

#38 Who Am I? Ages & Stages

[00:00:00] Welcome to the podcast today. Today, we're going to focus on how knowing about ages and stages, also called lifespan development, can be super helpful in cultivating mental wellness. This episode is retooled from season one's fundamentals and builds on the last two episodes. Where I shared with you, my two mindfulness exercises, Notice on the Inside and Notice on the Outside. When you put these three mental wellness tools together, Voila' you have more, self-awareness, a cornerstone in cultivating mental wellness. I'm very excited about the next few episodes, because having taught this many times to both clients and students, I often get the same response. Why doesn't everyone learn this? I think it's helpful to think of each of our lives as a story where there are chapters that unfold throughout the days, months, and years. Doing this helps us open our mind a bit to the realization that our own human development is a gradual process that takes place over [00:01:00] time.

I want to share with you, Dr. Erik Erikson's theory on psychosocial development across the human lifespan. Perhaps, some of you have been introduced to Dr. Erickson's work in a Psych class. This really won't be an introduction, but a reintroduction, as you begin to think about what Dr. Erickson teaches us in relationship to cultivating mental health. Dr. Erickson's theory gives us eight stages that all of us go through as our life unfolds. While each of us has our own story. The chapters have some things in common and knowing about these can be very helpful. Not only in healing and repairing what may have happened in earlier parts of our life, but helping parent our own children. And even help develop and mentor those people with whom we work and come in contact with on a daily basis. If you are a person who likes to take notes or likes to follow along with a one pager, please go to my website. MJ @ [00:02:00] MJ Murray vachon.com. There, you can find a one pager for this episode, in episode number three.

I think it's fair to say that in all of our life stories, we have the same opening line. Once upon a time an infant was born. The first stage, Erickson says, is called infancy. It lasts approximately 18 months. The psychosocial crisis that we are each wrestling with is basic trust versus mistrust. Let's look at this in a really simplistic way. A baby is born. The most significant relationship to the infant are its' primary caretakers. Mother, father or other caregivers who are part of the infant's daily life. When we think about a newborn. We begin to think how completely dependent, not only the child we're looking at was from the very beginning, but that we too, we're completely dependent on the adults around us to meet our [00:03:00] most basic needs. Yes, we needed our caregivers to give us food, clothing, shelter, and of course, love and attention.

This is how the baby answers the big question in this stage, can I trust the world? How does the baby signal that he or she has needs? Through crying, through signs and sounds of discomfort. When these basic needs are met by the adults, around them in a reasonable enough time, the baby begins to understand. That the world is a place that can be trusted. But what happens when the opposite occurs? Let's say the baby cries and cries and cries, and no one comes to check his diaper or give him or her a bottle. One would think that when these basic needs aren't met, the baby would just cry louder and longer. At first, the baby's cries increase in length and duration. But after time and time, again, of not having the basic needs met, the baby begins to withdraw and [00:04:00] deals with a sense that this is not a world that he or she can trust to have his or her own needs met. The young infant moves into the next stage of life without developing a basic sense of trust. Human development is not like a video game. We continue to go from chapter one of our life of infancy into the next chapter, whether we've got the basic need of trust developed or not.

The second stage Dr. Erickson calls Early Childhood. This stage starts at approximately one and a half years and ends around age three. As you can imagine, none of these stages have an exact start and an exact stop. The big question in Early Childhood, is, is it okay for me to be me? Erickson tells us that the psychosocial crisis at this stage is autonomy versus shame and doubt. And if you've ever lived with a two [00:05:00] year old, you'll understand what I mean very quickly. It is at this age that children begin to have their own preferences. If these preferences are met with support and encouragement a child begins to flourish. But if their preferences are met with frustration belittlement and punishment, by the primary caregivers in this child's life, the child begins to be filled with shame and doubt. Let me give you an example. Most of us have known a child, perhaps a two year old that was in love with a particular color. Let's say orange. The child insisted day in and day out on wearing his favorite orange shirt. Parents who understands the stage will buy a couple of orange shirts, launder them as a way to support this child's preferences. Another example, let's say a parent wants her child to eat healthy foods. They give the three-year-old some broccoli. Of course, the parent not being a fool says to the three-year-old, it looks like a [00:06:00] tree. Oh, this is very enticing to the three-year-old. Until he, or she puts that broccoli tree in their mouth. But the minute they feel the texture of the food or perhaps the taste, they spit it out. A parent who doesn't understand that in this stage, a child is automatically giving you information about what they like, and don't like. The parents should, for most of the times, try their best to respect these preferences. Not shame the child. You need to eat these vegetables. They're good for you. These messages begin to send ,perhaps unintentionally, to the child that their natural likes and dislikes are not okay. In this stage, the big question is, is it okay to be me? This stage asks parents to develop a lot more patience than most

of us ever have at the beginning of parenting. Perhaps the biggest battle of the wills in this stage is potty training. Most parents learned that potty training is a lot [00:07:00] harder than it seems. It needs to take place with gentle guidance, patience, and persistence. Not only on the part of the child, but on the part of the adults. When this important life skill is successfully completed, both parent and child have a new sense of autonomy. The child has a new sense of will. Yes, I can do this! But sometimes unknowingly parents become shaming. They become controlling, not only about the act of potty training, but about other things that the child needs to try on at this stage. The child begins because of shame and doubt to feel a bit compulsive. Who hasn't known the well-intended parent who wanted to encourage a peaceful and loving child and said no guns in my house. Only to find that they're adorable two and a half year old is turning every item they touch into a gun. This is the years of having preferences of exploring. It's so helpful to children when we are supportive of their [00:08:00] preferences.

Erickson's next stage is called the Play Age. It starts around three and ends at approximately five. The big question in this stage is, is it okay for me to do, to move and to act in the world? The family is the most significant relationship and these beautiful little beings move into life with more initiative. The psychosocial crisis at this stage is initiative versus guilt. Let me give you two interesting examples that I think highlight this stage. Both of them involve my oldest son, Nick.

When Nick was five, him and his best buddy, Troy who lived next door, came up with this fun idea that they wanted to throw a cord between our two upstairs windows. In which they could attach a bucket and they could pass toys back and forth between each other's houses. Wow. Did they have initiative? They had a purpose in mind. [00:09:00] They began to throw this cord again and again, with very little success. They'd run down the stairs. One of them would pick up the cord, go back up the stairs and throw it again. Then the other one having no success would run down his stairs, pick up the cord, go up to their window and throw it again. This went on and on and on. As an adult watching this, it seemed a little frustrating to me. I was quite sure that on one, maybe two throws I could be successful. But with this little bit of education about childhood development, I knew that I needed to let them have their own initiative. Boy, am I glad I stayed out of it? Two hours. Yes. With a little snack break in between those guys finally got the cord through both of the upstairs windows. When they were successful, they ran down the stairs, met each other in the front yard and had a celebration as big as the Super Bowl. They had a purpose and through this purpose, [00:10:00] both of them together had developed more and more initiative just having stuck it out.

That same child of mine went to his first class at the park department. It was a great class, not only for him, but for me. While, he would begin gymnastics, I could take a yoga class. The first class, he was a little shy, a little inhibited, and he just sat on my lap and watched. That seemed pretty normal to me. Week two, once again, he sat on my lap and he watched. Week three exact same behavior. I called one of my sisters who happens to know a lot about this age and stage, as well as gymnastics. I asked her, what should I do? She said, just be patient. He's probably an observer. Well, I'm not going to lie. For eight weeks he sat on my lap and observed. To be honest, I was really embarrassed. I had to consciously choose to not say anything that would shame him [00:11:00] because while I was sitting there and missing yoga, he was fairly engaged watching what was going on. At the end of the class his teacher gave out report cards and because he didn't participate, he got an F. Yes, this is a true story. I did what any mother would do? I signed him up for the next class a few weeks later. Much to my surprise, and to this day, I don't really understand what happened. Round two he walked into the class, he looked me in the eyes, he said, bye Mom. He did gymnastics and I did yoga. That was a huge learning for me. Because I was embarrassed. All of us have been in this situation at every age of our kids' development, where they do something that embarrasses as us. And our task is to not take our embarrassment out and unload it on our kid. Rather to be curious and to understand where they're coming from. Maybe sometimes we don't understand it, but we will allow it to happen because in this stage, the play age, the [00:12:00] big question is, is it okay for me to do, to move and to act. My son's natural way, even to this day, is to sit back and observe before he participates. He moves into things with his own natural rhythm. If he is allowed to do that his process does not get turned into guilt but just the way he begins to learn something new. This stage Play Age moves into the School Years Age. If resolved successfully, with the child having a healthy sense of purpose and initiative?

As you can imagine, purpose and initiative are quite necessary for Stage Four, which Erickson calls the School Age Years. These years begin at six and end at 12. You don't need me to tell you how foundationally important they are in a child's development. The big question in this stage is, can I make it in the world of people and things? If this stage has [00:13:00] successfully been worked through a child begins to feel a good sense of competence. Of course, this is not surprising because these are the years where children begin to learn, to read, to write and to do math. It's also the years where they begin to learn how to create friendships, how to socialize with other adults, coaches, and teachers, and the people that they work with in and out of their everyday life. One of the things I like to say to parents is that Erickson says the psychosocial crisis at this stage is industry versus inferiority. As parents, we're trying to set up a life where our child feels industrious. I think for many parents, this is the age and stage that

they have been waiting for. Because their baby who turned into a toddler and a young child is now school age. There's so many neat activities that children have the opportunity to take part in at this young age. But if parents can remember, what we're trying to do is [00:14:00] cultivate industriousness in our young children, they will create a schedule at this age, which is really attuning to what their child is capable of. I ask parents to use this lens of attunement in creating a daily and a weekly schedule that really meets young school age children's needs. What are these needs? Well, yes, their needs are for soccer, dance and music, but the basic needs at this age are this. Children need to be well fed. They need to be well rested. They need to have enough exercise and yes, they need downtime. They need time to daydream. They need time to recover from is always a taxing school day. Children desperately at this age, need their parents to have very clear guidelines around all video devices. They are really meant for relaxation. They are not meant to take the place of parent child, sibling, [00:15:00] and friend interaction. Sometimes, I think as our culture offers so many interesting activities for kids this age, we forget that their main job is to do school. In order to do school well they need to be in bed at good time. They need to be able to wake up and have a good breakfast. They also need to be able to move. And yes, they need some time to sit around and do nothing. It seems funny because really those four things are the foundation of helping our children to become competent. Yet, so many children that I have worked with, especially in the last 20 years, don't have a schedule that really encourages and allows them to have the energy and the focus to be industrious. With that being said, I want to take a minute to talk about learning differences because often these begin to surface in the early school, age years.

One of the differences in this generation, certainly from when I was in school and also for the parents in their thirties and forties is we now know much more about learning [00:16:00] differences. It is not unusual for me to work with a parent who says, "well, I had ADHD and I didn't get any treatment. I'm fine." " I too was a slow learner, but I think my kid will work out of that glitch." I really want to encourage parents to treat learning differences exactly as they would treat physical illnesses. Go to an expert and do whatever it takes for your child to be treated. Because this really can help a child to feel competent. Sometimes a parent will say to me, I don't really want my child to have a diagnosis because that will make my child feel different. And if my child feels different, then he won't feel good about himself. He'll have low self-esteem. That could not be any farther from the truth. Having worked a lot with children in this age. They have taught me when words are put to their differences in a way that is caring and hopeful and when interventions and skills are taught to them, they feel empowered instead of powerless. [00:17:00] As adults, we need to help them understand what the difference is and how to address it. Of course, parents are worried. Often parents say to me, kids are mean. I don't want my child to be

made fun of because he has special glasses or has pulled out of class for tutoring. It is very possible that this will happen, but with a little preparation, children really can handle this difference. Actually they know on some level but they would never have the words if the adults didn't help them understand it. The other day, a friend of mine told me about her grandson who needed hearing aids. He showed up at school with his bright blue hearing aids. And wouldn't, you know, it, one of his classmates said, "What are those things in your ears?" But this child was well-prepared by his parents to face the question. When his classmate asked him, he said, "They're my hearing aids. They give me superpower to hear better." His classmate looked at him and said, "Whoa, [00:18:00] Those are cool. I'd like a pair too." If we help our children face their differences and empower them to navigate them, they don't end up feeling a lack of competence. It is actually the opposite. Instead of feeling inferior, they actually feel more competent. Erickson tells us when this stage is successfully navigated. A child moves into the next stage, Adolescence, with a sense of industry, a sense of competence. But when this stage doesn't go well for a child, a child often feels inferior and then they have a sense of inertia. They don't have the energy. They don't have to have the sense of, I want to learn. I can learn.

Let's move forward and discuss Dr. Erickson's next stage of human development. I want you to take a second and pay attention to what happens inside of you, when I say these two words: adolescents and teenager. If you're like many people that I have asked this [00:19:00] question to you have a pretty immediate reaction or set of memories within you. Let's sift it. Perhaps your body had a sensation, which was a reaction to these words. Maybe you were filled with dread or maybe your spirit uplifted a bit. Did these two words conjure up any images? Maybe of you in a school play or you and your buddies trying weed for the first time? Did the words, teenager or adolescent surface, any feelings in you? Maybe some of sadness or the nostalgic feelings of your first love. Lastly, maybe you had some thoughts when I said those words. I'm so glad those years are over. Or those were the days. Maybe you thought, oh, those were such great days. Adolescence, perhaps more than any other life stage is filled with intense memories. Once you learn a little bit about this stage, it will make sense. It is during this stage, which starts at age 12 and ends at age 25, that our brain has its second [00:20:00] largest growth spurt. The first being the first year of infancy. The second being adolescence. Of course, that makes sense because it is in adolescence that our childhood brain matures into an adult brain. Dr. Erickson's stages prior to the advent of neuroscience defined adolescents as being from age 13 to 19. Where the big question was, Who am I? And What can I Be? The big questions are still the same, but with the advancements of neuroscience, we now know that there is this huge growth spurt that takes place in the brain and it takes 13 years. Dr. Daniel Siegel helps us to understand what the teen brain does. This gives us good guidance, whether we are adolescents

listening to this, parents of adolescents or professionals working with adolescents, or perhaps we're family members loving them in this really intense and complicated stage. Siegel says that the essence of a teen brain is this. [00:21:00] That the teen brain leans towards E S: emotional spark. Adolescents are full of emotional intensity. Social engagement SE. It is in this stage, both Erickson and Siegel say the most significant relationship, are peers and role models. Teens are looking for their next tribe. And N the teen brain leans towards novelty. They want new experiences, whether it's working in a part-time job, trying new activities in high school and college, or yes, dabbling in drugs, pornography and who knows what else? In this stage, the brain loves new and novel experience. Lastly, the teen brain needs and wants creative exploration, which is why teens love music, poetry, and Tik Tok. I can't think of a more vivid example that shows how incredibly creative young people can be then Tik Tok. It doesn't really take a developmental psychologist or a neuropsychiatrist to [00:22:00] let the average person on the street understand that a psychosocial crisis for a teenager is identity versus role confusion. Adolescent struggle as they should all through this stage with the question, Who am I and What can I do with my life? As our society has changed there are so many more career, educational, gender, sexual orientation, and lifestyle options for young people to explore. From my view as a clinician, I am grateful that this stage has been extended to be 13 years long because these questions need a lot of time, a lot of attention, a lot of support and a lot of intentionality. If a teen is going to move through this stage in a successful way, where they answer the question, Who am I?, with clarity and more fidelity and faithfulness than at any other time in their life, they need support. They need information and they need time [00:23:00] to test and to try out many new things. I find it interesting that Erickson chooses the strength that a teen gets at the end of adolescence as being that of fidelity. Fidelity is an old fashioned word, but what it means is that a teen in their middle twenties, as they move successfully through adolescence, understand who they are in a way that deeply resonates with themselves. Today, the word we would use is the teen is authentically himself or herself. Or as teens love to say, You be, you. Sometimes I think the enormity of choices that today's adolescents face in defining who they are, can make them overwhelmed and apathetic. I think our visual world filled with social media that often encourages teens to lean into trying to be famous or wealthy or to do something that nobody else has ever done makes them feel like they have [00:24:00] failed even before they have started. I think the really tricky balance between adolescents and the adults around them often makes the teen feel alone. Adolescents often give off the vibe to the adults in their lives, I don't need you. Yet, they really do need us, but they really need us on their terms, not ours. One thing I think often goes unnoticed until it's more entrenched in a teen's life then adults realize is adolescents use of alcohol, drugs, pot, pornography, and tech, as a way to soothe the anxiety, perhaps the depression, that many of them feel throughout

this stage. I encourage adults to not use a line," Well, that's just how teenagers are." When teenagers are exploring any of these vices their initial intention is often to belong or to soothe what's going on inside of them. All of us know no drug, no device on technology and [00:25:00] pornography really allows a child to answer the question, Who am I? in an authentic way. What they do is to soothe the discomfort and encourage connection with their peers that is at best altered and at worst, not rooted in authenticity. They need us as adults to be sounding boards. People who are the container for their confusion. Yes, they're role confusion as they move through this stage. Without us, they become apathetic. They won't move into the next stage with a solid sense of identity. They'll often end up having a sense of self that is rooted in low self-esteem and a sense of not really feeling like they have the agency to move into adulthood. Lucky is the teen who has adults in their life that can have conversations that really are rooted in curiosity. Help me understand why you're doing that? Help me understand what's important to you? Give me an update on your life? Wow. [00:26:00] I just saw your grades, I'm curious, how do you feel about them? We all have these scripts in our head that want to really sock it to teenagers, but that isn't what really helps them turn inward and find the words for Who am I?, in this moment of my life.

On, next week's episode, you'll hear a 20 year old talk about moving to the first part of adolescence. As he shares his experience of navigating the teen years, he provides us with a clear sense of the uncertainty and confusion that are normal as teens try to figure out who they are. Like many teens, he followed his interest, tried new experiences and had various groups of friends. All helping him to increase his self-awareness. Before heading back to college, he took the Enneagram and was quite relieved and enlightened that the results of this personality test resonated with his own internal self-awareness. This is a great episode. One that I think helps us [00:27:00] understand the application of Erickson's ages and stages in our life. After next week, episode us out I'll return to share the last of Erickson stages with a real surprise for all listeners who are 60 and over and not quite ready to go into old age. That includes me.

Here are my Inner Challenge insights for this episode.

Insight number one:

Want to make the world a better place. Then raise a child that wants to make the world a better place. The goal of ages and stages is helping our children flourish not only for their own happiness and success but so they can love and work with others in ways that are collaborative and life-giving. Parenting is tricky. Because most parents have had very little involvement with children. It's a bit

like driving with no driver's education. Ages and stages give us information so we're more realistic when it comes to our expectations of children.

Insight number two:

[00:28:00] I encourage people to use the Rule of 30 when they feel confused about how to parent grandparent or work with children. The Rule of 30 reminds us that we are raising our children to be happy and productive 30 year olds, not just for their sake, but for everyone's sake. We must keep an eye on the end game. The three-year-old may have a preference to lie down on the floor in a restaurant but we don't want a 30 year old doing this, so this behavior needs to be addressed. Children do not come out of the womb, knowing how to behave in public, how to share, how to study or that hitting and cheating is wrong. It is our job to teach them these most important life skills and values. The best teaching is done in a connecting, not shaming way. At any age, shaming floods the brain and the only lesson that is learned is I am bad. We need to connect in order to redirect. Before going into a restaurant, remind children this is [00:29:00] how they are to behave. Tell teens weekly. I love you. I think you're great. And cheating is not okay. When they display behavior that will not work for them at 30 years old we know that the lesson has not been learned and we need to up our game as teachers not do yelling or preaching, but through applying patience to try to understand why they're misbehaving so we can create a new lesson plan to help them behave. This often means we have to go back to school to figure out how to help the child. Google for ideas, ask a grandparent, a friend, listen to Dr. Becky. She's awesome. I hate to say this, but for many parents, this is more work than they had imagined but so as a house, a dog or taxes. Yet, nothing is as rewarding as helping a child grow up. If we can fully embrace both roles, the struggles become real areas of growth, not only for our children, but for us. Do you [00:30:00] have a growth mindset when it comes to parenting?

Insight number three:

I think you've heard enough of my voice for one day. Thanks for listening. Take a minute to look at the one pager and increase your self awareness about ages and stages. This is your Inner Challenge.