Inherited *parenting beliefs*

Understanding the beliefs about children, mothering and family that we absorb growing up, and choosing which ones to keep, adapt or let go.

MOTHER GROUND
YOUR VILLAGE

Every parent brings a lifetime of beliefs into parenting, most of them learned long before we ever held our own child. We absorb them from how we were parented, from grandparents, culture, community and the media. Many are so familiar that they don't feel like beliefs at all: they just feel like **"how things are done"**.

Some inherited beliefs are wise and loving, and worth keeping. Others may no longer fit what we know about children today, or who we want to be as a parent. Becoming aware of them gives us choice.

Have you ever heard, or thought...

- "Don't pick her up, you'll make a rod for your own back."
- "Children should be seen and not heard."
- "He's just crying for attention."
- "A good mother puts herself last."
- "Never let them see you upset."
- "I turned out fine."
- "Because I said so."
- "Mothers should be able to cope."

Inherited beliefs can show up as...

REACTIONS

- Hearing your parent's words come out
- Strong reactions to certain behaviours
- Shouting when you'd hoped not to

PRESSURE

- Feeling judged by family
- "Shoulds" about how to mother
- Guilt when you do it differently

CONFLICT

- Disagreeing with your partner
- Tension with grandparents
- Feeling torn between ways

INSIDE

- Self-doubt as a mother
- Comparing to your own mum
- Not knowing what you believe

Parenting *from the inside out*

Psychiatrist **Dan Siegel** and early childhood educator **Mary Hartzell**, in *Parenting from the Inside Out*, describe how our own childhood experiences are stored partly as **implicit memory**: feelings, reactions and expectations we don't consciously remember learning. Under stress, these can drive our parenting automatically.

They suggest that what matters most is not having had a perfect childhood, but **making sense of it**: understanding your story, so that you can respond to your child rather than react from the past.

SOURCE	BELIEFS YOU MAY HAVE ABSORBED
How you were parented	About discipline, affection, emotions, praise, independence, what children deserve
Grandparents and extended family	Generational advice: feeding, sleep, "spoiling", gender roles
Culture, faith and community	Values about family, respect, duty, who does what
Social media and parenting culture	Pressure to follow a "right" method, comparison, perfectionism
Society's view of mothers	Mothers as selfless, endlessly patient, naturally knowing

Ghosts and angels in the nursery

Psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg wrote about "ghosts in the nursery": painful experiences from a parent's past that resurface with their own baby. Later, Alicia Lieberman and colleagues described "**angels in the nursery**": memories of feeling loved, understood and safe, which protect and guide us. **Most of us carry both.**

OLD BELIEFS, NEW UNDERSTANDING

What we know *now*

Many inherited beliefs came from a time when less was known about child development and emotional health. Our understanding has grown, and it's OK to update what we believe, while honouring that our parents did what they knew.

AN INHERITED BELIEF	WHAT WE UNDERSTAND TODAY
"You'll spoil a baby if you pick them up too much."	Babies can't be spoiled. Responding to them helps them feel safe and builds secure attachment.
"Crying is just attention-seeking."	Crying is communication. Children seek attention because they need connection.
"Children need to be punished to learn."	Children learn best through connection, clear boundaries and calm guidance.
"Big feelings should be stopped."	Children learn to manage feelings by having them accepted and soothed by a calm adult.
"A good mother puts herself last."	Children benefit from mothers who look after their own needs too.
"If you made a mistake, never admit it."	Repair after a rupture teaches children that relationships are safe, even when things go wrong.

THERE'S NO SINGLE "RIGHT" WAY

This isn't about finding the perfect parenting method. Every family, culture and child is different. The aim is to **choose consciously**: to parent from your own values and knowledge, rather than from automatic patterns or outside pressure.

IN THE MOMENT

Reacting *or responding?*

Inherited beliefs are most powerful when we're tired, stressed or triggered. Siegel describes a "**low road**": when our thinking brain goes offline and old patterns take over. We might shout, shame or shut down, then feel guilty afterwards.

1 · NOTICE
"I'm having a big reaction. Whose voice is this?"

2 · PAUSE
Breathe, step back, take a moment if it's safe to.

3 · GET CURIOUS
"What does my child need? What do I believe?"

4 · RESPOND
Choose your response. If you react, repair later.

Common triggers

- Crying that won't stop
- Defiance or saying "no"
- Mess, noise, or being late
- Behaviour in public, being "judged"
- Your child at an age that was hard for you
- Sibling fights
- Your child being upset with you
- Comments from family about your parenting

Repair

AFTER REACTING
"I shouted at you earlier. That wasn't OK, and it wasn't your fault. I'm sorry."

NAMING CHANGE
"When I was little, we didn't talk about feelings. I want it to be different for us."

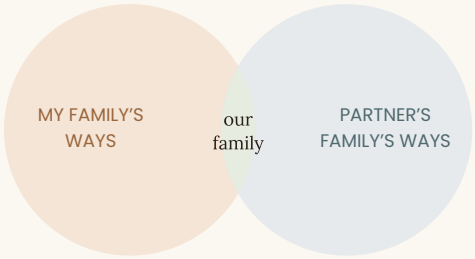
See also our handout *Parent, Adult, Child & motherhood: when your child stirs up your past.*

GOOD ENOUGH, NOT PERFECT

Changing inherited patterns takes time, and you will sometimes react in ways you wish you hadn't. Winnicott's idea of the "**good enough" parent** reminds us that children don't need perfection. They need a parent who notices, repairs and keeps trying. Every repair is part of breaking the cycle.

FAMILY AND PARTNERS

When beliefs *collide*



Creating something new, together

Two family cultures

Each partner brings beliefs from their own upbringing: about routines, discipline, food, sleep, affection and roles. Differences are normal, and can cause conflict when they go unspoken.

Talking about where your beliefs come from, rather than arguing about who is right, can help you create a **new family culture together**.

Questions to explore together

- What did your parents do that you want to keep?
- What do you want to do differently?
- How were feelings handled in your home?
- What does a "good parent" mean to you?

When grandparents disagree

Grandparents often share advice from love, and from what they knew. You can respect their care while still making your own choices.

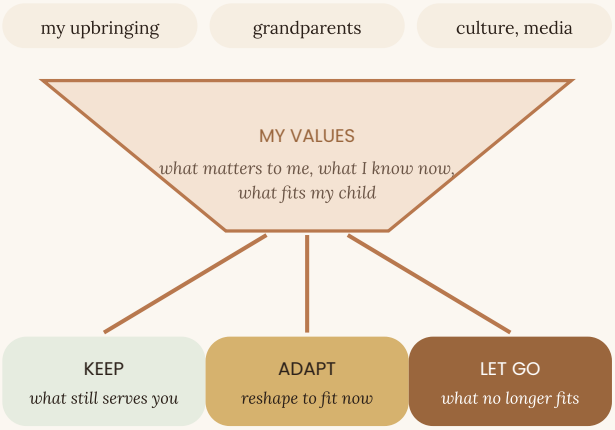
ACKNOWLEDGING
"I know that's how you did it, and you were trying your best. We're doing it a bit differently."

HOLDING A BOUNDARY
"We've decided to pick him up when he cries. Please support us in that."

KEEPING IT LIGHT
"Things have changed a lot. Thanks for caring. We've got this."

PARTNER BACKING
"We've talked about it together, and this is what works for our family."

My *belief audit*



Keep, adapt or let go

Imagine your inherited beliefs passing through the filter of your own values and what you now know. Some you'll want to keep, some to adapt, and some to gently let go.

There may also be a little grief in this process: for what you didn't receive, or for the gap between you and your own parents.

A BELIEF I INHERITED	WHERE IT CAME FROM	DOES IT FIT MY VALUES?	KEEP / ADAPT / LET GO

The kind of mother I want to be	
The "angels" I want to pass on	

Why therapy *can help*

Becoming a mother often stirs up our own childhood in unexpected ways. Therapy offers a space to make sense of your story, understand where your reactions come from, grieve what you didn't receive, and build confidence in the kind of mother you want to be, without judgement.

If you would like support exploring your own upbringing and your parenting, you are welcome to get in touch at velvetcouchtherapy.co.uk.

REFLECTION

1. What do I hope my child will say about how they were parented?

2. Which beliefs do I most want to pass on?

Recommended reading



Parenting from the Inside Out
Daniel Siegel & Mary Hartzell (2003)
How making sense of your past helps you parent well.



Good Inside
Becky Kennedy (2022)
Connection, boundaries and repair.



Matrescence
Lucy Jones (2023)
The transformation of becoming a mother.



The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read
Philippa Perry (2019)
Breaking patterns with warmth and understanding.



The Whole-Brain Child
Daniel Siegel & Tina Payne Bryson (2011)
Understanding children's developing brains.

Useful websites

NHS Start for Life
nhs.uk/start-for-life
Information on baby and toddler development.

NSPCC: parenting
nspcc.org.uk
Advice on positive parenting and family life.

Center on the Developing Child
developingchild.harvard.edu
Research on early relationships and development.

Looking after you

If you are struggling with low mood, or worried about your reactions towards your child, please speak to your GP or health visitor. Asking for help is a sign of care. Samaritans: **116 123** (free, 24 hours). NHS 111, mental health option. In an emergency, call **999**.

This information sheet offers general support and is **not intended to replace therapy, or medical or professional advice, diagnosis or treatment.** Draws on Daniel Siegel & Mary Hartzell; Selma Fraiberg (1975); Lieberman et al. (2005), "Angels in the nursery"; attachment theory. © Velvet Couch Therapy. For personal use only.