

## A DISCUSSION ON BASIC VIRTUES AND CRISIS IN THE CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

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### ABSTRACT

Through the ages, the African tradition has ensured children are exposed to the right values as they grow up. This is important in bringing out well balanced children and brings to fore the manner of handling young people in the various stages of growth before adulthood. The stages generate specific virtues and present some crisis which, if not resolved, will negatively affect the outcome of all handling of future stages of development including learning the values taught in specific stages. The purpose of the study is to examine the virtues generated and crisis presented in each stage of growth as explained by Erikson's psychosocial theory. The objective is to bring out the criticality of the virtues and the crises. The paper argues that parenting should appreciate and embrace the sensitivity of each child with regard to readiness to progress to next growth stage. This area has not received much attention among African researchers even though the knowledge of the virtues and crisis in each stage is beneficial to parenting. This article is a part of a larger study on parenting.

**Keywords:** Virtues, Crisis, Child's growth, Stages of Growth, Psychosocial Theory.

### INTRODUCTION

According to Erikson, a renowned developmental psychologist, the childhood developmental stages are very crucial in personality development and unfold in accordance with two factors: Inborn scheme and one's parenting in a family in relation to cultural values (Davis & Clifton, 1995). The stages are interrelated with subsequent ones building on preceding stages. A crisis in each stage is resolved by the ego in the same stage for development to continue correctly. An individual's personality is considered successful when they possess more of the good traits than bad traits attained from each stage.

Each stage presents a form of crisis or conflict which depending on how it is handled, positively or negatively impacts on how personalities develops. Those who meet the challenge well move to the next stage ready to face the crisis there, while those who are unsuccessful may find themselves stuck in a stage. Each psychosocial stage has two outcomes, that is, successful and unsuccessful, for instance initiative versus guilt.

The study delves on the virtues and crisis articulated by Erikson with the aim of showing how developing the desired level of maturity may be hindered if the crisis is not resolved hence not allowing the moral values to be formed. We also aim to show that for appropriate parenting to occur it is beneficial for those involved to be in the know of the level of growth the child is in and the corresponding crisis in order to walk with the child towards his or her maturity.

## **ERIKSON'S DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE OF GROWTH**

### **Infancy stage of growth**

According to Erikson, the first stage in a child's life is known as infancy and is the age bracket between birth and 18 months. "The basic strength or virtue of this stage is hope or the expectation that difficulties in life presenting whatever challenge they may, will eventually result in a positive outcome" (Fleming, 2018). The anti-thesis of hope is a lack of hope and withdrawal. The crisis the child faces is trust versus mistrust and would not be aware of what is moral or immoral.

At this stage, the lessons a child learns serve to assist him or her to answer the important question, "is the world safe or dangerous"? The answer depends on how the mother, father or caregivers take care of the totally helpless and dependent child. Those involved in care giving should strive to assure the infant that his or her needs will be consistently met leading the child to develop a sense of the world being trustworthy. If the infant needs are not met, it becomes mistrustful and insecure (Ramkumar, 2017). Mostly, the development of basic trust and mistrust within the child comes about from the social interaction of mother and infant as the infant receives care through comforting, feeding and nurturing (Steele, 2017). The mother's love and care through breastfeeding and attention provides a positive influence. An infant that is well handled, nurtured and loved, will develop a trust and security, and in others a basic optimism and is able to successfully complete the infancy stage. A sense of trust helps the child to accept limits and boundaries which is crucial for teaching moral values in later stages.

As the children grow they feel they can turn to a caring person for support which is important because when crisis occur they are shielded from feeling hopeless, anxious and insecure (Cherry, 2014). This is the trust which can later be extended to others. The child's development is dependent on the establishment of this basic trust or mistrust which creates a sense of hope which is needed to meet the problems presented at subsequent stages of development.

### **Early Childhood Stage**

At stage two of the child's growth, which is age 19 months to 3 years the virtue learnt is will while the crisis is autonomy versus shame or doubt. The toddlers are curious to explore the world around them as they develop their first interests and are outgoing wanting to do things on their own. Providing opportunities to explore these interests and to make independent decisions and at the same time receiving the parent's positive encouragement develops a sense of autonomy. When the toddler's decisions are ridiculed, he or she may experience shame and become doubtful in what his or her abilities are capable of, which inhibits self-expression, opinion, and sense of self. The opposite of shame and doubt is autonomy which produces self-reliance, independence of thought to acting for self. The parental encouragement, patience and reaction therefore plays an important role in shaping the child's experience and successful progression through this period, and the significance of this parental reaction concerns all aspects of the toddler's exploration and discovery (Fleming, 2018).

When children trust the world around them, they exercise their autonomy which is seen as they make independent decisions on things that impact their lives, testing their autonomy. They should be allowed to learn by making mistakes and the best parents can do is to encourage them and support this increased independence without being overly critical or too controlling (Fleming, 2018). It is in an environment of affirmation rather than of criticism

that people develop faster (Morrison, 1997). The parent may expect the child to assert his or her will but their self-will should be controlled by rules set by the parents. This will naturally result in shame by the child as the sense of being watched takes over. The rules imposed on the child provide the structure needed to “be a separate person, a moral agent, within the matrix of the social order” (Steele, 2017).

The tasks the child learns during this stage include feeding oneself, walking, talking as well as controlling bowel functions. Even as parents exercise patience with the child at the same time they must establish rules or standards of proper behaviour. He or she must be made to absorb the meaning of the word “no” for this helps them to learn law and order though any excessive control by parents risks increased lack of sense of autonomy and shame on the part of the child, since such behaviour can break the child’s will.

### **Play Age Stage**

The youngsters in this category of age 4 to 6 years face the challenge of initiative versus guilt. The virtue learnt is purpose. According to Erikson, the main question asked in this stage is “how moral am I?” it is a stage to develop independence and courage. The child is faced with the complexities of planning and developing a sense of judgement and purpose, and quite a bit of imagination. Further, he or she learns to define own boundaries while taking initiative which as McDevitt and Ormrod (2002) showed, can be through encouragement by their parents. Being capable of taking initiative prepares the child towards leadership roles and achievement of goals and this initiative is built when they are allowed to express imagination. For instance by playing with various natural objects, directing them in choosing an activity that they repeat as often as they want, engaging them in real life activities like house chores, and introducing stories and songs that stimulate the imagination. To ridicule or make fun of the child’s imagination, and overt expectation leads to inhibiting the natural senses of initiative (Ramkumar, 2017).

Another aspect of the parent helping the child develop self-initiative in this pre-school stage is in teaching the child the skills to be responsible and independent. The child is taught how to have courage, self-discipline, be empathetic and trustworthy. Fittro proposes some ideas on how to encourage these values during a child’s moral development. First, the parents should respect the child if they expect respect in return. Secondly the parents should remain firm regarding their expectations, but consider fairness since the child is a human being. This way the child will develop a positive self-concept. Thirdly they should take the advantage they have by virtue of their position as parents to teach moral values through discussion and example or illustration. In this way, the child can learn how to tolerate guilt, feelings of low self-esteem and self-confidence or self-efficacy. After taking an initiative to accomplish a certain goal, the child comes to learn that after all this type of behaviour is acceptable. The child should be given the opportunity to discuss how to accept these feelings that accompany guilt (Fittro, 1997).

### **School Age Stage**

At this stage of growth, the child is in the age bracket of 7 to 12 years and is now eager to learn and accomplish tasks that are more complex. The crisis faced is of industry versus inferiority while the virtue is competence. According to Erikson, the sense of guilt and shame work in tension to produce an ego strength (or virtue) of competency. For example the superego rules and creates strong feelings of guilt whenever one commits a wrong prompting condemnation of the action (Steele, 2017). The question the children ask is “can I make it in this world of people and things?” (Fleming, 2018). The children in this stage recognize

cultural and individual differences and with little assistance can manage their personal needs (Allen & Marotz, 2003). Sometimes the child may show disobedience as a way of expressing independence. For instance, the child may become rebellious or talk back to a parent. It should be noted that allowing the child too little success develops a sense of inferiority or incompetence but balancing between industry and inferiority leads to competence. However, the child should not be allowed too much industry because children must be children.

According to Brooks and Goldstein (2001), nurturing of self-esteem and resilience by parents can be done in several ways which include; understanding and accepting the learning problem of the child and highlighting the strength or virtues; educating the child on how to make decisions and solve problems; reinforcing responsibility by allowing the children to contribute; learning from mistakes and not feel defeated, and, creating a moment alone with the child, this makes him or her feel special. Erikson observes that the child's moral values form in this stage.

### **Adolescence Stage**

The adolescence stage starts from age 13 to 18 years where the virtue is fidelity and the crisis faced is identity versus role confusion. Adolescence is marked as a period of change as one transitions from childhood to adulthood. From the first stage of infancy till school age, development depends upon what was done to the individual. Now, development is dependent on what the young person does (Wikipedia, 2012). The foregoing past experiences goes to establish the individual's emerging sense of self also anticipating the future (Wikipedia, 2012). Even as life starts to get more complex, the adolescent needs to develop a sense of self and a personal identity. In other words, they work towards finding who they really are and therefore the adolescent concern themselves with asking the questions "who am I?", "Who can I be?" (Cicarelli & White, 2009). A sense of self is defined as a "multifaceted composite of one's characteristics and abilities" (Thies & Travers, 2009). Adolescents pay attention to how they appear to others and spend time evaluating personal values, goals and beliefs in order to discover their self-identity. The child learns the roles to occupy as an adult and may experiment with their independence. Encouragement by those around them is important

The adolescent not only need to develop a sense of self but also needs to establish a philosophy of his or her life. It is during this period they try out different roles, values and identities (Edelman & Mandle, 2010). There is potential for confusion leading to an identity crisis as the individual moves along this path of self-discovery. According to Erikson, those who resolve their personal crisis well achieve a sense of identity which helps them to know who they are. Those who remain doubtful and insecure are yet to resolve their crisis and end up experiencing identity confusion (Thies & Travers, 2009). Rebellion means one has established a negative identity or experiencing a feeling of unhappiness. The adolescent stage borders the crisis of intimacy versus isolation which the youth face in the following Erickson's stage of growth discussed next.

### **Young Adulthood Stage**

This is the stage of young adulthood, from age 19 to 35 years where the virtue is love and the crisis faced is intimacy versus isolation. The adolescent concern themselves with asking the questions "can I love". The young adults grow in their capacity to love through intimate relations. Intimacy is described as "finding the self, then losing the self in another" (Potter & Perry, 2009). The influence of the individual's stable hold on sense of self alongside his or her capacity to love, together with their significant other contributes to resolving of this crisis. The young adult should be prepared for intimacy, close relationship at personal level and isolation, being separated from others or being alone. Balancing between intimacy and

isolation makes love possible because knowing how to be alone makes it possible for one to love, handle real relationships and be ready for commitment. The ego should also be prepared for rejection (Fleming, 2018). Having resolved the crisis in the first stage of growth and developed hope as a strength to help confront future challenges, and having come successfully through the subsequent stages, then the young person should be able to effectively create and settle in a stable relationship.

It is only when the individual establishes and feels secured in their identity that they are ready for intimacy (Thies & Travers, 2009). Such individuals are loving and warm, able to form intimate and close relationships and sacrifice for it (Wikipedia, 2012). On the other hand the fear of losing identity leads to keeping away from intimate relationships thereby causing isolation (Thies & Travers, 2009).

Often the two outcomes of strength (positive) and a crisis (negative) at every stage are confusing. The true position is that the so-called negatives are essential for living in the world. A crisis is not an evil; it is necessary for social maturation and is instrumental in developing a moral value. A basic strength of character is achieved whenever the resolution of a crisis occurs. Peck (1978) observed the process of acquisition of the virtues is invariably an uphill struggle, often of lifelong duration. The parents play the key role in proffering these gifts.

Despite much criticism of Erikson psychosocial theory (Sorell & Montgomery, 2001), it continues to attract recognition as a crucial model in understanding the developmental stages of an individual. In our case, the study views Erikson's theory as a fine idea providing valuable insight and caution to parents on the child's growth process and specifically when inculcating moral values.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study highlight the significance of the virtues and crisis presented in the developmental stages of children. The virtue and the crisis provide a rich foundation and support for inculcating moral values. It should be noted that at infancy stage, the child is totally helpless and dependent on the parents and cannot directly be taught moral values. The child's appropriate development receives a boost when he or she is allowed to experience, in the early years, trust, autonomy, initiative and industry. In later years, the identity and intimacy developed at the adolescence and young adulthood stages become a more prevalent experience in future as the child continues to mature. At early stages, the child benefits immensely through the love and care given by the mother. As the child grows he or she may seem to struggle against the parents but what is actually observed are actions illustrating strength of will and willfulness (Steele, 2017) that need to be guided for a successful outcome in the particular stage.

It is the study's argument therefore that unless an attempt is made to include the aspect of parenting that introduces inputs sensitive to the virtues and crisis in each stage of growth or allows the children to develop these virtues and to resolve the crisis in each stage, the teaching they receive, however relevant, may not find the child in the right emotional disposition and temperaments. Thus, developing the strengths and resolving the crisis in each stage of development is as important as ensuring they receive moral values. A sense of trust helps the child to accept limits and boundaries which is crucial for teaching moral values in later stages.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, this study recommends the following:

1. Parenting that considers the virtues and crisis at various stages of a child's growth should be encouraged.
2. The road to adulthood has significantly changed in important ways, however, despite this, parents are advised to take time to ensure their children obtain the virtues articulated by Erickson and resolve the attendant crisis in a particular growth stage as way of aiding the child learn moral values.
3. It can be an added advantage if those entrusted with bringing up the child are dependable and have the appropriate skills.
4. Parents and those handling the training of children should evaluate if the child has successfully completed resolving the crisis of a stage before subjecting the child to more training.
5. Care should be taken not to rush children through a stage of development. Making sure they learn the strengths and resolve crisis of each stage will greatly enhance their chances of appreciating the moral values taught to them.

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