Erikson proposed that each period of life has a unique challenge or crisis that a person must face. This is referred to as a psychosocial development. According to Erikson, successful development involves dealing with and resolving the goals and demands of each of these crises in a positive way. These crises are usually called stages, although that is not the term Erikson used. If a person does not resolve a crisis successfully, it may hinder their ability to deal with later crises. For example, an individual who does not develop a clear sense of purpose and identity (Erikson’s fifth crisis - Identity vs. Role Confusion) may become self-absorbed and stagnate rather than working toward the betterment of others (Erikson’s seventh crisis - Generativity vs. Stagnation). However, most individuals are able to successfully complete the eight crises of his theory.3

Identity vs. Role Confusion

Identity vs. Role Confusion is a major stage of development where the child has to learn the roles he will occupy as an adult. In adolescence, children (ages 12–18) face the task of identity vs. role confusion. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of fidelity. Fidelity involves being able to commit one's self to others on the basis of accepting others, even when there may be ideological differences. According to Erikson, an adolescent’s main task is developing a sense of self. Adolescents struggle with questions such as “Who am I?” and “What do I want to do with my life?” Along the way, most adolescents try on many different selves to see which ones fit; they explore various roles and ideas, set goals, and attempt to discover their “adult” selves. Adolescents who are successful at this stage have a strong sense of identity and are able to remain true to their beliefs and values in the face of problems and other people’s perspectives. When adolescents are apathetic, do not make a conscious search for identity, or are pressured to conform to their parents’ ideas for the future, they may develop a weak sense of self and experience role confusion. They will be unsure of their identity and confused about the future. Teenagers who struggle to adopt a positive role will likely struggle to “find” themselves as adults.4
Erikson saw this as a period of confusion and experimentation regarding identity and how one navigates along life’s path. During adolescence, we experience psychological moratorium, where teens put their current identity on hold while they explore their options for identity. 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).5