Family Development Theory:

Stage Theories

Traditional stage theories describe family life in stages usually marked by children's ages. Over the 20th century, such theories were sometimes called Family Stages, Family Life Cycle, and Family Development.

Perhaps the best known was the 8-stage model outlined by Duvall and Hill. Briefly, those stages were:

1 - Married couples (no children)
2 - Childbearing families (oldest child aged birth to 30 months)
3 - Families with preschool children (oldest child aged 2½ to 6 years)
4 - Families with school children (oldest child aged 6 to 13 years)
5 - Families with teenagers (oldest child aged 13 to 20 years)
6 - Families launching young adults (stage begins when oldest child leaves home and ends when youngest child leaves home)
7 - Middle-aged parents (stage begins with empty nest and ends at start of retirement)
8 - Aging family members (stage begins with spouses' retirement and ends at their deaths)

This 8-stage model was published in many textbooks for decades. It provided the base for many more stage models, some of which were created to correct what scholars called flaws in the original model.

"Flaws" in a theory can always be debated, but one value of Family Development Theory today is in providing us with a base for discussion about what is bad and what is good about stage theories.

What's bad about stage theories — they box us in. Although the number of stages varies widely from 2 to 24 (Price, McKenry, & Murphy, 2000), these theories nevertheless present structure that must be dealt with. Early stage theories had structure that effectively issued "rules" about what constituted a family task in a particular stage and how it could be deemed accomplished. Complaints about such structure promoted new stage theories that had more flexible definitions and offered transition periods between stages—some wiggle room. The most modern of the stage theories also provide for families going through stages "out of order" or repeating stages due to remarriage. Too, modern versions combine Family Development with concepts from systems theory to better reflect how change is processed in families.

In surveying the diverse family forms in American society, we are hard pressed to defend the use of traditional stage theories. After all, if a stage theory outlines normative stages, then a family that doesn't follow it might be labeled non-normative or abnormal. Frankly, our "non-normative" families may outnumber the "normative," which effectively calls into question how "normative" the norm ever was!

What's good about stage theories — they give us convenient vocabulary. The fact is that we continue to rely on stage theories in the family field. We must have a good reason! And we do. It is that in spite of the problems of discussing stages of family, we do need a common and common sense lexicon for describing families.

When we speak of "the family with infants and toddlers," we immediately convey the typical concerns of the people living in that family. Protection, safety, and health are their issues. So are sleep deprivation (for everyone!) and role changes. We can assume that the adults in the family are making tremendous transitions in change of daily focus, in their family economics, in their time priorities. And we can assume that the babies in the family are also making tremendous transitions, some obvious to the adults and some not so obvious.

We use terms such as "teething stage" and "toileting stage" and "tantrum stage" because they quickly identify what's on the family's mind.

Our responsibility in using stage theories — if we use the vocabulary and sometimes teach the "ages and stages" we can help families. But we must also keep stage theories in perspective and remind ourselves and families that stages come with fuzzy edges. And some families skip over whole stages. And the transitions between stages may be much more important than the stages themselves.

We can also remind ourselves and families that scholars invent theories. Theories are written to help make sense of what we observe, not to serve as a rulebook that people should follow in order to be successful or happy or anything else. Some practitioners avoid theories
altogether, and others warn that a theory is practical for use for only 20 or 30 years because societal changes make each generation's situation different.

Family scientist Wesley Burr (1995) offers good advice in studying a theory: ask if it has utility for you. Don’t spend your time debating a theory or proving it’s concepts, assumptions, or predictions. Just determine if it has utility—practical value—for you in working with families.