Erikson’s Social-Emotional Human Development Theory

Erik and Joan Erikson were human development theorists in the 20th century. They described life as a series of 9 crises resolved at various stages. During each crisis, our body and mind interact with our culture and other surroundings. People either develop psychological traits that propel them forward into the next phase or they become stagnant socially and emotionally. Each stage happens at a certain time of life from infancy to late adulthood. These life stages and the crises associated with them can be pictured as waves.

When an individual does not resolve the stage in a balanced manner, her developmental growth is encumbered and becomes stagnant. As we get older, we resolve and re-resolve each stage based on our external and internal circumstances. An adult who has had difficulty finding balance at a stage earlier in life will have the opportunity to resolve that conflict again.

Bridges and Erikson’s Socio-Emotional Human Development Theory

Every Bridges curriculum is written with Erikson’s theories in mind. Each program, Bridges: Our Stories™, Bridges: Growing Together™, and Bridges: Our Smarts™, contains elements inspired by this social-emotional development framework. Positive influences and environments do encourage healthy developmental growth for people of all ages. Strong intergenerational programs support healthy socio-emotional development.

Summary of the Eriksonian stages:

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1 Description by Monica Romig
An infant during the first year of life engages with the world in such a way to develop **Trust** or **Mistrust**. If the infant is cared for in a stable manner, is fed and changed at the appropriate times, and is given the attention she requires, she will learn to trust her caregivers and surroundings. In contrast, if the infant is not fed or changed when necessary, and does not receive the attention needed, she will learn that the world is not a safe place, and will mistrust her caregivers and the world around him or her. An individual with a troubled childhood might have unresolved issues with trust that they bring with them. At each subsequent stage there is an opportunity to re-resolve this conflict in a positive manner with appropriate support. This is one of the many valuable benefits of older adults taking time to invest in children as they go through each stage.

Toddlers go through the conflict of **Autonomy** and **Shame/Doubt**. This stage revolves around the individual beginning to feed herself, use the bathroom on her own, and express her own desires such as choosing her own clothes. As a result of resolving this conflict in a successful manner, children feel competent in making choices for themselves. When caregivers do not allow them to have some level of self-control, they can feel shame and doubt about their desires and their abilities to be in control of themselves.

During the preschool years, children face the conflict of **Initiative** and **Guilt**. In this stage, children develop through achieving feelings of proficiency and ability to contribute. In the classroom, they begin to have jobs such as line leaders or serving the snacks. During this time, their growth may be inhibited by teachers and caregivers who focus on their failures rather than their successes, or prevent them from taking risks that would result in a seemingly failure. In *Bridges: Our Stories™*, developed for children in preschool through grade three, children have the opportunity to express their creativity and desires in hands-on projects. As picture books like *Miss Rumphius* and *Mike Mulligan and the Steam Shovel* are read and discussed, the children hear stories that affirm how individuals can make the world a better place and that by working hard they can achieve their goals.

As children enter into school age, they engage in the conflict of **Industry** and **Inferiority**. During this stage children are learning to work hard and that they have a place in society. Going to school and being other children their age in a classroom—sometimes for the first time—means learning how to engage with others, becoming a contributing member and practicing courtesy. In *Bridges: Our Stories™* and *Bridges: Growing Together™*, children are given opportunities to interact with other children their age, and individuals in a different generation. They experience working with others on activities and projects facilitating their understanding of who they are in their community. Again, the constant careful
and encouraging attention of adult volunteers provides nurturing for the children’s development, especially if they had previously unresolved issues.

Moving into adolescence, young people face the conflict of **Identity** and **Identity Confusion**. Pre-teens and teenagers are learning who they are and what they value, and considering what they might do with the next phases of their lives. In *Bridges: Our Smarts™*, the participants learn about Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence or “Smarts” Theory, which teaches that everyone has unique strengths, or smarts, and that each one is equally special and valuable. By recognizing their individuality, pre-teens and teens can begin to understand who they are, the interests they have, and how they can make a positive impact in this world—guided by seasoned adults. The adults learn about these intelligences as well so that they are better able to nurture the children in their lives – in Bridges and beyond.

In early adulthood individuals face the crisis of **Intimacy** and **Isolation**. This conflict covers the stage of life where individuals are investing in meaningful interpersonal relationships like close friendships, and being mentored in careers and in marriage. A balanced resolution of this conflict involves being able to engage in a balanced committed relationship with another individual without losing one’s sense of self. An unbalanced resolution might lead to a person not being able to share deeply with another person. Note that this stage can be resolved through marriage as well as different types of close relationships, both romantic and otherwise.

Adults continue to develop along Erikson’s framework. From middle age into older adulthood, individuals face the conflict of **Generativity** or **Stagnation**. Being generative means contributing to the lives of those who follow after you in a meaningful way. This can be done through sharing culture, passing on skills or talents, or through monetary contributions to an important cause. This can also be accomplished through mentoring and sponsoring relationships with young people. In a mentoring relationship, the older person intentionally shares wisdom and experiences with the younger person. In a sponsoring relationship, the older adult provides opportunities for the younger person to cultivate experiences. In all of the Bridges program curricula, older adults have the opportunity to share their lives with the young people with whom they interact. Each session has a designated time set for discussion and life review.

Moving into older age, the conflict aging adults face is **Integrity** and **Despair**. Navigating this conflict involves reflecting on a life lived and finding value and meaning in it. It also includes understanding the challenges and mistakes that happen throughout her life and finding peace with them. Every Bridges program
is mindful of the necessity for humans to spend time in reflection. Opportunities are given for children and adults to spend quiet time writing about what they have learned and what they find important.

The final stage is Gerotranscendence, named by another sociologist but advanced by the Eriksons. This stage was added by Joan during her and Erik’s last years, and it involves finding one’s place in the world and eternity. Each stage now becomes a daily conflict as the individual’s physical body becomes less able to accomplish what it has in the past. For example, for someone who needs to use a walker, there is a conflict with whether the person will be industrious and leave the house or remain home. For someone who can no longer bathe herself independently, can she trust her caregiver to touch her tenderly and with dignity? The older adult must daily face these conflicts and choose the positive side. If the many conflicts have been resolved and the person finds meaning in her life, she can trust that a positive spirit will triumph. The individual who finds balance during this conflict is prepared to leave this world peacefully.

The social emotional framework developed by the Eriksons seeks to give an outline of how humans develop over the course of their lifetimes. Each Bridges program runs for a short time within that big picture. With components inspired by Erikson’s theory, Bridges: Our Stories™, Bridges: Growing Together™ and Bridges: Our Smarts™ bring the generations together as they grow and develop.