totally helpless and dependent on caregivers to take care of it. Erikson believed that during these first two critical years of life, it is essential for an infant to learn that caregivers could be trusted to provide for these needs. When a child is cared for and his or her needs are attended to properly, the child develops a sense that the world is trustworthy.

What happens if a child is neglected or his or her needs are not met with any real consistency? In such a scenario, the child may develop a sense of mistrust about the world. The world may feel like an unpredictable place and the people who should love and care for the child may not be dependable.

If this stage is completed successfully, the child will emerge with the virtue of **hope**. Even when challenges emerge, a person with this quality will feel that they can turn to loved ones for support and care. Those who fail to gain this virtue will experience fear. When a crisis occurs, they may feel hopeless, anxious, and insecure.

**Stage 2: Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt**

As children enter the toddler years, they become increasingly independent. They not only begin to walk by themselves, they also start to perform a number of actions independently. Kids often want to make more choices about the things that impact their life such as selecting which foods to eat and which clothes to wear.

These actions not only play an important role in becoming a more independent human being, they also help determine whether children develop a sense of autonomy or feelings of doubt about their own abilities. Those who successfully navigate this stage of psychosocial development will emerge with the virtue of **will**, or the sense that they can take meaningful actions that will influence what happens to them.

Kids who develop this autonomy will feel **self-confident** and comfortable being themselves. Caregivers can help ensure that kids succeed in this stage of encouraging choices, allowing kids to make decisions, and supporting this increased independence.

What actions might lead to failure at this stage? Parents who are overly critical, who don’t allow their children to make choices, or who are too controlling can contribute to shame and doubt. These children might emerge from this stage lacking self-esteem and confidence in their abilities and they may become overly dependent upon others.

**Stage 3: Initiative versus Guilt**

The third stage of psychosocial development is centered on kids developing a sense of initiative. Peers become more important as this point, as kids begin to interact more with kids in their neighborhood or in their classroom. Children begin to engage in more pretend play and social play, often making up games and planning activities with others kids.

At this stage, it is important for kids to make judgments and planning their actions. Kids also begin to assert more power and control over the world around them. During this stage, parents and caregivers should encourage children to explore but also to make appropriate decisions. Kids who successfully master this stage emerge with a sense of initiative, while those who do not may experience guilt. The virtue at the center of this stage is **purpose,** or the sense that they have control and power in the world.

**Stage 4: Industry versus Inferiority**

During the school years prior to adolescence, children enter the psychosocial stage that Erikson referred to as industry versus inferiority. Throughout this stage, children are focused on developing a sense of competence. Not surprisingly, school plays and essential role during this phase of development.

As they mature, children become increasingly able to tackle more and more complex tasks. They are also interested in become more masterful and accomplished at various things, and express interest in learning new skills and taking on challenges. Ideally, kids will receive encouragement and praise for performing different things such as drawing, reading, and writing. By receiving this positive attention and reinforcement, kids begin to build the self-confidence that they need to succeed in life.

So what happens if children do not get praise and attention from others for mastering new skills? Erikson believed that failing to master this stage of development would ultimately lead to feelings of inferiority and a lack of confidence in one’s own abilities. The basic virtue that emerges from successfully completing this psychosocial stage is known as **competence**.

**Stage 5: Identity versus Role Confusion**

Anyone who remembers the often tumultuous teenage years can probably instantly understand Erikson’s identity versus role confusion stage of development. At this point, adolescents begin to explore the basic question: “Who am I?” Teens are focused on developing a sense of self, figuring out what they believe in, who they are, and what they want to become.

Erikson believed that the formation of a personal identity was one of the most important phases of life. Developing a strong sense of self serves as a sort of compass that helps guide each person through the rest of his or her life. So what does it take to develop a good identity? First is the ability to explore with support and love. Kids often go through different phases and explore different ways of expressing themselves. Those who are allowed to go through this personal exploration and successfully master this stage emerge with a strong sense of independence, personal agency, and sense of self. Those who fail to complete this stage often enter adulthood confused about who they really are and what they want out of life.

The basic virtue that emerges from completing this stage successfully is known as **fidelity**.

**Stage 6: Intimacy versus Isolation**

Love and romance are some of the primary concerns of many young adults, so it’s not surprising that Erikson’s sixth stage of psychosocial development centers on exactly this topic. This stage begins around age 18 and 19 and continues to about age 40. The central theme of this stage is centered on forming loving, lasting, and supportive relationships with other people. Erikson believed that the sense of self that was (hopefully) established during the identity versus role confusion stage plays a vital role in being able to forge strong and loving relationships. Success during this phase of development leads to strong bonds with others, while failure can result in a sense of isolation and loneliness.

The basic virtue that develops at this stage is **love**.

**Stage 7: Generativity versus Stagnation**

The later years of adulthood are marked by a need to create something that will continue on after we are gone. Essentially, we begin to feel the need to leave some kind of lasting mark on the world. This can involve raising children, taking care of others, or having some type of positive impact on other people. Careers, family, church groups, community organizations and other things can all help contribute to this sense of accomplishment and pride.

Those who master this stage of development emerge with a sense that they have made a significant and valuable impact on the world around them and develop the basic virtue that Erikson referred to as **care**. People who do not manage this stage effectively may feel uninvolved, unproductive, and even cut off from the world.

**Stage 8: Integrity versus Despair**

The final stage of Erikson’s psychosocial theory lasts from approximately age 65 up until the end of a person’s life. While it may be the last stage of life, it is still important. It is during this time that people begin to reflect back on the life that they have lived and ask, “Did I life a good life?” People who reflect back on their lives with a sense of pride will feel fulfilled, while those to look back with regret will experience bitterness or even despair.

People who master the final stage of life emerge with a sense of **wisdom**, and feel that they have lived a worthwhile and meaningful life even though they face the grim specter of death. Those who feel that their lives were wasted or meaningless will experience sadness, anger, and regret.

**In Summary**

Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development marked a significant change from a lot of earlier theories in that it focused on development across the entire lifespan. Today, many psychologists prefer theories that are less focused on a set of predefined stages and recognize that individual differences and varied experiences often mean that development can be markedly different from one person to the next.

Some common criticisms of Erikson’s theory are that it doesn’t say much about the underlying causes of each development crisis. It also tends to be somewhat vague about the difference experiences and events that mark the difference between success and failure at each stage. Also, the theory lacks any object way to determine if a person has “passed” or “failed” a particular stage of development.

Kohlberg’s stages of Moral Development

Lawrence Kohlberg expanded on the earlier work of cognitive theorist Jean Piaget to explain the moral development of children. Kohlberg believed that moral development, like cognitive development, follows a series of stages. He used the idea of moral dilemmas—stories that present conflicting ideas about two moral values—to teach 10 to 16 year-old boys about morality and values. The best known moral dilemma created by Kohlberg is the "Heinz" dilemma, which discusses the idea of obeying the law versus saving a life. Kohlberg emphasized that it is the way an individual reasons about a dilemma that determines positive moral development.

After presenting people with various moral dilemmas, Kohlberg reviewed people’s responses and placed them in different stages of moral reasoning. According to Kohlberg, an individual progresses from the capacity for pre-conventional morality (before age 9) to the capacity for conventional morality (early adolescence), and toward attaining post-conventional morality (once Piaget's idea of formal operational thought is attained), which only a few fully achieve. Each level of morality contains two stages, which provide the basis for moral development in various contexts.

**Level 1: Preconventional**

Throughout the preconventional level, a child's sense of morality is externally controlled. Children accept and believe the rules of authority figures, such as parents and teachers.  A child with pre-conventional morality has not yet adopted or internalized society's conventions regarding what is right or wrong, but instead focuses largely on external consequences that certain actions may bring.

*Stage 1: Obedience-and-Punishment Orientation*

Stage 1 focuses on the child's desire to obey rules and avoid being punished. For example, an action is perceived as morally wrong because the perpetrator is punished; the worse the punishment for the act is, the more "bad" the act is perceived to be.

*Stage 2: Instrumental Orientation*

Stage 2 expresses the "what's in it for me?" position, in which right behavior is defined by whatever the individual believes to be in their best interest. Stage two reasoning shows a limited interest in the needs of others, only to the point where it might further the individual's own interests. As a result, concern for others is not based on loyalty or intrinsic respect, but rather a "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" mentality. An example would be when a child is asked by his parents to do a chore. The child asks "what's in it for me?" & the parents offer the child an incentive by giving him an allowance.

**Level 2: Conventional**

Throughout the conventional level, a child's sense of morality is tied to personal and societal relationships. Children continue to accept the rules of authority figures, but this is now due to their belief that this is necessary to ensure positive relationships and societal order. Adherence to rules and conventions is somewhat rigid during these stages, and a rule's appropriateness or fairness is seldom questioned.

*Stage 3: Good Boy, Nice Girl Orientation*

In stage 3, children want the approval of others and act in ways to avoid disapproval. Emphasis is placed on good behavior and people being "nice" to others.

*Stage 4: Law-and-Order Orientation*

In stage 4, the child blindly accepts rules and convention because of their importance in maintaining a functioning society. Rules are seen as being the same for everyone, and obeying rules by doing what one is "supposed" to do is seen as valuable and important. Moral reasoning in stage four is beyond the need for individual approval exhibited in stage three. If one person violates a law, perhaps everyone would—thus there is an obligation and a duty to uphold laws and rules. Most active members of society remain at stage four, where morality is still predominantly dictated by an outside force.

**Level 3: Postconventional**

Throughout the postconventional level, a person's sense of morality is defined in terms of more abstract principles and values. People now believe that some laws are unjust and should be changed or eliminated. This level is marked by a growing realization that individuals are separate entities from society and that individuals may disobey rules inconsistent with their own principles. Post-conventional moralists live by their own ethical principles—principles that typically include such basic human rights as life, liberty, and justice—and view rules as useful but changeable mechanisms, rather than absolute dictates that must be obeyed without question. Because post-conventional individuals elevate their own moral evaluation of a situation over social conventions, their behavior, especially at stage six, can sometimes be confused with that of those at the pre-conventional level. Some theorists have speculated that many people may never reach this level of abstract moral reasoning.

*Stage 5: Social-Contract Orientation*

In stage 5, the world is viewed as holding different opinions, rights, and values. Such perspectives should be mutually respected as unique to each person or community. Laws are regarded as social contracts rather than rigid edicts. Those that do not promote the general welfare should be changed when necessary to meet the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This is achieved through majority decision and inevitable compromise. Democratic government is theoretically based on stage five reasoning.

*Stage 6: Universal-Ethical-Principal Orientation*

In stage 6, moral reasoning is based on abstract reasoning using universal ethical principles. Generally, the chosen principles are abstract rather than concrete and focus on ideas such as equality, dignity, or respect. Laws are valid only insofar as they are grounded in justice, and a commitment to justice carries with it an obligation to disobey unjust laws. People choose the ethical principles they want to follow, and if they violate those principles, they feel guilty. In this way, the individual acts because it is morally right to do so (and not because he or she wants to avoid punishment), it is in their best interest, it is expected, it is legal, or it is previously agreed upon. Although Kohlberg insisted that stage six exists, he found it difficult to identify individuals who consistently operated at that level.

***Critiques of Kohlberg's Theory***

Kohlberg has been criticized for his assertion that women seem to be deficient in their moral reasoning abilities when compared to men. Carol Gilligan (1982), a research assistant of Kohlberg, criticized her former mentor’s theory because it was based so narrowly on research using white, upper-class men and boys. She argued that women are not deficient in their moral reasoning and instead proposed that males and females reason differently: girls and women focus more on staying connected and maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Kohlberg's theory has been criticized for emphasizing justice to the exclusion of other values, with the result that it may not adequately address the arguments of those who value other moral aspects of actions. Similarly, critics argue that Kohlberg's stages are culturally biased—that the highest stages in particular reflect a westernized ideal of justice based on individualistic thought. This is biased against those that live in non-Western societies that place less emphasis on individualism.

Another criticism of Kohlberg’s theory is that people frequently demonstrate significant inconsistency in their moral judgments. This often occurs in moral dilemmas involving drinking and driving or business situations where participants have been shown to reason at a lower developmental stage, typically using more self-interest driven reasoning (i.e., stage two) than authority and social order obedience driven reasoning (i.e., stage four). Critics argue that Kohlberg's theory cannot account for such inconsistencies.