

# Examining family growth and development: a theoretical model

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THE NURSE PRACTITIONER is playing an increased role in the design and implementation of health care and expanding assessment skills based on the biological, psychological, social, and behavioral sciences. The assessment of family growth and development is one such skill.

When assessing a family, the nurse practitioner is assessing the growth and developmental levels of each family member. In making this observation, she or he may call upon a collection of theories. For instance, she or he may use Walter Toman's *Family Constellation*,<sup>1</sup> noting birth order of spouses in their families of origin (eg, two eldest marrying, forming a new unit and their need to examine authority and responsibility issues; or eldest marrying youngest and their need to examine caretaker and caregiver issues).

From another theoretical viewpoint, the

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*Examples appearing in this article were taken from the author's experience.*

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Table 1. Integration of developmental theories of Duvall and Erikson

Stage of the family life cycle (Duvall)	Psychosocial development (Erikson)	Integration of development tasks (Duvall & Erikson)
I. (Premarital)*	Couple and/or child Trust vs mistrust	Establishing the relationship. Defining mutual goals. Developing intimacy.
II. Married couple	(Continuity of same)	Developing an appropriate dependence, independence, interdependence pattern. Establishing a mutually satisfying relationship. Negotiating boundaries of the couple relationship; and with individuals' families of origin. Discussing the issue of childbearing. Making decision to conceive. Working out authority and responsibility issues. Working out caretaker roles. Having children. Forming a new unit. Facilitating child's establishment of trust.
III. Childbearing	Autonomy vs shame	Acknowledging the need for personal time and space while sharing with each other and a child.
IV. Preschool	Initiative vs guilt	Continuing individual development as couple, parent, and family. Experiencing changes in energy and time for individual and couple needs. Promoting continued growth in each other and the relationship while encouraging the child to develop autonomy and retain self-esteem. Establishing own family tradition with each other and children without guilt related to breaks with traditions of families of origin.
V. School age	Industry vs inferiority	One or both spouses establishing new roles in work settings, or community, or changes in child rearing practices and gaining recognition for selves and children. Children in school and after school activities, relating with peers, self-esteem being enhanced or inhibited; and interfacing with activities in family.

Table 1 (*continued*)

Stage of the family life cycle (Duvall)	Psychosocial development (Erikson)	Integration of development tasks (Duvall & Erikson)
VI. Teenage	Integrity vs role confusion	<p>Parents continue to develop roles in the community and interests other than with children.</p> <p>Children examine ways to experience freedom while expressing responsibility for actions.</p> <p>Struggles evolve with parents as emancipation process proceeds.</p> <p>Family's value system may be challenged.</p> <p>Couple relationship may be strong or weak depending on how members respond to each other's needs.</p>
VII. Launching center	Intimacy vs isolation	<p>Parents launching young adults with rituals marking rites of passage.</p> <p>Change in relationship with children who are becoming adults and/or in new living situations; change in couple's relationship because of children's absence and increased time with one another.</p>
VIII. Middle-age parents	Generativity vs stagnation	<p>Energy channeled into guiding the next generation via the family or in community activities or the couple may now be dealing with issues of aging of their own parents.</p> <p>Children of middle-age parents may be adolescent.</p>
IX. Aging family members	Integrity vs despair	<p>Persons have achieved satisfying relationships and feel a sense of accomplishment and desiring to continue to live fully until death instead of existing in a state of despair.</p> <p>Aging members are coping with bereavement and may now be living alone.</p>

\*( ) = author's stage

nurse practitioner may observe the family unit as "enmeshed" or "disengaged," as defined by Minuchin.<sup>2</sup> He uses the terms enmeshed or disengaged to describe a type of interaction, not as a qualitative difference between functional and dysfunction-

al, although he notes that at the extremes they may indicate areas of possible pathology.<sup>2</sup> For example, the nurse practitioner may observe levels of closeness as being appropriate or inappropriate based on the person's need to interact with others in

order to experience security from the network and, simultaneously, to have one's independence.

Of the many approaches available to the nurse practitioner, I (in my teaching and clinical practice) have found it particularly helpful to look upon the family as a system in the sense used by Buckley: "a set of different things or parts . . . that meet two requirements, first these parts are directly or indirectly related to one another in a network of reciprocal causal effects and, second, each component part is related to one or more of the other parts of the set in a reasonably stable way during any particular period of time."<sup>3</sup>(p41)

The first requirement stated in this definition is assessed via the theory of Duvall in her examination of the stages of the family life cycle.<sup>4</sup> The second requirement can be assessed by integrating Erikson's theory of psychosocial development<sup>5</sup> with that of Duvall. Erikson theorizes that individual human development takes place in eight consecutive stages and labels each of those stages with the name of an inner crisis needing resolution. He defines crisis not as something necessarily negative but as an experience of heightened vulnerability with the potential for growth. During each crisis the individual experiences disequilibrium and the necessity for new approaches to life situations.

Duvall theorizes that the family experiences sequential stages of development in the "family life cycle"; there are successive phases marked by family developmental tasks, critical events (eg, getting married, bearing the first child, children leaving home, etc) that "propel a family into and through each new stage in its history."<sup>4</sup>(p178)

The models of Erikson and Duvall have an advantage over family process models<sup>6,7</sup> in that they examine ongoing development of the individuals in the system, the couple, and the family system as a complete unit, with an acknowledgment that development is ongoing and ever-changing for all members at the same time (see Table 1).

## DEFINITION

"Family" is defined here as a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood, or adoption, constituting a single household, interacting and communicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister, and creating and maintaining a common culture.<sup>8</sup>(pp7,8)

However, other definitions of family are acknowledged, that is, persons who have a contract to live as a couple communally or cooperatively. These persons may have chosen not to conceive, bear, or adopt children, but they still constitute a family in the sense of the dynamics described earlier.

## THE STAGES

### First stage

I define the first stage of this dynamic as the premarital stage. Patterns of communication develop early in the relationship; these patterns reflect the trust or mistrust as outlined by Erikson in the first stage of individual development. The sharing of thoughts and feelings about one another; the hopes, dreams, goals, and expectations are slowly begun in an atmosphere of nascent trust.

**Example 1:** We used to spend hours in graduate school discussing all the work we were doing, but the tone of things changed when we started talking about what each of us wanted to do with our life. The more we talked about this, the more we began to see that we had similar goals and dreams and we could make them work together.

This person is addressing the pattern of interaction that is the foundation of trust in a partner, gradually revealing thoughts and feelings that lead to taking a risk regarding the future of the relationship.

### Second stage

The decision to marry moves the relationship into a mutual desire to be viewed publicly as a couple, a new system. According to Duvall, "the developmental task for the married couple is to establish a mutually satisfying marriage, adjust to pregnancy and the promise of parenthood, in addition to fitting into the kin network."<sup>4</sup>(p179) In moving to this new stage, the couple is embarking on a pattern of independence, dependence, and interdependence, which includes not only the man and woman but also the families of origin. Their new relationship demands a redefinition of the relationship with the family of origin. Cultural, religious, economic, geographic, and personal value systems influence this redefinition.

**Example 2:** The first Christmas we were married there was a crisis, or at least a lot of tension. Both sets of parents were expecting us to be with them for the holidays. We opted for Christmas Eve with my family and Christmas dinner with hers, but it was not really satisfying because the two of us as couple did not have our Christmas. By

the next holiday, we knew we came first and had to work some other arrangements with our parents.

The tension experienced by this couple is typical of the process of developing trust in each other to confront the reality of a unit separate from that connected to the families of origin; the negotiations around holidays are reflective of the interaction necessary for making any decisions as a couple or family.

### Third stage

The decision to conceive and bear children moves the development of the unit into the child-bearing stage. As the child begins the climb on the Eriksonian ladder and begins to feel a sense of trust transmitted by having basic needs met, the parents continue traveling the growth ladder individually and as a couple. Duvall views their task in this phase as "having, adjusting to and encouraging the development of infants, [in addition to] establishing a satisfying home for parents and infants."<sup>4</sup>(p179)

To accomplish this task, authority issues need to have been addressed (ie, one partner may feel a need to be in control of the unit) and to have extended personal space and time while having to share with the other and with a child.<sup>1</sup>

**Example 3:** I felt so confined and hamstrung after Terri was born. It seemed like the only time that was mine was when she slept, and I'd have to sleep then, too, because I was tired. When Tom could get home, I'd be so resentful that he had a chance to be "out" for the day. Finally, we worked out a schedule where he would get up earlier and change, feed, and play with the baby while I

had a later sleep. I discovered I had more energy then and did not have to nap. We also decided to have some time out each week for us. I think I would have been constantly angry or crazy if we didn't get some refreshment. Now, I enjoy myself and my family more.

In Eriksonian terms, this couple has been able to establish autonomy and not feel shame. The new roles of men and women in the 1980s offer many variations on the way this dynamic of autonomy versus shame is experienced, including dual career families, single parenting, or full-time father.

#### Fourth stage

The infant grows quickly into a toddler and begins the preschool era with a flurry of creative exploration while enjoying mobility and verbal exchange and exhibiting a high rate of initiative and opportunities to experience guilt.

Example 4: Denny is moving quickly through the pots and pans section of the cabinet. He takes everything out and loves to hear the

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*One family member's need for exploration is in conflict with other members' needs.*

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clang of the pot lids. I want to encourage his creativity, but the noise gets to be a bit much for my ears. When George is home, he is insistent on having the house quiet.

Here, one family member's need for exploration is in conflict with other

members' needs. In the same way, the needs of the families of origin may be in conflict with the family having a preschool child. The stress may be similar to that experienced by the newly married couple but with additional factors in light of the offspring.

Example 5: I feel so guilty when Tom refuses to spend an afternoon with Grandma Alice. He just does not seem to like her, and he always has so much fun with Grandma Edna. I am sure Alice blames me.

The couple's growth and development continues or can become arrested at this point. For many couples, the time to have a date together or time out from parenting for personal or couple growth can be limited because of financial concerns or the lack of adequate child care arrangements.

Example 6: We felt a strong need as a couple for some time off from parenting responsibilities after we had the twins. Because of financial constraints, we decided to explore with friends and neighbors the possibility of co-op child care. We have felt financially relieved and, therefore, had money to have a nice date as well as we were comfortable to know our children would get good care.

#### Fifth stage

Children reaching school age, according to Erikson, are industriously engaged in learning new things and gaining recognition for their accomplishments, and they feel inferior if they are not meeting their own expectations or those of others. Duvall sees the developmental task of the "school age family" "as fitting into the

community of school age families in constructive ways [and] encouraging children's educational achievement."<sup>4(p179)</sup>

While this is going on, the couple is establishing ways of living productively and seeking recognition for selves and children. Either spouse may be completing degree requirements or becoming established in additional work outside the home to develop a career, to keep up with inflation, or saving toward the ever-elusive college tuition for the children.

**Example 7:** Sam and his friend have just made the soccer team. We are pleased about his achievements, and we'll certainly be involved in getting him to his practice and games. We'll have to put up a master schedule at this rate to include my class schedule, Bob's overtime work, and all the children's activities.

### Sixth stage

As children move from preadolescence to adolescence and become teenagers, they are described by Erikson as experiencing identity versus role confusion. In addition, they are experiencing a sense of physiological rebellion as their body parts try to coordinate with some degree of synchronization. At the same time as the adolescent is experiencing accelerated physical and psychological growth, either or both parents may be reaching a plateau in their adult development, expressed in body changes, role shifts, new expectations of each other, or of themselves, and increased satisfaction in the possibility of more couple time or dissatisfaction in the current relationship.

**Example 8:** Jim and I have noticed lately how Jill is trying to let go of us. She seems

to want to make all her own decisions without our input. I guess her friends have more influence on her now than we do. She also wants to be with them more than she wants to be with us.

Duvall sees the task at this stage as attaining a balance of freedom and responsibility as the teenager matures and gains independence and the parents establish interests and careers other than parenting. I maintain that parents need to have sustained interests other than child-oriented ones throughout their parenting years.

### Seventh stage

As the adolescent moves into young adulthood and learns ways of becoming intimate with another person, potential careers and ongoing educational experiences are examined. Parents begin to view their role and the family system, as defined by Duvall, "as launching centers releasing young adults into work, military service, college, marriage, etc., with appropriate rituals and assistance."<sup>4(p179)</sup>

**Example 9:** We wanted to have a party for Chris before he went to college. It was a happy time and a sad time. We were glad about his beginning college but also sad realizing that he was starting to leave home.

In many family systems, there is now an additional change in the launching experience. Many parents are experiencing their children staying at home longer because of the financial difficulties that young persons may have in establishing separate living arrangements. Another focus in some families has been the return of a

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*Many parents are experiencing their children staying at home longer because of financial difficulties that young persons may have in establishing separate living arrangements.*

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child, now in young adulthood, who may also be a parent. There has been an increase in young unmarried women, keeping their children and raising them within their family of origin, thus changing the system and resuming early developmental tasks.

For many couples who became parents and invested a great deal of energy into childbearing early in their marriage, their relationship may have experienced a holding pattern for some years. Now, if they have launched all of the children and are alone, they may view the other as a stranger. Or, if they have been growing closer and sharing deeply over the years, they may have a deep bond as a result of the experience of parenting a child or children through the various stages of growth and development.

### **Eighth stage**

In middle age, individuality may be expressed in creativity in the home or in individual careers, as exhibited in Erikson's stage of generativity. If parents have stagnated, awaiting old age, the ongoing development of a child may be a painful experience, especially if the child is living a lifestyle opposed to the family value system.

Example 10: We spent a lot of money on his education; now, he does not use it. He is singing in a band. It seems like a waste for us and for him. But, he does not listen when we speak, so we just stopped talking.

Duvall defines the developmental tasks for the middle-age parents as "rebuilding the marriage relationship [and] maintaining kinship ties with older and younger generation."<sup>4(p179)</sup> Obviously, the task of maintaining kinship ties has to be ongoing throughout all the stages as the family's way of establishing continual support for the system. During the middle years of the couple, their own parents are aging, and there may be discussions of a parent coming to live with them.

### **Ninth stage**

The last stage is that of "aging family member"; a sense of personal accomplishment and the achievement of satisfying personal relationships may give an individual a feeling of integrity rather than despair as described by Erikson. Both the individual and the couple have designed and can use the tools to live until they die.

Duvall views the developmental task at this time as "coping with bereavement and living alone, closing the family home or adapting it to aging [and] adjusting to retirement."<sup>4(p179)</sup>

## **DISCUSSION**

The nurse practitioner, while being aware of and integrating the theories of Duvall and Erikson and in acknowledging the individual crises and experiences as



well as the developmental tasks of the family as a unit, has a more effective tool to use in the design and implementation of health care. Nursing management can then take the form of counseling or anticipatory guidance with an adolescent mother of a newborn who is living at home with her parents. The family system at the launching stage moves back to an earlier developmental stage. The new parent is continuing the tasks of adolescence while her child is at Erikson's stage of trust. Her parents became grandparents when they may have been experiencing more parental responsibility for guiding their adolescent in her new role. They may find that their time and space have been altered. These developmental changes in the individuals and in the system have to be acknowledged and understood by the nurse practi-

tioner in order to design and implement an effective plan for providing health care.

## SUMMARY

The ongoing development of the individual and the family system can be viewed as a symphony inasmuch as the tempo may, at different times, be fast or slow, the volume soft or loud, the communication patterns harmonious or dissonant, and the mood changing with the member entering or leaving. Each instrument has its own uniqueness, and everyday living might sound more like a rehearsal than a grand performance. Nevertheless, each stage has its plan and each member learns to respect the other, so that the total experience is reasonably comfortable most of the time.

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## SUGGESTED READINGS

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