Parent, Adult, Child & *motherhood*

MOTHER GROUND
YOUR VILLAGE

Why our children can stir up feelings from our own childhood, and how to respond from a calmer, steadier place.

Psychiatrist Eric Berne developed **Transactional Analysis** in the 1950s. He noticed that we all shift between three ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, which he called **ego states**: Parent, Adult and Child. Becoming a mother can bring all three into sharp focus, as we parent our children while carrying the child we once were.



PARENT

The learned voice

What we absorbed from our own parents and carers. You may hear your mother's words come out of your mouth. It can comfort (Nurturing) or criticise (Controlling).

ADULT

The here-and-now self

Responding to your child as they are, right now, with the knowledge you have today. This is the part that can pause and choose.

CHILD

The felt experience

The feelings and reactions of the child you were. It holds joy and playfulness, and also old fear, shame or anger that can be stirred by your own child.

How each ego state can show up

EGO STATE	WITH YOUR CHILD, IT MIGHT SOUND LIKE	HOW IT LOOKS
PARENT		
Controlling +	Safe limits: "Hold my hand by the road."	Firm, clear
Controlling –	Criticises: "Why can't you ever just listen?"	Shouting, pointing
Nurturing +	Comforts: "You're upset. I'm here."	Warm, soothing
Nurturing –	Over-protects: "I'll do it, you can't yet."	Anxious hovering
ADULT		
Adult	Thinks it through: "She's tired and hungry. What does she need?"	Calm, curious
CHILD		
Free Child +	Joins in the play, silliness and fun	Laughter, delight
Free Child –	Wants it to stop, now: "I can't cope with this!"	Overwhelmed
Adapted Child +	Fits in, considers others' needs	Accommodating
Adapted Child –	Feels small, ashamed, freezes or explodes	Tearful, shut down

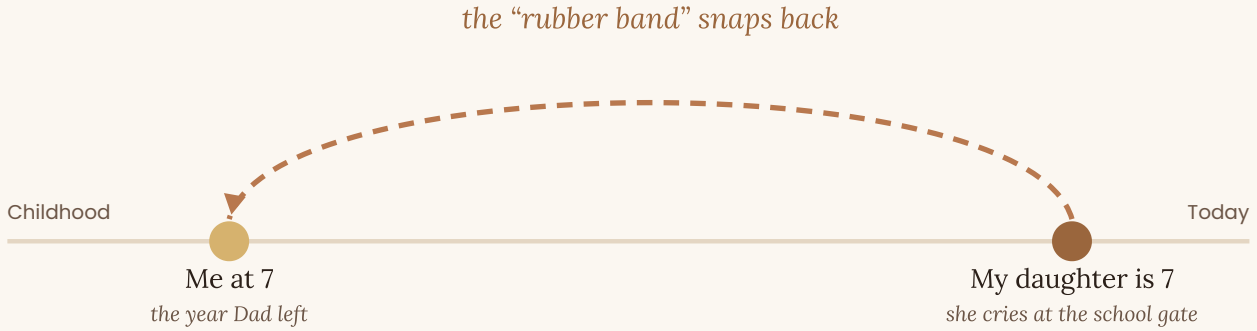
+ helpful · – unhelpful. No ego state is "bad". Each has a healthy side, and the aim is to have choice about which one we use.

When your child *stirs up your past*

Sometimes a reaction to our child feels far bigger than the moment deserves. Often, it isn't only about now.

Transactional Analysis calls this **rubber banding**: a moment in the present catches on an old experience and pulls us back to it, as if we were attached by an elastic band. Suddenly we're not responding as the mother in the room. We're feeling like the child we once were.

This can be especially strong when **your child reaches the age you were** when something difficult happened: when a parent left, a sibling was born, you were bullied, unwell, frightened, or felt unseen. Your child's ordinary behaviour at that age can wake up feelings you didn't know were still there.



WHEN MY CHILD…	IT MIGHT STIR	I MIGHT SLIP INTO	AND FIND MYSELF
Baby cries and won't settle	Being left to cry, or no one coming	Adapted Child: panic, helplessness	Feeling desperate, wanting to run
Toddler says "I hate you!"	Rejection, or a parent who withdrew love	Adapted Child: hurt, shame	Going cold, or snapping back
Child is excluded by friends	Your own lonely school years	Child: old grief and fear	Over-involvement, sleepless worry
Child answers back	Not being allowed a voice	Controlling Parent	Shouting words you swore you'd never use
Child is unwell	Illness or a frightening hospital stay	Child: alarm, dread	Intense anxiety, checking

GHOSTS IN THE NURSERY

Psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg (1975) used the phrase "*ghosts in the nursery*" to describe how unremembered pain from a parent's own childhood can quietly shape how they respond to their baby. Later, Alicia Lieberman and colleagues described "*angels in the nursery*": memories of being loved, comforted and understood, which also get passed on.

Noticing the ghosts doesn't mean you're a bad mother. It means you're brave enough to look, and that is how patterns change.

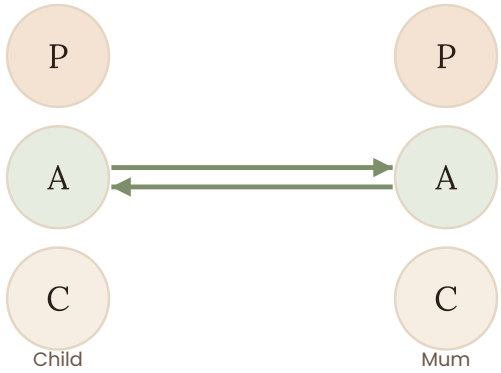
TRANSACTIONS

How we *talk to each other*

Berne called each exchange between people a ***transaction****. Noticing which ego state a message comes from, and which one it lands in, helps explain why some conversations flow and others go wrong.*

Complementary

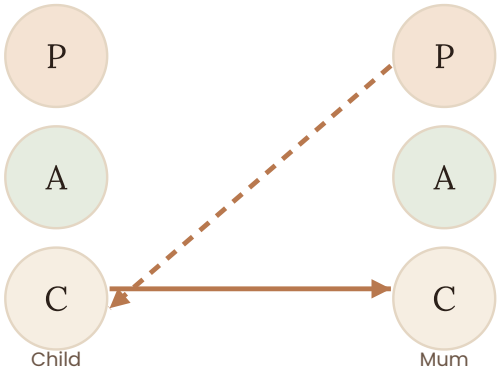
The reply comes from the state that was spoken to, so the conversation flows.



Adult to Adult
Child: "Is it cold outside?" / Mum: "Yes, let's get your coat."

Crossed

The reply comes from an unexpected state. Communication breaks down or turns into conflict.



Free Child to Free Child, met by Controlling Parent
Child: "Look, a puddle! Let's jump!" / Mum: "Don't you dare, you'll ruin your shoes."

Mum (Free Child and Adult): "Go on then, one big jump, and wellies next time!"

Clues you're in your Child, not your Adult

- You feel as young or helpless as your child
- You want to run, hide or cry with them
- Rage or panic that feels out of proportion
- You hear your own parent's words coming out
- You go numb, flat or far away
- Afterwards: deep shame or self-blame

Rupture and repair

No parent stays in their Adult all the time. Research by Ed Tronick and colleagues found that parents and babies are frequently "out of sync", and that it's the **repair**, coming back together after a mismatch, that helps children feel secure and learn that relationships can survive hard moments.

FOR A LITTLE ONE

"I used a big cross voice. That wasn't your fault. I'm sorry. Let's have a cuddle."

FOR AN OLDER CHILD

"I was really stressed and I took it out on you. You didn't deserve that. Can we try again?"

Repair is your Adult and Nurturing Parent showing your child something you may never have been shown: that mistakes can be put right.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Coming back to *your Adult*

1 · PAUSE
Breathe out slowly. If needed, put your child somewhere safe and step away.

2 · NAME IT
"I'm in my Child right now." Naming a state helps the Adult come back online.

3 · HOW OLD?
Ask: "How old do I feel?" and "When have I felt this before?"

4 · RESPOND
Offer your younger self comfort, then choose a reply from your Adult.

Then and now

ASK YOURSELF	MY REFLECTIONS
My child's age now	
What was happening in my life at that age	
What I felt then	
What I needed, and didn't get	
What I can offer my younger self now	
What I want my child to experience	

Your Nurturing Parent, for you

"You were only little. It wasn't your fault."

"You're safe now. I'm the grown-up."

"I can give my child what I needed."

"I'm allowed to get it wrong and repair."

Worth remembering

- Everyone moves between ego states. It's human.
- Being triggered by your child doesn't mean you don't love them. It often means old hurt is asking for care.
- You can be a different parent from the one you had, and still love where you came from.
- Talking it through with a counsellor can help you make sense of old patterns.

Looking after you

If memories from your childhood feel overwhelming, you have flashbacks or nightmares, or you're worried about how you're coping with your child, please speak to your GP, midwife or health visitor. You won't be judged.

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.** Based on Transactional Analysis (Eric Berne; Stewart & Joines) and rubber banding (Kupfer & Haimowitz); Fraiberg's "Ghosts in the Nursery", Lieberman's "Angels in the Nursery" and Tronick's research on repair. © Velvet Couch Therapy. For personal use only.