

Family Life Cycle

Stage One: Single young adults leave home

Overview:

Here the emotional change is from the reliance on the family to acceptance of emotional and financial responsibility for ourselves. Second-order changes (see sidebar) include differentiation of self in relation



to family of origin. This means we neither blindly accept what our parents believe or want us to do, nor do we automatically respond negatively to their requests. Our beliefs and behaviors are now part of our own identity, though we will change and refine what we believe throughout our lives. Also, during this period we develop intimate peer relationships on a deeper level than we had previously and become financially independent.

Details:

This is the most critical stage of the family life cycle. As you enter young adulthood, you begin to separate emotionally from your family. During this stage, you strive to become fully able to support yourself emotionally, physically, socially, and financially. You begin to develop unique qualities and characteristics that define your individual identity.

Intimacy is a vital skill to develop during your independent, young adult years. Intimacy is the ability to develop and maintain close relationships that can endure hard times and other challenges. In an intimate relationship, you learn about:

- Commitment.
- Commonality or similarity.
- Compatibility.
- Attachment.
- Dependence on another person who is not in your family.
- Shared emotion in a relationship.

You also learn who you are outside of your identity within your family. Your ability to develop an intimate relationship depends on how successful you were at developing your individual identity earlier in life.

Exploring interests and career goals is part of developing independence. To live successfully away from your family, you must develop financial and emotional independence.

You also begin to be responsible for your own health in this stage. You become responsible for your nutritional, physical, and medical needs. Developing healthy habits at this time—such as good nutrition, regular exercise, and safe sex practices—is important for lifelong good health and happiness.

You learn new aspects of independence throughout your lifetime. Even when you have moved on to another stage of life, such as coupling, you continue to learn independence within the context of that stage.

During the independence stage, you hope to:

- Learn to see yourself as a separate person in relation to your original family—parents, siblings, and extended family members.
- Develop intimate peer relationships outside the family.
- Establish yourself in your work or career.

Other important qualities you develop during this phase include:

- Trust.
- Morals.
- Initiative.
- Work ethic.
- Identity, or who you are in the world.

Stage Two: The new couple joins their families through marriage or living together

Overview:

The major emotional transition during this phase is through commitment to the new system. Second-order change involves the formation of a marital system and realignment of relationships with extended families and friends that includes our spouses.

Details:

After you achieve independence, the next stage in the family life cycle is coupling. You explore your ability to commit to a new family and a new way of life. While being in a committed relationship with someone without the act of marriage does involve a process of adaptation and relationship building, marriage often requires unique skills.

When you join families through marriage, you form a new family system. Your family system includes your personal ideas, expectations, and values. These are shaped by the relationships and experiences



with your original family. When you marry, you combine your family system with your spouse's. This requires reshaping your and your spouse's goals. In the most functional marriages, partners have the ability to take two different points of view and create an option that neither person had considered. It differs from a compromise in that it is not giving up something. Rather, it is creating a third, better option.

You may find that some of the ideas or expectations that you held in the past are not realistic at this stage. Some **common areas of adjustment** include:

- Finances.
- Lifestyle.
- Recreational activities or hobbies.
- Relationships with in-laws.
- Sexuality or sexual compatibility.
- Friendships.
- Putting another person's needs before your own.

The ultimate goal at this stage is to achieve interdependence, which occurs when you are able to fully enter into a relationship with another person. Interdependence also requires that you share goals and that you are able to occasionally place the needs of another above your own. But before you can achieve interdependence, you must have first acquired a high degree of independence.

The **relationship skills** you learn in coupling serve as a foundation for other relationships, such as parent-child, teacher-student, or physician-patient.

Within a couple, you learn:

- Advanced interpersonal communication.
- Problem-solving skills.
- Common spiritual and emotional development goals.
- How to form boundaries in relationships.
- When to place the needs or importance of the other person above your own.

Most research indicates that early on, a happy marriage is full of passion and sexual intimacy, which can become less important in later successful marriage. **A satisfying marriage at this stage includes a high amount of considerate or kind acts** (such as doing something nice for the other person without being asked) and praise.

The life skills you learn in this stage are important in developing true interdependence and the ability to have a cooperative and healthy relationship. Some of the **challenges of this stage** include:

- Transitioning into the new family system.
- Including your spouse in your relationships with friends and family members.
- Being committed to making your marriage work.

- Putting the needs of another ahead of your own.

You and your spouse will have less stress if the transition into a new family system is smooth, and less stress often means better health.

Your **specific goals** for this stage of the family life cycle are:

- Forming a new family with your spouse.
- Realigning your relationships with your family of origin and your friends to now include your spouse.

Stage Three: Families with young children

Overview:

Emotionally we must now accept new members into the system. This isn't hard initially because babies come to us in sweet innocent packages that open our hearts. Unfortunately, in the middle of the night we may wonder what we've gotten ourselves into. Nevertheless, we adjust the marital system to make space for our children, juggling child rearing, financial and household tasks. Second-order change also occurs with the realignment of relationships with extended family as it opens to include the parenting and grandparenting roles.

Details:

Making the decision to have a baby

At some point in your marriage, you and your spouse will decide if you want to have a baby. Some couples know going into a marriage that they do not want children. Parenting is one of the most challenging phases of the family life cycle.

The decision to have children is one that affects your individual development, the identity of your family, and your marital relationship. **Children are so time-consuming that skills not learned in previous stages will be difficult to pick up at this stage.** Your ability to communicate well, maintain your relationships, and solve problems are often tested during this stage.



Introducing a child into your family results in a major change in roles for you and your spouse. Each parent has three distinct and demanding roles: as an individual, a spouse, and a parent. As new parents, your individual identities shift along with how you relate to each other and to others. If you have not learned compromise and commitment in the previous stage, you may not have the skills you need to transition well into this stage.

Along with the joy that comes from having a child, you may feel a great deal of stress and fear about these changes. A woman might have concerns about being pregnant and going through childbirth. Fathers tend to keep their fears and stress to themselves, which can cause health problems.

Talking about your emotional or physical concerns with your family physician, obstetrician, or counselor can help you deal with these and future challenges.



Parenting young children

Adapting children into other relationships, including your marriage, is a key emotional process of this stage. You will take on the parenting role and transition from being a member of a couple to being a parent. While you are still evolving as individuals, you and your spouse are also becoming decision-makers for your family. **Continuing to express your individuality while working well together as a couple results in a strong marriage.**

Your child's healthy development depends on your ability to provide a safe, loving, and organized environment. **Children benefit when their parents have a strong marriage.**

Caring for young children cuts into the amount of time you might otherwise spend alone or with your spouse. If there were skills you didn't learn in previous phases, such as compromise for the good of the family, your marriage may suffer. Divorce and extramarital affairs often occur during the raising of small children when the parents have not learned proper life skills.

But for those who have the proper tools, this can be a very rewarding, happy time, even with all of its challenges. Optimally, you develop as an individual, as a member of a couple, and as a member of a family.

Specific **goals** when young children join your family are:

- Adjusting your marital system to make space for children.
- Taking on parenting roles.
- Realigning your relationships with your extended family to include parenting and grandparenting roles.

Stage Four: Families with adolescents

Overview:

Emotional transitions are hard here for the whole family because we need to increase the flexibility of a



family's boundaries to include children's independence and grandparents' frailties. As noted above, second-order change is required in order for the shifting of the parent-child relationship to permit adolescents to move in and out of the system. Now there is a new focus on midlife marital and career issues and the beginning shift toward joint caring for the older generation when both children and aging parents demand our attention, creating what is now called the sandwich generation.

Details:

Parenting adolescents

Parenting teenagers can be a rough time for your family and can test your relationship skills. It's also a time for positive growth and creative exploration for your entire family. Families that function best during this period have strong, flexible marriages developed through good communication, problem solving, mutual caring, support, and trust.

Most teens experiment with different thoughts, beliefs, and styles, which can cause family conflict. Your strengths as an individual and as part of a couple are critical as you deal with the increasing challenges of raising a teenager. Strive for a balanced atmosphere in which your teenager has a sense of support and emotional safety as well as opportunities to try new behaviors. An important skill at this stage is flexibility as you encourage your child to become independent and creative. Establish boundaries for your teenager but encourage exploration at the same time.

If you properly developed your individual identity in earlier stages of your life, you will be much more secure about the changes your child is going through. But if you did not gain the needed skills at earlier stages of life, you may feel very threatened by your child's new developments.

Flexibility in the roles each person plays in the family system is a valuable skill to develop at this stage. Responsibilities such as the demands of a job or caring for someone who is ill may require each person in the family to take on various, and sometimes changing, roles.

This is a time when one or more family members may feel some level of depression or other distress. It may also lead to physical complaints that have no physical cause (somatization disorders such as stomach upsets and some headaches) along with other stress-related disorders.

Nurturing your marriage and your individual growth can sometimes be ignored at this stage. Toward the end of this phase, a parent's focus shifts from the maturing teen to career and marriage. Neglecting your personal development and your marriage can make this shift difficult.

You also may begin thinking about your role in caring for aging parents. Making your own health a priority in this phase is helpful as you enter the next stage of the family life cycle.

Specific **goals** during the stage of parenting adolescents include:

- Shifting parent-child relationships to allow the child to move in and out of the family system.
- Shifting focus back to your midlife marital and career issues.
- Beginning a shift toward concern for older generations in your extended family.

Stage Five: Launching children and moving on

Overview:

This is one of the transitions that can be most emotionally difficult for parents as they now need to accept a multitude of exits from and entries into the family system. If the choices of the children leaving the nest are compatible with the values and expectations of the parents, the transition can be relatively easy and enjoyable, especially if the parents successfully navigate their second-order changes, such as renegotiation of the marital system as a couple rather than as simply parents. Other developmental changes include development of adult-to-adult relationships between us and our grown children, inclusion of in-laws and grandchildren, and dealing with the disabilities and death of our own parents.

Details:

The stage of launching adult children begins when your first child leaves home and ends with the "empty nest." When older children leave home, there are both positive and negative consequences. If your family has developed significant skills through the family life cycle, your children will be ready to leave home, ready to handle life's challenges. Free from the everyday demands of parenting, you may choose to rekindle your own marriage and possibly your career goals.

Developing adult relationships with your children is a key skill in this stage. You may be challenged to accept new members into your family through your children's marriages or relationships. You may focus on reprioritizing your life, forgiving those who have wronged you (maybe long ago), and assessing your beliefs about life.



If you have not moved through the phases with the appropriate tools and attitudes, you may not have taught your children needed skills to live well on their own. If you and your spouse have not transitioned together, you may no longer feel compatible with each other. But remember that you can still gain the skills you may have missed. Self-examination, education, and counseling can enhance your life and help ensure a healthy transition to the next phase.

This is a time when your health and energy levels may decline. Some people are diagnosed with chronic illnesses. Symptoms of these diseases can limit normal activities and even long-enjoyed pastimes. Health issues related to midlife may begin to occur and can include:

- High blood pressure (hypertension).
- Weight problems.
- Arthritis.
- Menopause.
- Osteoporosis.
- Heart disease (coronary artery disease).
- Depression.
- Stress-related illnesses.

You may also be caring for aging parents in this phase, which can be stressful and affect your own health.

Specific goals to attain at this stage include:

- Refocusing on your marriage without children.
- Developing adult relationships with your grown children.
- Realigning relationships to include in-laws and grandchildren when your children begin their own families.

Stage Six: Families in later life

Overview:

When Erik Erikson discusses this stage, he focuses on how we as individuals either review our lives with acceptance and a sense of accomplishment or with bitterness and regret. A family systems approach, however, is interested in how the family as a unit responds and sees the key emotional principle as accepting the shifting of generational roles. Second-order changes require us to maintain



our own interests and functioning as a couple in face of physiological decline. We shift our focus onto the middle generation (the children who are still in stage five) and support them as they launch their own children. In this process the younger generation needs to make room for the wisdom and experience of the elderly, supporting the older generation without overfunctioning for them. Other second-order change includes dealing with the loss of our spouse, siblings, and peers and the preparation for our own death and the end of our generation.

Details:

During the retirement phase of the family life cycle, many changes occur in your life. Welcoming new family members or seeing others leave your family is often a large part of this stage as your children marry or divorce or you become a grandparent.

This stage can be a great adventure where you are free from the responsibilities of raising your children and can simply enjoy the fruits of your life's work. Challenges you may face include being a support to other family members, even as you are still exploring your own interests and activities or focusing on maintaining your marriage. Many people are caring for elderly parents at this time. You may feel challenged by their emotional, financial, and physical needs while trying to help them retain their independence.

You may experience declining physical and mental abilities or changes in your financial or social status. Sometimes you must deal with the death of other family members, including your spouse. The quality of your life at this stage depends on how well you adjusted to the changes in earlier stages. It often also depends on how well you have cared for your own health up to this point. Normal aging will affect your body, resulting in wrinkles, aches, pains, and loss of bone density. The chances of having a mental or chronic physical illness does increase with age. But aging does not mean you will automatically experience poor health.

Retirement can be a fulfilling and happy time. Becoming a grandparent can bring you great joy without the responsibility of raising a child. Those who are without adequate support systems or not well off financially, though, may have a more difficult time in this phase of life.

Specific **goals** to reach for at this final stage of your family life cycle include:

- Maintaining your own interests and physical functioning, along with those of your spouse, as your body ages.
- Exploring new family and social roles.
- Providing emotional support for your adult children and extended family members.
- Making room in the family system for the wisdom and experience of older adults.
- Providing support for the older generation without doing too much for them.
- Dealing with the loss of a spouse, siblings, and other peers, and preparing for your own death.
- Reviewing your life and reflecting on all you have learned and experienced during your life cycle.