Freud's Stages of Psychosexual Development

By Kendra Cherry
Updated November 18, 2016

1. What is Psychosexual Development?

The theory of psychosexual development was proposed by the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and described how personality developed over the course of childhood. While the theory is well-known in psychology, it is also one of the most controversial.

So how exactly does this psychosexual theory work? Freud believed that personality developed through a series of childhood stages in which the pleasure-seeking energies of the id become focused on certain erogenous areas. This psychosexual energy, or libido, was described as the driving force behind behavior.

Psychoanalytic theory suggested that personality is mostly established by the age of five. Early experiences play a large role in personality development and continue to influence behavior later in life.

So what happens during each stage? What if a person fails to progress through a stage completely or favorably? If these psychosexual stages are completed successfully, a healthy personality is the result. If certain issues are not resolved at the appropriate stage, fixations can occur. A fixation is a persistent focus on an earlier psychosexual stage. Until this conflict is resolved, the individual will remain "stuck" in this stage. For example, a person who is fixated at the oral stage may be over-dependent on others and may seek oral stimulation through smoking, drinking, or eating.

2. The Oral Stage

Age Range: Birth to 1 Year

Erogenous Zone: Mouth

During the oral stage, the infant’s primary source of interaction occurs through the mouth, so the rooting and sucking reflex is especially important. The mouth is vital for eating and the infant derives pleasure from oral stimulation through gratifying activities such as tasting and sucking. Because the infant is entirely dependent upon caretakers (who are responsible for feeding the child), the infant also develops a sense of trust and comfort through this oral stimulation.

The primary conflict at this stage is the weaning process—the child must become less dependent upon caretakers. If fixation occurs at this stage, Freud believed the individual would have issues with dependency or aggression. Oral fixation can result in problems with drinking, eating, smoking, or nail biting.

3. The Anal Stage

Age Range: 1 to 3 years

Erogenous Zone: Anus

During the anal stage, the infant’s primary source of interaction occurs through the anal sphincter, so the elimination and defecation reflex is especially important. The anus is vital for the elimination of waste and the infant derives pleasure from anal stimulation through gratifying activities such as bowel movements and elimination. Because the infant is entirely dependent upon caretakers (who are responsible for feeding the child), the infant also develops a sense of trust and comfort through this anal stimulation.

The primary conflict at this stage is the toilet training process—the child must become less dependent upon caretakers. If fixation occurs at this stage, Freud believed the individual would have issues with dependency or aggression. Anal fixation can result in problems with bowel control, constipation, or diarrhea.
Erogenous Zone: Bowel and Bladder Control

During the anal stage, Freud believed that the primary focus of the libido was on controlling bladder and bowel movements. The major conflict at this stage is toilet training—the child has to learn to control his or her bodily needs. Developing this control leads to a sense of accomplishment and independence.

According to Freud, success at this stage is dependent upon the way in which parents approach toilet training. Parents who utilize praise and rewards for using the toilet at the appropriate time encourage positive outcomes and help children feel capable and productive. Freud believed that positive experiences during this stage served as the basis for people to become competent, productive, and creative adults.

However, not all parents provide the support and encouragement that children need during this stage. Some parents instead punish, ridicule or shame a child for accidents.

According to Freud, inappropriate parental responses can result in negative outcomes. If parents take an approach that is too lenient, Freud suggested that an anal-expulsive personality could develop in which the individual has a messy, wasteful, or destructive personality. If parents are too strict or begin toilet training too early, Freud believed that an anal-retentive personality develops in which the individual is stringent, orderly, rigid, and obsessive.

4. The Phallic Stage

Age Range: 3 to 6 Years

Erogenous Zone: Genitals

During the phallic stage, the primary focus of the libido is on the genitals. At this age, children also begin to discover the differences between males and females.

Freud also believed that boys begin to view their fathers as a rival for the mother’s affections. The Oedipus complex describes these feelings of wanting to possess the mother and the desire to replace the father. However, the child also fears that he will be punished by the father for these feelings, a fear Freud termed castration anxiety.

The term Electra complex has been used to described a similar set of feelings experienced by young girls. Freud, however, believed that girls instead experience penis envy.

Eventually, the child begins to identify with the same-sex parent as a means of vicariously possessing the other parent. For girls, however, Freud believed that penis envy was never fully resolved and that all women remain somewhat fixated on this stage. Psychologists such as Karen Horney disputed this theory, calling it both inaccurate and demeaning to women. Instead, Horney proposed that men experience feelings of inferiority because they cannot give birth to children, a concept she referred to as womb envy.

5. The Latent Period

Age Range: 6 to Puberty

Erogenous Zone: Sexual Feelings Are Inactive

During the latent period, the libido interests are suppressed. The development of the ego and superego contribute to this period of calm. The stage begins around the time that children enter into school and become more concerned with peer relationships, hobbies, and other interests.

The latent period is a time of exploration in which the sexual energy is still present, but it is directed into other areas such as intellectual pursuits and social interactions.
6. The Genital Stage

Age Range: Puberty to Death

Erogenous Zone: Maturing Sexual Interests

During the final stage of psychosexual development, the individual develops a strong sexual interest in the opposite sex. This stage begins during puberty but last throughout the rest of a person’s life.

Where in earlier stages the focus was solely on individual needs, interest in the welfare of others grows during this stage. If the other stages have been completed successfully, the individual should now be well-balanced, warm, and caring. The goal of this stage is to establish a balance between the various life areas.

7. Evaluating Freud’s Psychosexual Stage Theory

Freud’s theory is still considered controversial today, but imagine how audacious it seemed during the late 1800s and early 1900s. There have been a number of observations and criticisms of Freud’s psychosexual theory on a number of grounds, including scientific and feminist critiques:

- The theory is focused almost entirely on male development with little mention of female psychosexual development.
- His theories are difficult to test scientifically. Concepts such as the libido are impossible to measure, and therefore cannot be tested. The research that has been conducted tends to discredit Freud’s theory.
- Future predictions are too vague. How can we know that a current behavior was caused specifically by a childhood experience? The length of time between the cause and the effect is too long to assume that there is a relationship between the two variables.
- Freud’s theory is based upon case studies and not empirical research. Also, Freud based his theory on the recollections of his adult patients, not on actual observation and study of children.

Find more information about Freud’s theory of personality:

The Conscious and Unconscious Mind

The Id, Ego, and Superego

8. A Quick Summary and Review of the Psychosexual Stages

The summary below offers a brief overview of these stages of psychosexual development, the approximate age levels for each stage and the primary conflict confronted at each stage.

Oral Stage (Birth to 1 year)

An infant’s primary interaction with the world is through the mouth. The mouth is vital for eating, and the infant derives pleasure from oral stimulation through gratifying activities such as tasting and sucking. If this need is not met, the child may develop an oral fixation later in life,
Anal Stage (1 to 3 years)
Freud believed that the primary focus of the libido was on controlling bladder and bowel movements. Toilet training is a primary issue with children and parents. Too much pressure can result in an excessive need for order or cleanliness later in life, while too little pressure from parents can lead to messy or destructive behavior later in life.

Phallic Stage (3 to 6 years)
Freud suggested that the primary focus of the id’s energy is on the genitals. According to Freud, boy’s experience an Oedipal Complex and girl’s experience and Electra Complex, or an attraction to the opposite sex parent. To cope with this conflict, children adopt the values and characteristics of the same-sex parent, thus forming the superego.

Latent Stage (6 to 11 years)
During this stage, the superego continues to develop while the id’s energies are suppressed. Children develop social skills, values and relationships with peers and adults outside of the family.

Genital Stage (11 to 18 years)
The onset of puberty causes the libido to become active once again. During this stage, people develop a strong interest in the opposite. If development has been successful to this point, the individual will continue to develop into a well-balanced person.

9. Learn More About Sigmund Freud

If you are interested in learning more about Sigmund Freud’s life and work, then be sure to explore the following articles and resources for more information:

- Sigmund Freud: His Remarkable Life, Theories, and Legacy
- 10 Things You Might Not Know About Sigmund Freud
- A Timeline of Freud’s Life
- Some of Sigmund Freud’s Greatest Quotes
- Freud’s Three Levels of Mind
- The Id, Ego, and Superego

Sigmund Freud’s Views of Woman
- What Sigmund Freud Thought About Religion
- 10 Signs You Might Be the Next Sigmund Freud