

Play across the Life Cycle: From Initiative to Integrity to Transcendence

Elizabeth Jones

In this autobiographical journey through life-span developmental theory, I reflect on my life as a player, embedding it in the context of Erik Erikson and Joan Erikson's stages of human development. I build on these basic ideas—theory, storytelling, play, and development—and define them as simply as possible.

Definitions and reflections

Theory. Theories are generalized principles based on experienced data. They are logical-sequential, like “if this, then that” In human development, life stories are our most important data. All of us construct theories by which we live. Whether or not we put those theories into words, we act on them every day. They are our efforts to identify the patterns in our lives.

Storytelling. Stories are representations of our day-to-day experiences, caught in words and music, images and constructions, and dance and drama. Stories are what we remember. I'm telling my story with the hope you will connect and remember. But *your* story is even more important if you're checking out a theory's usefulness for you. So the challenge to you is to keep asking yourself, “Does the theory fit you too?” “Are there connections between my story and yours?”

Play. In our book *Playing to Get Smart*, Renatta Cooper and I define play as “choosing what to do, doing it, and enjoying it” (2005, viii). That is perhaps

oversimplified, but it makes the basic point: Play is intrinsically motivated. Play happens in the context of being human, where we have the privilege of making conscious choices. We are unlike beetles and starfish and other simpler critters; our lives are not limited to pure survival. We get to act—and to *observe, think, remember, and reflect*.

We construct representations of our experience—words, images, stories—so we can go back to them in our minds and share them with other members of our group of social animals, discover our differences, think and talk, and construct some more. A child mastering play—constructive play, dramatic play—is practicing storytelling: re-creating plot, motive, character, and setting.

We tell stories for their own sake and for shared delight. They connect children with what has gone before and remind elders of their accumulated wisdom. They help us remember. We remember our play.

Play begins with the question, “What will happen if I/we . . . ?” With experience, it becomes a hypothesis: “If I/we do that, this will happen.” Making credible hypotheses—and, eventually, building theories—is learned through mastering play. The early years, especially ages 3–5, are the critical developmental stage at which children first achieve this mastery.

In infancy (before play), sensory-motor exploration is largely unintentional. It is simply wired in us. In toddlerhood, the practice of motor skills becomes more deliberate, accompanied by the assertion of budding identity: “Mine!” “Me do it!” “No!” Adults may view toddlers who start taking initiative as “being bad.” Being “bad” may seem dangerous. But resisting authority is essential in the development of human intelligence.

Play is one of several different behaviors that people can engage in. In *Dimensions of Teaching-Learning Environments: Handbook for Teachers*, Liz Prescott and I (1984) construct a scheme to distinguish among four possible variants of human behavior, which we call Play, Work, Games, and Labor. All of them are necessary to get through the day (see “Human Behaviors Necessary for Living Life”). These brief definitions are useful in thinking about (1) a child’s experience in settings defined as educational and (2) your experience throughout your life story.

Development. Development is a pattern for thinking about the growth in living things, especially people. Developmental theory is an outcome of mental pattern-making; it is constructed through play.

I got hooked on developmental theory when I went off to graduate school in 1952 and was introduced to Erik Erikson’s Eight Stages of the Life Cycle. His book *Childhood and Society* ([1950] 1963) was newly published. I’ve added other theorists to my understanding of development, but Erik Erikson still provides my basic framework. His wife Joan uses weaving as a metaphor for the persistence of all the stages throughout our lives. Each stage is part of the warp through which the rest of life’s threads are woven (J.M. Erikson 1991).

Play across the life cycle

So here I am, storytelling about my personal experience of play across the life cycle, all the way through the first seven stages and working on the transition from generativity to integrity to transcendence. I recently chose semiretirement at Pacific Oaks College and am actively learning about letting go, maybe. But Pacific Oaks has been my play place my whole adult life, and I haven’t used it up yet. Liz Prescott and I were

colleagues for many years; we shared an office and child care, collaborated on research, and taught and played together.

Liz had taught Pacific Oaks's basic Human Development: Life Cycle class for some years when one morning in our shared office she announced happily, "I've just figured out what the Human Development class is about." "What?" I asked. "Development!" she said. It wasn't a tease; it was a genuine *aha* moment for her, and for me. Others' theories can be studied and memorized, but making a theory one's own can take a long time. It took me some years of reading and rereading Erikson to figure out what the Initiative stage is really about. (It's about play. Silly me!)

Storytelling: My stages of development

In case you've not studied Erik and Joan Erikson, or did but have forgotten, I'll remind you of the stages all the way through my story. Understanding human development has been basic to the history of Pacific Oaks over the last 65 years. In a new era, I don't want this understanding of stages to go away.

Early childhood—Ages 0–5

Infancy is the opportunity to build basic *trust* and to develop the strength of *hope*.

Toddlerhood is the opportunity to practice *autonomy* and to develop the strength of *will*.

Preschool age is the play age, the time to master *initiative* and to develop the strength of *purpose*.

In each stage a child is intrinsically motivated, building on motor and brain development in the context of human relationships. The human infant is completely dependent on care from others, and trust is essential to survival. The urge for autonomy arises along with the ability to walk—and run away! *Initiative* is built on both those strengths; developed consciousness makes purposeful behavior possible.

As a young child, I was good at trust and autonomy and initiative. I was the only child of a 40-year-old mother, which wasn't as common then as it is now. (She had been the youngest of eight children and didn't want to repeat that experience.) She was delighted to become a stay-at-home mother and play with me. My parents lived in the same house for over 50 years; their parents had all gotten on ships and come to America from Europe. I've done almost the same as my parents—different house, same settled pattern. I appreciate a steady base from which to go away and to come back to—just like a toddler.

My parents cared for me, and I trusted them. They indulged my demands for “Mine!” and “Me do it!” as I practiced autonomy (it took peers, later in my life cycle, to deal with my spoiled-brat side). I played in the house and the backyard, and my mother took me on walks, sang to me, and read me poems and “The Elephant’s Child” from Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories*. The Elephant’s Child was full of “satiabile curiosity,” which means he asked ever so many questions. I have been following his example and quoting him all my life. I practiced initiative; I became a devoted, imaginative player. I liked being an only child (except on vacations). I’m still an introvert deep down, a preference that surfaces increasingly as I age.

I was born in San Francisco, and my mother used to take me to “the city” from our East Bay home, first by ferry and later by train after the Bay Bridge was built. My parents had been backpackers, predating the aluminum and nylon era (their packs were made of wood and canvas). They belonged to a hiking club on Mount Tamalpais, and every summer we went horse packing in the Sierra with other families from the club. I have never outgrown the need for mountains in my life or the capacity for playing with pinecones and stones along streams.

Later childhood

School-age offers time for industry, leading to the strength of competence.

I taught myself to read through play before I went to kindergarten. But I was shy with strangers and short on social skills. I cried when my mommy left me on my first day of kindergarten and was teased about it for at least a year afterward. School was best, I remember, in fourth grade with Mrs. O’Neill, who wore pink pinafores and jumped rope with us and let us color world maps with Mongol pencils.

I had girlfriends, and we played all over the neighborhood—on the train tracks, in the cemetery, in all the vacant lots. And we were mean to each other, as little girls often are. I invented the We Hate Bobbie club (of brief duration) in fifth grade. I will never forgive my teacher, Mrs. Roberts, for taking off my desk the constitution I was drafting for the club during class and sending me to the principal for punishment.

More often I was the one being teased (we took turns at that). Girl Scout meetings were boring, but collecting badges was fun. I liked schoolwork, and we had wonderful music and drama teachers. I got to be Susanna Foster in a musical about Stephen Foster and to wear a full-length dotted swiss party dress, yellow with brown

dots, but Faye got to be Jeannie with the light brown hair. She graduated from high school a semester early so she could marry our high school music teacher. She was just

18. (Silly girl.)

Youth

Adolescence is the opportunity to develop *identity* and experience the strength of *fidelity*.

Young adulthood is the opportunity to develop *intimacy* and the strength of *love*.

I've put *identity* and *intimacy* together here because there has been considerable theoretical disagreement on whether the sequence is different for boys than for girls. I haven't sorted that out for myself. Certainly, high school and college were times of great interest in boys! For me, the youth group I went to at my best friend's church offered both boys and ideals, and the challenge of a commitment to service that has stayed with me. Counselor Helen Flegal was the first adult mentor I recognized in my life.

College brought a wonderful intellectual adventure . I went to every performance of every play and concert on campus, played the organ and sang in a cappella choir, worked in the library and the bookstore, and read everything in sight. I was playing, big-time. I had always played by reading books, and so I majored in English. But I didn't want to *work* at reading books, as graduate work in English would require. In my senior year, when I started to wonder what I would be when I grew up, I switched to psychology and the possibility of working with people. I couldn't imagine being a teacher, in front of a class—that would be too scary.

When dating got boring, I got married at age 20. This distressed my mother, who as a prefeminism feminist had chosen to marry later at age 36. That summer my husband

Gil and I house-sat for my choir director, his two Siamese cats, and his wandering German shepherd Jenny, and hiked in Yosemite's Tuolumne Meadows. Then we finished our last year of college in Stockton and went off to graduate school in Wisconsin, deciding that it was time for two Californians to experience winter (two years turned out to be enough, and there were no mountains. I enrolled in the interdisciplinary child development program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where I was introduced to preschool by a master teacher, Sue Maxfield, who was wonderful at helping students see the details of children's behavior. I was hooked on watching and learning about children for the rest of my life. Preschool felt quite different from being a teacher in front of a class. It was play.

Generativity

Adulthood offers the opportunity to practice *generativity* and experience the strength of *care*. In this stage, we're responsible for making the world work.

Generativity can extend a long time. If you look back through the stages, the first stage is about a year long; those that follow are in focus for only two years to perhaps half a dozen. I plunged into generativity in my early twenties and I am still at it many decades later. I still experience my work as play, what I choose to do, and I enjoy it.

At the end of graduate school, my life became different—responding as a grown-up, as a human services professional, and as a parent to the opportunity to care for others. We finished our MAs and planned our return to California. My advisor showed me a job notice for a preschool teacher at Pacific Oaks Friends School; she thought it might be a good fit. Husband Gil was admitted to a doctoral program at the University of California

at Los Angeles (UCLA), so we moved to Pasadena. We were invited to live upstairs above the children's school and feed the rabbits and lock the doors.

I was expecting a December baby, so I didn't end up in the planned job in the Adventure Yard with 4- year-olds. However, Evangeline Burgess, Pacific Oaks College president, negotiated with me a collection of part-time positions, including children's music specialist and substitute teacher. With my new MA, I was full of ideas. Whenever I came up with a fine new one, Evangeline said, "Go for it." She didn't do it *for* me, but she gave me permission to play and work and often scaffolded my ideas. If something worked, she generally scouted around for ways to keep it alive. For me it was an extraordinary play environment that let me be active in the creation of Pacific Oaks College.

I was also extraordinarily fortunate in the creation of a large family. It was the baby boomer generation. We had six children, so they weren't alone on our street in Eagle Rock. As an only child, I sought the chaotic contrast of a big family; it offered me play opportunities, discovery of what the next child would be like, and daily reading to them all. Whenever possible we threw the children into the back of the truck and went off camping all over the West. As they grew older, the children began backpacking. One night in Mineral King, California, a young black bear showed up, very interested in the backpacks ready for the next morning's hike. (Not wanting to have to mend the backpack in the morning, I leaped out of my sleeping bag and chased him away.)

When we first arrived at Pacific Oaks, the college was just being created. I got pulled in to teach adults and keep inventing new programs. Teaching adults was a challenge. I spent years figuring out how to construct a coherent theory and practice and

how to structure environments where adults, like young children, could learn through play.. Other opportunities came along beyond my work at Pacific Oaks, such as research projects in public school classrooms. At age 50 I got a passport for the first time and traveled to Japan, Australia, and all over the world, playing and learning.

The later years

Aging, Erikson's eighth stage, asks for *integrity* and offers the strength of *wisdom*.

Old age is the stage I haven't properly tackled yet, being resistant to letting go of the joys of generativity. My children have been moving into middle age; my grandchildren range from 23 years to 30 months, and I am cherishing empty-nesting. I'm back to the joys I recall from my years as an only child. I've heard several people my age and older describe themselves as "flunking retirement." Until last year, I've simply avoided taking the risk. Letting go of a job is hard when there's so much to be done.

Moving into the eighth stage, I need to start collecting stories and building theory yet again. When it comes to genuine understanding of the later years, I'm no longer a wise elder. Instead, I'm back to exploring the unknown, just as I was at 4, at 14, and at 24. Joan Erikson offers me reassurance, when she writes, "To grow old is a great privilege. It allows feedback on a long life that can be lived in retrospect" (E.H. Erikson with J.M. Erikson 1997, 128)

Elder play

If play is choosing what to do, doing it, and enjoying it, how do elders play? "How old is old?" is of course the question. With an average life span of 80 years or so in

many countries, including our own, some of us just go sailing on well past traditional retirement age. “Why slow down if the going is good?”

In infancy and toddlerhood, play is sensory-motor exploration: “What will my body do?” By adulthood, sensory-motor competence is such a given that it’s automatic. But by middle age, a few things start to break down and force us to pay some attention to the question, “What can’t I do any longer?”

Memory loss may create some senior moments, but except when it becomes disabling, most of us can just pause and wait for the missing fact or word to come back along at its own slower speed. I think brain space gets crowded after all those years of memorable experience. Slowing down can be an asset, not only a liability.

With age, there are losses. Loss of connection, of energy, and of physical ability and strength all reduce pace and engagement. With age there are also gains: wisdom, stillness, a slower pace to savor things previously rushed through.

Observers of children’s play describe it as solitary, parallel, or social. Those forms are found in elder play too. The choice among them mirrors one’s physical condition, temperament, opportunity, and needs that perhaps were previously unmet.

More active elder play may include recreation and caregiving, such as travel, walking, volunteering, and grandparenting. There is time as well for less active play: contemplation and reminiscence. Contemplation—paying real attention to something—might take the form of relaxed gardening, bird-watching or surf-watching, listening to music, or taking quiet walks with an awareness of trees and clouds and ups and downs.

When most of life is behind, not ahead, playing with one’s memories by reminiscing can bring both delight and pain and sharing and closure. The often-remarked

increase in long-term memory in the later years is a remarkable phenomenon. I find myself remembering the last names of most of the kids in my kindergarten class! Short-term memory generally kicks in with patience. Joan Erikson offers a new ninth stage, *transcendence*, in her addition to *The Life Cycle Completed: Extended Version with New Chapters on the Ninth Stage of Development*. She writes:

Perhaps the really old find a safe place to consider their states of being only in privacy and solitude. After all, how else can one find peace and acceptance of the changes that time imposes on mind and body?

When Erik was 91, he and I had been married for 64 years. Following hip surgery, he became withdrawn, and he serenely retired. He was neither depressed nor bewildered but remained consistently observing and quietly appreciative of his caretakers. We should all be so wise, gracious, and accepting of old age when it comes our way. I am now 93 years old and have experienced more of the inevitable complications of *slowly* growing old. I am not retired, serene, and gracious. In fact I am eager to finish this revision of the final stage before it is too late and too demanding an undertaking. (E.H. Erikson with J.M. Erikson 1997, 4)

I think Joan Erikson is my role model. But I'm not there yet. For now, I'm still playing. I think the life cycle is a circle. It begins and ends with play—playing with possibilities and impossibilities, grasping and letting go. “What’s this? “What can I do with it?” I’m grateful that Pacific Oaks has been my extraordinary play place for these many years. It still is.

Here and now

For those of us who are alive and alert, the challenge is still with us. The point of studying and constructing theory lies in the power of naming. When we play with names for things, we have greater power for understanding our lives and for building relationships. As social animals, we must relate to others to survive and to learn that human knowledge is socially constructed. At Pacific Oaks, both the children's school and the college require their learners to engage in dialogue—to speak, listen, reflect, and create and name patterns in human development.

As we tried to decide, in the 1950s, what to call the degree to be offered by our new college, our president, Evangeline, was clear: This needs to be a liberal studies degree, not a professional training degree. In liberal studies, learners are encouraged to explore, play with ideas, and become critical thinkers.

At Pacific Oaks we considered Early Childhood Education as the degree major; we considered Child Development. And we agreed on Human Development, encompassing the whole life span. Human services professionals, whatever age groups they serve in whatever settings, need life-span understanding. They need to collect stories from their own and others' lives. They need to remain genuinely curious: “Who am I?” “Who are you?” “Will you play with me?” These are the questions pursued by 4-year-olds. They are questions we never outgrow. At Pacific Oaks our master's students are expected to begin their thesis with a personal statement: “This is my story. This is where my passion for my thesis topic comes from.”

If I understand you in the context of your life, I may be able to live generously with you. We take seriously the study of life span human development, which gives us

names, patterns, questions, and skills for respectful, caring interaction with our fellow human beings. If we can understand each other deeply enough, we may be able to keep moving toward the hope of the Quaker founders of Pacific Oaks: To create a more peaceful world—and it all begins with little children.

References

Erikson, E.H. [1950] 1963. *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton.

Erikson, E.H., with J.M. Erikson. 1997. *The Life Cycle Completed: Extended Version with New Chapters on the Ninth Stage of Development*. New York: Norton.

Erikson, J.M. 1991. *Wisdom and the Senses: The Way of Creativity*. New York: Norton.

Jones, E., & R.M. Cooper. 2005. *Playing to Get Smart*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Jones, E., & E. Prescott. 1984. *Dimensions of Teaching-Learning Environments: Handbook for Teachers*. Pasadena, CA: Pacific Oaks College.

Box 1

Human Behaviors Necessary for Living Life

Play. In open-ended play, the individual is free to explore a wide range of possibilities, with no preestablished rules of procedure or outcomes. Being competent in play means being self-directed and able to find something to do, get absorbed in it, discover things in the process, and go on to more elaborated play or to self-structured tasks.

Work. We undertake work to achieve a significant product. It is real work only when the worker experiences it as significant, as demonstrating his or her competence, and as having personal, social importance.

Two other categories of behavior (Games and Labor), are variants of play and work and also take place in schools and other settings.

Games. Any meaningful task that tests one's competence and has a beginning and a point of completion is a game, in this sense, within the limits of a preestablished structure. A game requires conformity to a set of rules, an understanding of the underlying consensus. Individuals who are good at games can follow the rules and win a reasonable proportion of the time. Games are a point of connection between play and work. Work differs from games only in having a clearer product and in being perceived as more serious in purpose.

Labor. Another response to a preestablished structure, labor, lacks the sense of optimism, challenge, and joyful completion experienced in a good game. It may be socially useful in some contexts, but unlike work it yields no significant product. External rewards or penalties are typically necessary to keep the worker at it. The learning that accompanies labor is extraneous, having only to do with the acquisition of survival skills in a setting that lacks personal meaning.

Adapted with permission from Elizabeth Jones and Elizabeth Prescott, *Dimensions of Teaching-Learning Environments: Handbook for Teachers* (Pasadena, CA: Pacific Oaks College, 1984), 84–85.

Elizabeth (Betty) Jones, PhD, Faculty Emerita at Pacific Oaks College, in Pasadena, California, is the coauthor of three books on play: *The Play's the Thing: Teachers' Roles in Children's Play*, *Master Players: Learning from Children at Play*, and *Playing to Get Smart*. Betty's NAEYC books include *Teaching Adults Revisited: Active Learning for Early Childhood Educators* and, with coauthors, *Emergent Curriculum* and *The Lively Kindergarten: Emergent Curriculum in Action*. bjones@pacificoaks.edu

This article is adapted from a 2010 Burgess Lecture Betty delivered honoring Evangeline Burgess, early leader in early childhood education and Pacific Oaks College's first president. Mentor and friend, Evangeline offered Betty the opportunity to play at work