Erik Erikson (1950, 1963) does not talk about psychosexual Stages, he discusses psychosocial stages. His ideas, though, were greatly influenced by Freud, going along with Freud’s ideas about the structure and topography of personality.

However, whereas Freud was an id psychologist, Erikson was an ego psychologist. He emphasized the role of culture and society and the conflicts that can take place within the ego itself, whereas Freud emphasized the conflict between the id and the superego.

According to Erikson, the ego develops as it successfully resolves crises that are distinctly social in nature. These involve establishing a sense of trust in others, developing a sense of identity in society, and helping the next generation prepare for the future.

Erikson extends on Freudian thoughts by focusing on the adaptive and creative characteristic of the ego, and expanding the notion of the stages of personality development to include the entire lifespan.

Erikson proposed a lifespan model of development, taking in five stages up to the age of 18 years and three further stages beyond, well into adulthood. Erikson suggests that there is still plenty of room for continued growth and development throughout one’s life.

Erikson put a great deal of emphasis on the adolescent period, feeling it was a crucial stage for developing a person’s identity.

Like Freud and many others, Erik Erikson maintained that personality develops in a predetermined order, and build upon each previous stage. This is called this the epigenic principle.

The outcome of this 'maturation timetable' is a wide and integrated set of life skills and abilities that function together within the autonomous individual. However, Instead of focusing on sexual
development (like Freud), he was interested in how children socialize and how this affects their sense of self.

Psychosocial Stages

Erikson’s (1959) theory of psychosocial development has eight distinct stages.

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Like Freud, Erikson assumes that a crisis occurs at each stage of development. For Erikson (1963), these crises are of a psychosocial in nature because they involve psychological needs of the individual (i.e. psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (i.e. social).

According to the theory, successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and the acquisition of basic virtues. Basic virtues are characteristic strengths which the ego can use to resolve subsequent crises.

Failure to successfully complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and therefore a more unhealthy personality and sense of self. These stages, however, can be resolved successfully at a later time.

1. Trust vs. Mistrust
Is the world a safe place or is it full of unpredictable events and accidents waiting to happen?

Erikson's first psychosocial crisis occurs during the first year or so of life (like Freud's oral stage of psychosexual development). The crisis is one of trust vs. mistrust.

During this stage the infant is uncertain about the world in which they live. To resolve these feelings of uncertainty the infant looks towards their primary caregiver for stability and consistency of care.

If the care the infant receives is consistent, predictable and reliable they will develop a sense of trust which will carry with them to other relationships, and they will be able to feel secure even when threatened.

Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of hope. By developing a sense of trust, the infant can have hope that as new crises arise, there is a real possibility that other people will be there are a source of support. Failing to acquire the virtue of hope will lead to the development of fear.

For example, if the care has been harsh or inconsistent, unpredictable and unreliable then the infant will develop a sense of mistrust and will not have confidence in the world around them or in their abilities to influence events.

This infant will carry the basic sense of mistrust with them to other relationships. It may result in anxiety, heightened insecurities, and an over feeling of mistrust in the world around them.

Consistent with Erikson's views on the importance of trust, research by Bowlby and Ainsworth has outlined how the quality of early experience of attachment can effect relationships with others in later life.

2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

The child is developing physically and becoming more mobile. Between the ages of 18 months and three, children begin to assert their independence, by walking away from their mother, picking which toy to play with, and making choices about what they like to wear, to eat, etc.

The child is discovering that he or she has many skills and abilities, such as putting on clothes and shoes, playing with toys etc. Such skills illustrate the child's growing sense of independence and autonomy. Erikson states it is critical that parents allow their children to explore the limits of their abilities within an encouraging environment which is tolerant of failure.

For example, rather than put on a child's clothes a supportive parent should have the patience to allow the child to try until they succeed or ask for assistance.

So, the parents need to encourage the child to becoming more independent whilst at the same time protecting the child so that constant failure is avoided.
A delicate balance is required from the parent .... they must try not to do everything for the child but if the child fails at a particular task they must not criticize the child for failures and accidents (particularly when toilet training). The aim has to be “self control without a loss of self-esteem” (Gross, 1993). Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of will.

If children in this stage are encouraged and supported in their increased independence, they become more confident and secure in their own ability to survive in the world.

If children are criticized, overly controlled, or not given the opportunity to assert themselves, they begin to feel inadequate in their ability to survive, and may then become overly dependent upon others, lack self-esteem, and feel a sense of shame or doubt in their own abilities.

3. Initiative vs. Guilt

Around age three and continuing to age five, children assert themselves more frequently. These are particularly lively, rapid-developing years in a child’s life. According to Bee (1992) it is a “time of vigor of action and of behaviors that the parents may see as aggressive”.

During this period the primary feature involves the child regularly interacting with other children at school. Central to this stage is play, as it provides children with the opportunity to explore their interpersonal skills through initiating activities.

Children begin to plan activities, make up games, and initiate activities with others. If given this opportunity, children develop a sense of initiative, and feel secure in their ability to lead others and make decisions.

Conversely, if this tendency is squelched, either through criticism or control, children develop a sense of guilt. They may feel like a nuisance to others and will therefore remain followers, lacking in self-initiative.

The child takes initiatives which the parents will often try to stop in order to protect the child. The child will often overstep the mark in his forcefulness and the danger is that the parents will tend to punish the child and restrict his initiatives too much.

It is at this stage that the child will begin to ask many questions as his thirst for knowledge grows. If the parents treat the child’s questions as trivial, a nuisance or embarrassing or other aspects of their behavior as threatening then the child may have feelings of guilt for “being a nuisance”.

Too much guilt can make the child slow to interact with others and may inhibit their creativity. Some guilt is, of course, necessary otherwise the child would not know how to exercise self control or have a conscience.

A healthy balance between initiative and guilt is important. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of purpose.