

What Is an Oedipus Complex?

Explore one of Freud's most controversial yet enduring concepts

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The Oedipal complex, also known as the Oedipus complex, is a term used by [Sigmund Freud](#) in his theory of [psychosexual stages of development](#) to describe a child's feelings of desire for his or her opposite-sex parent and jealousy and anger toward his or her same-sex parent. Essentially, a boy feels that he is competing with his father for possession of his mother, while a girl feels that she is competing with her mother for her father's affections. According to Freud, children view their same-sex parent as a rival for the opposite-sex parent's attentions and affections.

The Origins of the Oedipal Complex

Freud first proposed the concept of the Oedipal complex in his 1899 book [The Interpretation of Dreams](#), although he did not formally begin using the term Oedipus complex until the year 1910. The concept became increasingly important as he continued to develop his concept of psychosexual development.

Freud named the complex after the character in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* who accidentally kills his father and marries his mother.

In the Greek myth, Oedipus is abandoned at birth and thus does not know who his parents are. It is only after he had killed his father and married his mother that he learns their true identities.

How Does the Oedipus Complex Work?

In [psychoanalytic theory](#), the Oedipus complex refers to the child's desire for sexual involvement with the opposite sex parent, particularly a boy's erotic attention to his mother. This desire is kept

out of conscious awareness through repression, but Freud believed that it still had an influence over a child's behavior and played a role in development.

Freud suggested that the Oedipus complex played an important role in the phallic stage of psychosexual development. He also believed that successful completion of this stage involved identifying with the same-sex parent which ultimately would lead to developing a mature sexual identity.

According to Freud, the boy wishes to possess his mother and replace his father, who the child views as a rival for the mother's affections.

The Oedipal complex occurs in the phallic stage of psychosexual development between the ages of three and five. The phallic stage serves as an important point in forming sexual identity.

During this stage of development, Freud suggested that the child develops a sexual attraction to his or her opposite sex parent and hostility toward the same-sex parent.

Signs of the Oedipus Complex

So what are some of the signs of the oedipal complex? Freud suggested that there are a number of behaviors that children engage in that are actually a result of this complex. Some behavioral manifestations of the complex might involve a boy expressing possessiveness of his mother and telling his father not to hug or kiss his mom. Little girls at this age may declare that they plan to marry their fathers when they grow up.

The Electra Complex

The analogous stage for girls is known as the [Electra complex](#) in which girls feel desire for their fathers and jealousy of their mothers. The term Electra complex was introduced by Carl Jung to describe how this complex manifests in girls. Freud, however, believed that the term Oedipus complex referred to both boys and girls, although he believed that each sex experiences it differently.

Freud also suggested that when girls discover that they do not have a penis, they develop penis envy and resentment toward their mothers for "sending her into the world so insufficiently equipped." Eventually, this resentment gives way to identification with her mother and the process of internalizing the attributes and characteristics of her same-sex parent.

It was Freud's views of female sexuality that were perhaps his most heavily criticized. The psychoanalyst Karen Horney refuted Freud's concept of penis envy and instead suggested that

men experience womb envy due to their inability to bear children.

Freud himself admitted that [his understanding of women](#) was perhaps less than fully realized. "We know less about the sexual life of little girls than on boys," he explained. "But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction. After all, the sexual life of adult women is a 'dark continent' for psychology."


How Is the Oedipus Complex Resolved?

At each stage in Freud's theory of psychosexual development, children face a developmental conflict that must be resolved in order to form a healthy adult personality. In order to develop into a successful adult with a healthy identity, the child must identify with the same-sex parent in order to resolve the conflict of the phallic stage.

So how does the child go about resolving the Oedipus complex? Freud suggested that while the primal [id](#) wants to eliminate the father, the more realistic [ego](#) knows that the father is much stronger. The id, as you may recall, is the primal source of energy that seeks to immediately satisfy all of the unconscious urges. The ego is the part of personality that emerges to mediate between the urges of the id and the demands of reality.

According to Freud, the boy then experiences what he called castration anxiety - a fear of both literal and figurative emasculation. Freud believed that as the child becomes aware of the physical differences between males and females, he assumes that the female's penis has been removed and that his father will also castrate him as a punishment for desiring his mother.

In order to resolve the conflict, the [defense mechanism](#) known as identification kicks in. It is at this point that the [super-ego](#) is formed. The super-ego becomes a sort of inner moral authority, an internalization of the father figure that strives to suppress the urges of the id and make the ego act upon these idealistic standards.



In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud explained the child's superego retains the character of the child's father and that the strong feelings of the Oedipus complex are then repressed.

Outside influences including social norms, religious teachings, and other cultural influences help contribute to the repression of the Oedipal complex.

It is out of this that the child's conscience emerges, or his overall sense of right and wrong. In some cases, however, Freud also suggested that these repressed feelings could also result in an unconscious sense of guilt. While this guilt may not be overtly felt, it can still have an influence over the individual's conscious actions.

What If the Oedipus Complex Is Not Resolved?

So what happens when the Oedipus complex is not successfully resolved? As when conflicts at other psychosexual stages are not resolved, a [fixation](#) at that point in development can result. Freud suggested that boys who do not deal with this conflict effectively become "mother-fixated" while girls become "father-fixated." As adults, these individuals will seek out romantic partners who resemble their opposite-sex parent.

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