When your child reaches *the age you were hurt*

How parenting a child at the same age you experienced trauma or difficulty can stir up your own past, why it happens, and how to care for yourself and your child.

MOTHER GROUND
YOUR VILLAGE

Many parents are surprised by how strongly they react at certain stages of their child's life. A toddler's tantrums, a first day at school, a child turning nine, or the start of the teenage years can bring overwhelming feelings that seem to come from nowhere.

Often, these reactions make sense when we look back: **our child has reached the age we were when something painful happened to us.** Perhaps that was the age a parent left, became ill or died; when we were bullied, neglected or abused; or when we had to grow up too fast. Our child's experience can reawaken our own, sometimes without us realising why.

> **YOU ARE NOT A BAD PARENT**
>
> Being triggered by your child doesn't mean you don't love them, or that you are failing. It means old pain is asking for attention. Noticing it is the first step in making sure **it stops with you.**

You might notice...

BIG REACTIONS

- Rage that feels out of proportion
- Panic or dread
- Sudden tears

SHUTTING DOWN

- Feeling numb or distant from your child
- Zoning out
- Avoiding certain moments

OVER-PROTECTING

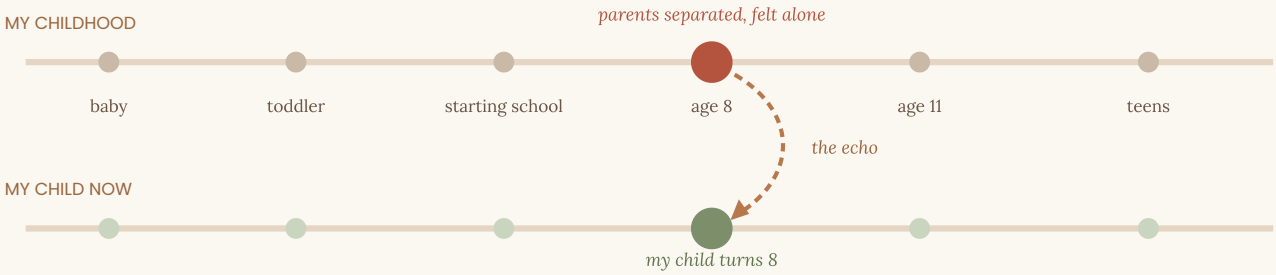
- Intense fear for their safety
- Not letting them go
- Constant checking

INNER PAIN

- Grief for your own childhood
- Envy of what they have
- Memories resurfacing

Two timelines, *one echo*

As we raise our children, we walk alongside their childhood while carrying our own. When their stage meets a painful stage of ours, the two timelines can feel as if they overlap.



Implicit memory

Psychiatrist **Dan Siegel** and educator **Mary Hartzell**, in *Parenting from the Inside Out*, explain that many early experiences are stored as **implicit memory**: feelings, body sensations and reactions, without a clear story or sense of "this is from the past". When something in the present matches these memories, they can be activated, and we feel the old emotions **as if they are happening now**.

Siegel describes how, when unresolved issues are triggered, we may take the **"low road"**: our thinking brain goes offline and we react from old survival responses, rather than responding as the calm adult we want to be.

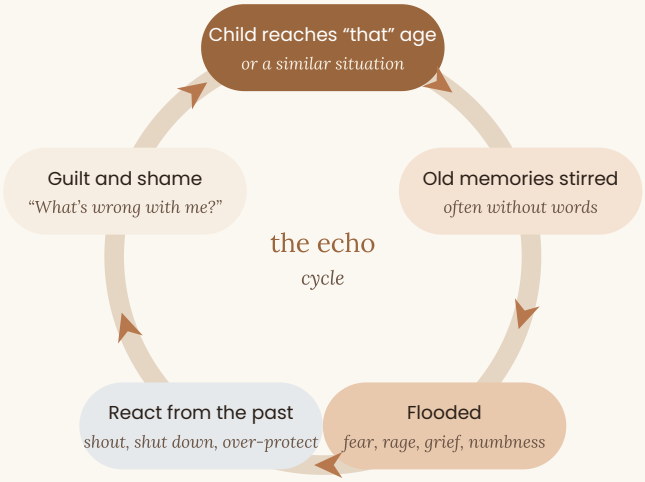
Ghosts in the nursery

Psychoanalyst **Selma Fraiberg** (1975) used this phrase to describe how a parent's unremembered childhood pain can enter their relationship with their own baby. She also showed that when parents were helped to remember and feel their own childhood pain, they became much less likely to repeat it.

Ages, stages *and triggers*

Every person's history is different, but certain stages often stir particular memories:

YOUR CHILD'S STAGE	WHAT IT MIGHT STIR UP	HOW IT MIGHT FEEL
Newborn and baby	Your own early neglect, or a parent who was depressed, absent or unwell	Overwhelm at crying, numbness, a sense of emptiness
Toddler	Not being allowed to have big feelings; harsh discipline	Rage at tantrums, shame, wanting to escape
Starting school	Separation, being left, bullying, feeling different	Dread, anxiety, intense sadness at drop-off
Middle childhood	Parental divorce, bereavement, illness, family chaos, abuse	Panic, grief, hypervigilance, reliving memories
Puberty	Body changes, early sexualisation, abuse at that age, shame about your body	Fear, discomfort, overprotection, flashbacks
Teenage years	Being rejected, unsupported, or having to grow up too fast	Feeling rejected by your teen, anger, envy, grief



The echo cycle

When old memories are stirred, we can become flooded and react in ways we later regret. Guilt and shame then make it harder to think clearly, and the cycle can repeat.

Psychotherapist **Pete Walker** calls these **emotional flashbacks**: being suddenly flooded with childhood feelings, without a clear memory attached.

Is this *then, or now?*

AMYGDALA

The smoke alarm

detects danger; after trauma it goes off at reminders, even when safe

HIPPOCAMPUS

The filing clerk

labels memories with time and place; under extreme stress it can't file "then"

PREFRONTAL CORTEX

The thinking brain

calms the alarm and reasons; goes offline when we feel threatened

An old alarm

The brain's alarm system, the **amygdala**, learns from early experiences. When something reminds it of past danger, it can sound the alarm, even when there is no real threat now.

Your child crying, defying you or going through a stage you found frightening may set off this alarm, flooding you with fight, flight, freeze or shutdown.

Signs the past may be involved

- Your reaction feels much bigger than the situation
- You feel younger, small, helpless or frightened
- Your body floods: racing heart, heat, shaking, numbness
- The feeling seems strangely familiar
- You hear your parent's voice in your words
- It keeps happening at a particular stage or situation

Their story is not your story

One of the most painful parts of being triggered is that we may start to see our child's experience through the lens of our own. We may fear for them in ways that aren't about them, or react to them as if they were someone from our past. Gently reminding yourself that **your child is living a different childhood, with a different parent**, can help.

IF YOU EXPERIENCED SEXUAL ABUSE

Bath time, nappy changes, children's bodies, or your child reaching the age you were abused can be especially triggering. These reactions are common, understandable and not a sign of anything wrong with you. Support can help enormously. NAPAC offers support for adults abused in childhood.

In the *moment*

1 · PAUSE
If you can, step back. "I need a moment." Make sure your child is safe.

2 · GROUND
Feet on the floor, long out-breaths, cold water, notice what you can see.

3 · NAME IT
"This is my eight-year-old self. This is an old feeling."

4 · THEN AND NOW
"Then I was alone. Now I'm the adult, and my child has me."

THEN

- I was 8, and alone
- No one noticed I was sad
- No one explained
- I had no choice

NOW

- My child is 8, and has me
- I can notice and ask
- I can explain and listen
- I am the adult now

Separating then and now

Writing down what was true then, and what is true now, can help your nervous system recognise that the danger has passed.

It also helps you see the differences between your childhood and your child's, which is often deeply reassuring.

Things to say to yourself

REASSURING
"I'm safe. My child is safe. This is a memory, not now."

KIND
"No wonder this is hard. I was so young when this happened to me."

CHOOSING
"I can respond differently from how I was treated."

TAPPING OUT
To a partner: "I'm really triggered. Can you take over for ten minutes?"

LONGER TERM

Healing *so it stops with you*

Look after your younger self. The child you were needs care too. What did you need at that age? Can you offer some of it to yourself now?

Plan for tender stages. If you know an age or milestone may be hard, plan extra support around it, such as birthdays, school starts or anniversaries.

Share it. Tell your partner or a trusted person what this stage brings up, so they understand and can support you.

Repair with your child. If you react in a way you regret, come back to it: "I shouted, and that wasn't OK. It wasn't your fault." Repair builds security.

Grieve. It's natural to feel grief, even envy, as you give your child what you never had. Let those feelings be there.

Get support. Talking to a therapist can help process the original experience, so it has less power in the present.

Repair: what to say

AFTER REACTING

"I got really upset earlier. That was about my feelings, not something you did wrong. I'm sorry."

FOR OLDER CHILDREN

"Sometimes things that happened when I was little make me feel very strong feelings. I'm working on it."

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Research by Siegel and others suggests that what matters most is not whether a parent had a difficult childhood, but whether they have been able to **make sense of it**. Every time you notice, pause, repair and reflect, you are changing what you pass on.

TOOLS

Mapping *the echoes*

Note significant experiences at different ages in your childhood, and when your child will reach, or has reached, those ages.

MY AGE	WHAT WAS HAPPENING FOR ME	WHEN MY CHILD REACHES IT	SUPPORT I MIGHT NEED

Trigger log

WHAT HAPPENED	WHAT I FELT (AND HOW OLD I FELT)	WHAT IT REMINDED ME OF	WHAT HELPED

REFLECTION

1. What did I need at the age my child is now?

2. How is my child's childhood different from mine?

Why therapy *can help*

When a child's age or stage stirs up our past, it can be an unexpected opportunity to heal. Therapy offers a safe space to explore what happened to you, process the feelings that were never allowed, and care for the younger part of you, so that you can be the parent you want to be, with more calm and less fear.

Trauma-focused approaches, inner child work and reparenting can all help. You don't need to remember everything, or have a clear story, to benefit.

If parenting is stirring up your own childhood, you are welcome to get in touch at **velvetcouchtherapy.co.uk**.

Recommended reading

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

Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving
Pete Walker (2013)
Understanding emotional flashbacks and healing.

Raising Good Humans
Hunter Clarke-Fields (2019)
Mindful parenting and breaking reactive cycles.

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

Good Inside
Becky Kennedy (2022)
Connection, boundaries and repair, including for triggered parents.

Useful websites

NAPAC
napac.org.uk
Support for adults who were abused in childhood.

NSPCC: parenting
nspcc.org.uk
Positive parenting information and advice.

Mind
mind.org.uk
Information on trauma and mental health.

Looking after you

If you are worried about your reactions towards your child, or feel unable to cope, 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 Siegel & Hartzell, *Parenting from the Inside Out*; Selma Fraiberg (1975), "Ghosts in the Nursery"; Pete Walker; attachment theory. © Velvet Couch Therapy. For personal use only.