

# *LIFESPAN DEVELOPMENT*

*A Psychological Perspective Second Edition*

*By Martha Lally and Suzanne Valentine-French*



# Lifespan Development: A Psychological Perspective

## Second Edition

By Martha Lally and Suzanne Valentine-French (Published 2019)

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## **Learning Objectives: Psychosocial Development in Adolescence**

- *Describe the changes in self-concept and self-esteem in adolescence*
- *Summarize Erikson's fifth psychosocial task of identity versus role confusion*
- *Describe Marcia's four identity statuses*
- *Summarize the three stages of ethnic identity development*
- *Describe the parent-teen relationship*
- *Describe the role of peers*
- *Describe dating relationships*

### **Self-concept and Self-esteem in Adolescence**

In adolescence, teens continue to develop their self-concept. Their ability to think of the possibilities and to reason more abstractly may explain the further differentiation of the self during adolescence. However, the teen's understanding of self is often full of contradictions. Young teens may see themselves as outgoing but also withdrawn, happy yet often moody, and both smart and completely clueless (Harter, 2012). These contradictions, along with the teen's growing recognition that their personality and behavior seem to change depending on who they are with or where they are, can lead the young teen to feel like a fraud. With their parents they may seem angrier and sullen, with their friends they are more outgoing and goofier, and at work they are quiet and cautious. "Which one is really me?" may be the refrain of the young teenager. Harter (2012) found that adolescents emphasize traits such as being friendly and considerate more than do children, highlighting their increasing concern about how others may see them. Harter also found that older teens add values and moral standards to their self-descriptions.

As self-concept differentiates, so too does self-esteem. In addition to the academic, social, appearance, and physical/athletic dimensions of self-esteem in middle and late childhood, teens also add perceptions of their competency in romantic relationships, on the job, and in close friendships (Harter, 2006). Self-esteem often drops when children transition from one school setting to another, such as shifting from elementary to middle school, or junior high to high school (Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013). These drops are usually temporary, unless there are additional stressors such as parental conflict, or other family disruptions (De Wit, Karioja, Rye, & Shain, 2011). Self-esteem rises from mid to late adolescence for most teenagers, especially if they feel competent in their peer relationships, their appearance, and athletic abilities (Birkeland, Melkivik, Holsen, & Wold, 2012).

### **Erikson: Identity vs. Role Confusion**

Erikson believed that the primary psychosocial task of adolescence was establishing an identity. Teens struggle with the question "Who am I?" This includes questions regarding their appearance, vocational choices and career aspirations, education, relationships, sexuality, political and social views, personality, and interests. Erikson saw this as a period of confusion and experimentation regarding identity and one's life path. During adolescence we experience



**psychological moratorium**, where teens put on hold commitment to an identity while exploring the options. The culmination of this exploration is a more coherent view of oneself. Those who are unsuccessful at resolving this stage may either withdraw further into social isolation or become lost in the crowd. However, more recent research, suggests that few leave this age period with identity achievement, and that most identity formation occurs during young adulthood (Côté, 2006).

Expanding on Erikson’s theory, James Marcia (2010) identified four identity statuses that represent the four possible combinations of the dimension of commitment and exploration (see Table 6.2).

**Table 6.2 Marcia’s Four Identity Statuses**

| Commitment to an Identity | Exploration |                      |                      |
|---------------------------|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                           |             | Absent               | Present              |
|                           | Absent      | Identity Diffusion   | Identity Moratorium  |
|                           | Present     | Identity Foreclosure | Identity Achievement |

The least mature status, and one common in many children, is identity diffusion. **Identity diffusion** is a status that characterizes those who have neither explored the options, nor made a commitment to an identity. Those who persist in this identity may drift aimlessly with little connection to those around them or have little sense of purpose in life.

**Figure 6.17**



[Source](#)

Those in **identity foreclosure** have made a commitment to an identity without having explored the options. Some parents may make these decisions for their children and do not grant the teen the opportunity to make choices. In other instances, teens may strongly identify with parents and others in their life and wish to follow in their footsteps.

**Identity moratorium** is a status that describes those who are actively exploring in an attempt to establish an identity but have yet to have made any commitment. This can be an anxious and emotionally tense time period as the adolescent experiments with different roles and explores various beliefs. Nothing is certain and there are many questions, but few answers.

**Identity achievement** refers to those who after exploration have made a commitment. This is a long process and is not often achieved by the end of adolescence.

During high school and the college years, teens and young adults move from identity diffusion and foreclosure toward moratorium and achievement. The biggest gains in the

development of identity are in college, as college students are exposed to a greater variety of career choices, lifestyles, and beliefs. This is likely to spur on questions regarding identity. A great deal of the identity work we do in adolescence and young adulthood is about values and goals, as we strive to articulate a personal vision or dream for what we hope to accomplish in the future (McAdams, 2013).

Developmental psychologists have researched several different areas of identity development and some of the main areas include:

**Religious identity:** The religious views of teens are often similar to that of their families (Kim-Spoon, Longo, & McCullough, 2012). Most teens may question specific customs, practices, or ideas in the faith of their parents, but few completely reject the religion of their families.

**Political identity:** The political ideology of teens is also influenced by their parents' political beliefs. A new trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a decrease in party affiliation among adults. Many adults do not align themselves with either the democratic or republican party but view themselves as more of an "independent". Their teenage children are often following suit or become more apolitical (Côté, 2006).

**Vocational identity:** While adolescents in earlier generations envisioned themselves as working in a particular job, and often worked as an apprentice or part-time in such occupations as teenagers, this is rarely the case today. Vocational identity takes longer to develop, as most of today's occupations require specific skills and knowledge that will require additional education or are acquired on the job itself. In addition, many of the jobs held by teens are not in occupations that most teens will seek as adults.

**Gender identity:** Acquiring a gender identity is becoming an increasingly prolonged task as attitudes and norms regarding gender keep changing. The roles appropriate for males and females are evolving, and the lack of a gender binary allow adolescents more freedom to explore various aspects of gender. Some teens may foreclose on a gender identity as a way of dealing with this uncertainty, and they may adopt more stereotypic male or female roles (Sinclair & Carlsson, 2013).

**Sexual identity:** According to Carroll (2016), by age 14 most adolescents become interested in intimate relationships, and they may begin sexual experimentation. Many adolescent feel pressure to express interest in opposite-sex relationships, even if they are not ready to do so. This pressure can be especially stressful for those adolescents who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or questioning their sexual identity. Many non-heterosexual adolescents struggle with negative peer and family reactions during their exploration. A lack of parental acceptance, especially, can adversely affect the gay, lesbian or bisexual adolescent's emerging sexual identity and can result in feelings of depression. In contrast, adolescents whose families support their sexual identity have better health outcomes.

**Ethnic identity** *refers to how people come to terms with who they are based on their ethnic or racial ancestry.* "The task of ethnic identity formation involves sorting out and resolving positive and negative feelings and attitudes about one's own ethnic group and about other groups and identifying one's place in relation to both" (Phinney, 2006, p. 119). When groups differ in status in a culture, those from the non-dominant group have to be cognizant of the customs and

values of those from the dominant culture. The reverse is rarely the case. This makes ethnic identity far less salient for members of the dominant culture. In the United States, those of European ancestry engage in less exploration of ethnic identity, than do those of non-European ancestry (Phinney, 1989). However, according to the U.S. Census (2012) more than 40% of Americans under the age of 18 are from ethnic minorities. For many ethnic minority teens, discovering one's ethnic identity is an important part of identity formation.

**Figure 6.18**



[Source](#)

Phinney's model of ethnic identity formation is based on Erikson's and Marcia's model of identity formation (Phinney, 1990; Syed & Juang, 2014). Through the process of exploration and commitment, individual's come to understand and create an ethnic identity. Phinney suggests three stages or statuses with regard to ethnic identity:

1. **Unexamined Ethnic Identity:** Adolescents and adults who have not been exposed to ethnic identity issues may be in the first stage, unexamined ethnic identity. This is often characterized with a preference for the dominant culture, or where the individual has given little thought to the question of their ethnic heritage. This is similar to diffusion in Marcia's model of identity. Included in this group are also those who have adopted the ethnicity of their parents and other family members with little thought about the issues themselves, similar to Marcia's foreclosure status (Phinney, 1990).
2. **Ethnic Identity Search:** Adolescents and adults who are exploring the customs, culture, and history of their ethnic group are in the ethnic identity search stage, similar to Marcia's moratorium status (Phinney, 1990). Often some event "awakens" a teen or adult to their ethnic group; either a personal experience with prejudice, a highly profiled case in the media, or even a more positive event that recognizes the contribution of someone from the individual's ethnic group. Teens and adults in this stage will immerse themselves in their ethnic culture. For some, "it may lead to a rejection of the values of the dominant culture" (Phinney, 1990, p. 503).
3. **Achieved Ethnic Identity:** Those who have actively explored their culture are likely to have a deeper appreciation and understanding of their ethnic heritage, leading to progress toward an achieved ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). An achieved ethnic identity does not necessarily imply that the individual is highly involved in the customs and values of their ethnic culture. One can be confident in their ethnic identity without wanting to maintain the language or other customs.

The development of ethnic identity takes time, with about 25% of tenth graders from ethnic minority backgrounds having explored and resolved the issues (Phinney, 1989). The more ethnically homogeneous the high school, the less identity exploration and achievement (Umana-Taylor, 2003). Moreover, even in more ethnically diverse high schools, teens tend to spend more time with their own group, reducing exposure to other ethnicities. This may explain why, for

many, college becomes the time of ethnic identity exploration. “[The] transition to college may serve as a consciousness-raising experience that triggers exploration” (Syed & Azmitia, 2009, p. 618).

It is also important to note that those who do achieve ethnic identity may periodically reexamine the issues of ethnicity. This cycling between exploration and achievement is common not only for ethnic identity formation, but in other aspects of identity development (Grotevant, 1987) and is referred to as **MAMA cycling** or *moving back and forth between moratorium and achievement*.

**Bicultural/Multiracial Identity:** Ethnic minorities must wrestle with the question of how, and to what extent, they will identify with the culture of the surrounding society and with the culture of their family. Phinney (2006) suggests that people may handle it in different ways. Some may keep the identities separate, others may combine them in some way, while others may reject some of them. **Bicultural identity** means *the individual sees himself or herself as part of both the ethnic minority group and the larger society*. Those who are **multiracial**, that is *whose parents come from two or more ethnic or racial groups*, have a more challenging task. In some cases, their appearance may be ambiguous. This can lead to others constantly asking them to categorize themselves. Phinney (2006) notes that the process of identity formation may start earlier and take longer to accomplish in those who are not mono-racial.

**Negative Identity:** A **negative identity** is the adoption of norms and values that are the opposite of one’s family and culture, and it is assumed to be one of the more problematic outcomes of identity development in young people (Hihara, Umemura, & Sigimura, 2019). Those with a negative identity hold dichotomous beliefs, and consequently divide the world into two categories (e.g., friend or foe, good or bad). Hihara et al. suggest that this may be because teens with a negative identity cannot integrate information and beliefs that exist in both their inner and outer world. In addition, those with a negative identity are generally hostile and cynical toward society, often because they do not trust the world around them. These beliefs may lead teens to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior and prevent them from engaging in more positive acts that could be beneficial to society.

## Parents and Teens: Autonomy and Attachment

While most adolescents get along with their parents, they do spend less time with them (Smetana, 2011). This decrease in the time spent with families may be a reflection of a *teenager’s greater desire for independence* or **autonomy**. It can be difficult for many parents to deal with this desire for autonomy. However, it is likely adaptive for teenagers to increasingly distance themselves and establish relationships outside of their families in preparation for adulthood. This means that both parents and teenagers need to strike a balance between autonomy, while still maintaining close and supportive familial relationships.

Children in middle and late childhood are increasingly granted greater freedom regarding moment-to-moment decision making. This continues in adolescence, as teens are demanding greater control in decisions that affect their daily lives. This can increase conflict between parents and their teenagers. For many adolescents this conflict centers on chores, homework, curfew, dating, and personal appearance. These are all things many teens believe they should