

Stages of Childhood Development

Morris Massey coined the very interesting phrase "What you are is where you were when," and in doing so helped bring the importance of early development into the mainstream. The trend of recognizing and honoring children's growth and learning started well before with Maria Montessori in 1897. Erick Erickson built on her research and methods with his recognition of the importance of youths many developmental stages. These can be a very helpful tool in figuring where things may have gone wrong and where to begin to put them right.

Dysfunctional families are usually a result of co-dependency; "A type of dysfunctional helping relationship where one person supports or **enables** another person's addiction, poor mental health, immaturity, irresponsibility, or under-achievement, or network of family, friends, etc. and fixation on others for sustenance, approval, identity, and so on" (Wikipedia). The Wiki quoted also identifies thirty dysfunctional behavior patterns and dynamics, and sixty signs of unhealthy parenting. No wonder there are so many problems in families and society today!

The Adult Children of Alcoholics and Dysfunctional Families main text, "the Big Red Book," describes how we create lifelong thought and behavior patterns due to an abusive and neglectful family system in our youth. The abuse, neglect, and resulting patterns can be so prevalent and pervasive they appear normal and natural to family members.

To hide problems within the family and from others rules of don't talk, don't trust, don't feel, and don't look, don't listen, don't heal are created, and punishment is often quick and severe should they be broken. This textbook of family trauma also states that we unknowingly, subconsciously are doomed to recreate these sad and sick patterns through-out our lives in hopes of resolving them, and often with the people least equipped and likely to do so. And so it continues, unless and until we break the rules and awaken from the insanity.

With deep looking, listening, and feeling in safe communities of people where we can talk, trust, and focus on our issues, we can at last break the cycle to find insight, understanding, and wisdom. With this foundation of well being we can utilize newfound tools as skilful means to find and further healing. We may then find awareness, enlightenment, and transformation by unlocking our past and clearing out destructive baggage.

As you read this and things come up for you, we urge you to take time to explore and process thoughts and emotions. Take notes if something strikes you deeply, or if you think it deserves more attention at other times with family, friends, or others. The point is to see what's in the attic, the closet, and the baggage. To find out what is meaningful for you, and where you might find hope, help, and healing. Coming from a strong background and healing in twelve step recovery program meetings, step studies, and retreats, and its emphasis on concurrent community, counseling, and therapy, we know it is an option worth exploring.

From birth to two years may be the most important stage; basic trust vs. mistrust. Here reliable feeding, affection, affirmation, and attention help us feel the world is a safe and welcoming place. Abuse, neglect, and abandonment here can leave deep wounds, at times too deep to reach full understanding and healing. These poor souls may become withdrawn, suspicious, frustrated, and have great difficulty bonding through-out life.

A friend once shares that he was sometimes left in his crib and dirty diaper the whole day or tied up in the yard like a dog. Another felt her family life was a battle ground as family members were often fighting verbally and physically. Whether we experience neglect or abuse many come to see the world as cold and lonely, or angry and painful, or both. In twelve step recovery we learn to think of our birth parents as the means of our birth, but our true parent as a loving Higher Power we can access to re-parent ourselves with gentleness, kindness, caring, and love.

Did we learn emotional stability, faith in our environment and future, or suspicion, uncertainty, and fear? Were our physical and mental needs met when we reached or cried out, or were we ignored and cursed? Did our wonder and appreciation of the world and others open up and expand, or did we shut down and close up? This is the most basic level of our development, so very important for our outlook on the rest of the stages and our life in general. We learn to talk here, so our innate expressiveness is a revealing window to this stage. Are we open and verbal, quiet and closed, or domineering and aggressive in our speech?

Early childhood is recognized as age two to four years and is marked by a development of autonomy vs. shame (self sufficiency vs. dependency). The question here; is it okay to be me.? Children in this stage can learn adequacy and personal control over physical skills through toilet training, dressing and feeding themselves, or may become saddled with sometimes extreme shame for not achieving these on others time schedule. One friend shares how when he wet his pants as a child, his mother laid out newspapers in the middle of the room, circled his relatives around him, and said "okay, now you can pee!" As you may guess, he was crushed.

On the other hand, another friend shares a picture of herself in a high chair with a bowl of cereal on her head. Unlike the first example, the family thought it was hilarious, as expressed by the wide smile on her face. Many understand this situation vividly, as they recall themselves or their own children dressing, eating, and otherwise readying for the day. For some it is or was a time of helping each other and getting a good start. For others a time of yelling, criticism, and other stresses.

Preschool age of four to five years is marked by a sense of initiative vs. guilt where we ask; is it okay for me to do, move, and act? If things go well this is the stage of courage, creativity, and adventure as we learn to play alone and with others, count, and make judgments. This can be a time of exploring of fun as we learn to play games, have fun, and sing and dance. One friend shares how she was stifled so feels a tightening constriction in her chest and throat when she needs to speak her truth.

In preschool we get our first chance at art through finger and brush painting in broad strokes on a large canvas. Colored pencils, crayons, markers, and coloring books may become available as well. The artistic influence may grow and flourish or be criticized and denied. This time can also be marked by aggressiveness through yelling, throwing, and hitting. A friend at this young age went on an adventure and walked to his cousins house. When it got dark his cousins parents took him home, but no one missed him or cared to mention his disappearance.

The span of age of five to twelve is the stage of competence and proficiency vs. inferiority and defeat. Now neighbors and others at school come into play as we learn skills of reading, writing, and many others. Sports, band, and other groups affect us as well. In this larger community we are exposed to a much wider range of people and their issues, some supportive but others bullying and judgmental. We now learn morals, industriousness, and using our bodies to their fullest as we ask ourselves; can I make it in the world of people and things?

Some become inspired self starters, while others languish in feelings of lethargy and unworthiness. If the child is helped to master appropriate skills, self confidence soars. These strong roots grow strong wings to explore what we can do and do well. Excessive criticism and micromanagement here can cause long term feelings of weakness, inferiority, and low self esteem.

Adolescence is ages thirteen to nineteen, and the time of finding our identity or suffering from identity confusion and crisis. Now friends, role models, and other social relationships have the most affect on us as we decide; Who am I and who can I be? Careers, sexuality, drugs, and other responsibilities put pressure on us as we move towards and into adulthood. Teenagers are always anxious to fit in to their peer group, so being shunned or seen as an outsider or dweeb, geek, dork, etc. can be devastating.

This is a very fragile time as evidenced by the very high rates of drug abuse, crime, and suicide among teenagers. Teens also have the highest chance of being killed in car crashes, another indication of how today's teens have a lot of responsibility even though their maturity is still quite limited. Looking back on childhood we see many were pushed into roles such as sports or scholastic star, good or bad child, scapegoat, nature child, wounded, orphan, or needy child that persist through-out childhood and beyond. Do any of these roles resonate for you?

Twenty to twenty nine is considered early adulthood, and the stage of love and intimacy vs. isolation and loneliness. Relationships with mates and friends are foremost as we ponder; Can I love and be loved? We sense the complexity of relationships and learn about kindness, tenderness, and warmth. This stage is extending in our times as young adults struggle with school debt and the cost of marriage, homes, and children due to the economic situation and its many manifestations.

Romantic, college, and work relationships take on a new urgency as we look for purpose and meaning in another stressful and challenging time. Thankfully we normally have youthful energy, vitality, and resilience to help us through. This is also a time for very important decisions as we chose where to live, careers, and mates. Mistakes here are difficult and troublesome, as many young adults lack support of family, friends, and others.

Adulthood age thirty to sixty five is marked by generativity vs. stagnation as we hopefully find a mate, create a comfortable home, and build a family and career. Stagnation and isolation are unfortunately on the rise as younger adults are stuck with parents or room-mates much longer. Work and family life are most important as we ask; Can I make my life count?

The need to create or nurture things that have significant meaning and will outlast us arises and comes into focus at home, work, and other situations. Unfortunately this is also too often the time of divorce and separation as families shatter and dissolve. As hard as it is on adults, children may take it very hard and react with shock, denial, anger, and bargaining just as those facing death or other great losses.

Financial burdens may abound here as well as we face the costs of daycare, schools, homes, cars, healthcare, and so on. Maturity and/or dysfunction may be accelerated as we deal with the pressure and complexity of this very busy and stressful stage of life. Healthy supportive community can be a great blessing here if we have that luxury as grandparents, siblings, or others lend a hand. If not, we are wise to find ways to create that loving and helpful community, and give back in ways we are able.

Beyond sixty five is old age and a sense of integrity vs. despair. Can we look back on life and feel fulfilled, satisfied, and at peace, or is there regret, disappointment, and despair? Hopefully there is success and wisdom enough to meet the challenges of mental, physical, financial, and other declines and prepare for death. Here we ask ourselves if we have lived a meaningful life; was it worth it?

If we are fortunate, we are able to give back to our family, friends, and communities in very skilful ways. Should we find our greatest longings are yet unfulfilled, there may still be time, talent, and finances available to fill the void. The past saw our older generations as a very valuable resource. That point of view was lost for a time as older Americans were pushed aside, but is regaining validity as we look to those who have gone before for guidance, knowledge, and inspiration.

Going through these stages we hope has been an eye opener and revelation of what was gained, what was lost, and what is yet to come. Knowing this we can work to compensate for losses and missed opportunities through lovingly re-parenting ourselves and finding and utilizing supportive communities along the way. We can't go it alone. We weren't built that way. We are social creatures and will only thrive to our fullest through deep, caring, and profound connections with others.

Acknowledging and understanding how the stages of development played out in our in our lives can be very helpful, for if any were missed or denied they may haunt us the rest of our lives. Conversely, resolving them in the present the best as we can, we may yet find true fulfillment, love and happiness. As mentioned earlier, twelve step programs can be a great help to recognize and resolve these issues, build community, and find ways to give back the help and healing we have received.