

# Chapter 5

## Complex Trauma: A Professional and Personal Account

**Susan Wuchenich Parker**  
Robert Morris University, USA

### ABSTRACT

*Defining trauma is an individualized process that includes looking at events, experiences, and effects. Best practices explicitly state the importance of an individual's experiences when defining trauma. Therefore, solely utilizing a professional lens for discussion is often inappropriate. The purpose of this chapter is to examine trauma and trauma-informed care through both a professional and personal lens. Research on outcomes for children internationally adopted or living in foster care will be intertwined with personal narrative. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development will be the lens to examine how trauma affects life and learning as children grow and mature. Finally, specific anecdotal strategies will be shared that either provided or negated support on how potentially to navigate public and higher education systems in the United States.*

### INTRODUCTION

The emphasis of this chapter is the effect of complex trauma on internationally adopted school age children, and children in the foster care system. These two groups have much in common. Moreover, public and private educators will likely encounter a child from one or both groups. Research will be filtered through a personal lens. The author, in previous professional roles worked with children and families from both groups. Additionally, she has an intensive personal experience as the parent of a child adopted at age eight from an Eastern European orphanage. Research and narrative will be linked using Erik Erikson's framework on psychosocial development.

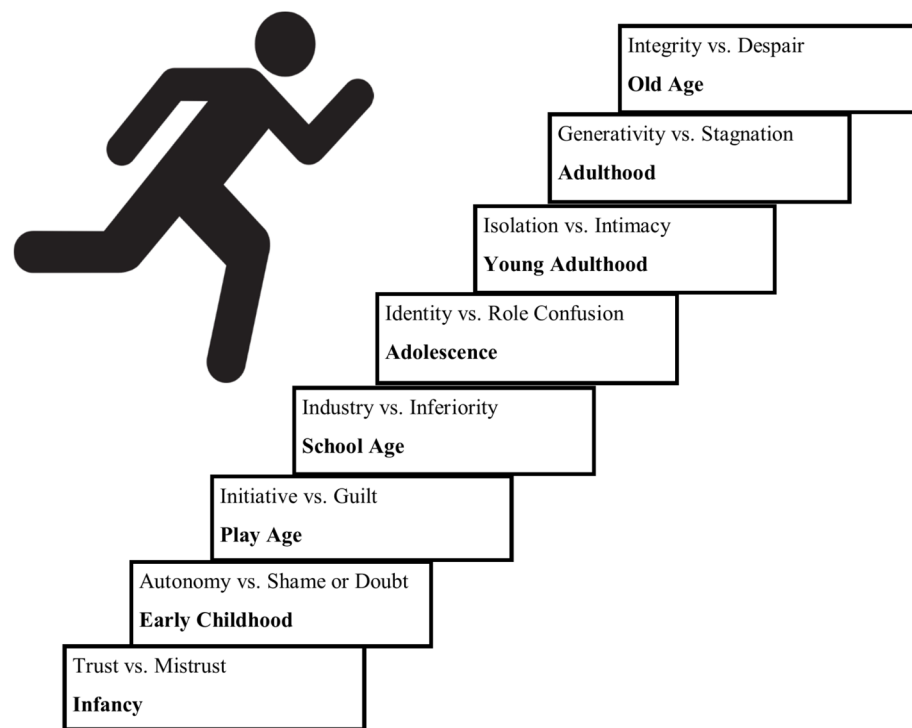
At its most basic level, Erikson's framework provides a chronological and developmental basis for dialogue on child and human development. Erikson's framework suggests a simultaneous relationship between development and social expectations that teach us what it means to be human. At each of the eight stages of development, infancy through old age, biological changes interact with social expectations, supports, cultural practices and institutions (Marcia & Josselson, 2013). For example, in infancy,

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babies learn to either trust or mistrust the world around them. An infant whose cries are met by a caring adult trying to understand if the child is hungry, wet, or tired and who then takes appropriate steps to mitigate the child's unhappy circumstances will lead to an infant's trust in the world. The scenario follows this basic format: I am upset, I cry, someone comes to help me. Infants that trust the world to take care of them, move into the second stage more adept at handling the growth and challenges that come with early childhood and toddlerhood. Each stage builds upon the previous. See Figure 1 for a visual depiction of the developmental trajectory.

Figure 1. Model of Erikson's psychosocial stages



However, it is a mistake to view the model as simply a “staircase” for development. It is important to take both the positive and negative spaces of the stairs into consideration. In order for individuals to progress, they need positive and negative experiences to formulate their own understanding of themselves and the world. Some negative experiences teach valuable life lessons, but too many leave an individual on a very shaky staircase. Moreover, development only occurs within the greater context of the world. Individual growth requires a reliance on cultural and generational connections and knowledge (Marcia & Josselson, 2013). In order to move smoothly up the stairs and through the stages to old age, babies and adults rely on others in their lives to help guide them. For Erikson, a child's world is defined within the context of important relationships. Therefore, the adults in one's life must also have a stable position on the staircase.

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