

# EGO STATES

## UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOUR

### 1. BACKGROUND

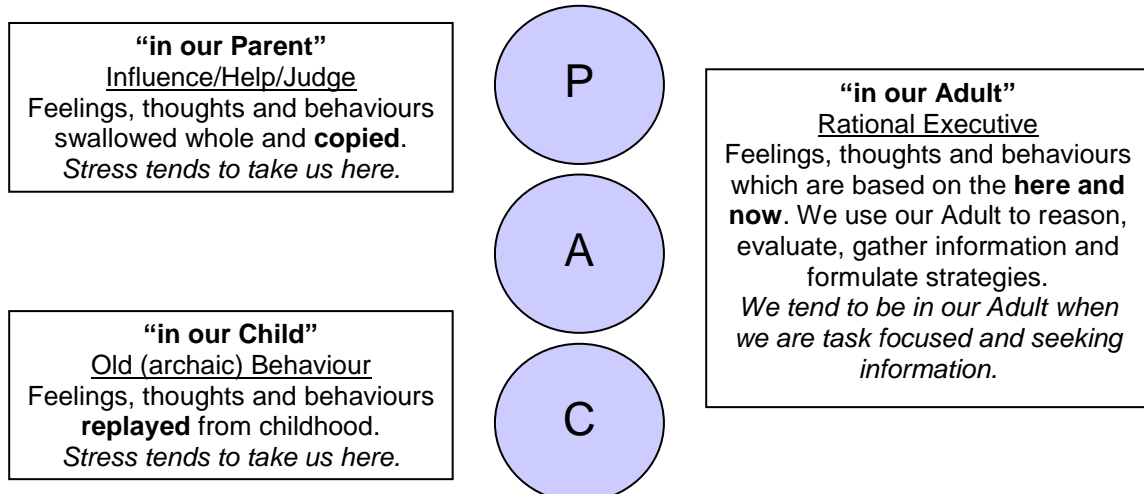
- Do you know anyone who points an accusing finger at others just as his father did?
- Do you know anyone who works hard at taking care of others just as her mother did?
- Do you know anyone who collects facts, thinks things through and acts rationally?
- Do you know anyone who throws temper tantrums as he did at age 3?
- Do you know anyone who learned as a child to be seen and not heard?

If so, you have seen the three states that make up personality in action. Transactional Analysis contains useful models of behaviour which can provide insights into ourselves and how we interact. A key model is the **Ego State Model** which can help us in a variety of situations, including; leadership, problem solving and team dynamics.

### 2. THE STRUCTURE OF PERSONALITY – *what happens INTERNALLY*

The Ego State model is drawn as three stacked circles which represent the three elements of our personality (Berne 1972). **The Child** includes the thoughts, feelings and behaviours we developed as we grew up. As young children we were impulsive, creative and spontaneous. We learnt to satisfy our needs and to keep ourselves safe. We were influenced by our parents, guardians or significant role models and we developed our *own unique view* of the world. When we are ‘grown up’ adults and are replaying these thoughts, feelings and behaviours we are said to be ‘in our Child’. **The Parent** includes the slogans and models of behaviour we have copied from our parents, guardians or other significant people in our lives. These are ‘swallowed whole’ without being objectively tested, so all sorts of positive and negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours go into our Parent. When we are replaying these *borrowed* ways of thinking, feeling and behaving we are said to be ‘in our Parent’. **The Adult** is about responding to the *here and now*. This is when we check out our current internal or external situation, rationally and objectively. The thoughts, feelings and behaviours we experience when we are ‘in our Adult’ are not based on our childhood. They are based on current reality.

*Think about how you respond to social situations, or about what views and opinions you hold?*



### 3. IDENTIFYING EGO STATES

Ego States are unique to each individual because our past experiences and the decisions we made are ours and ours alone. For example, two sisters may have quite different ways of showing fear or anxiety, or they may have quite different ways of looking after people, or showing affection. Therefore, we need to be careful when trying to interpret styles of behaviour, as we could easily misread people.

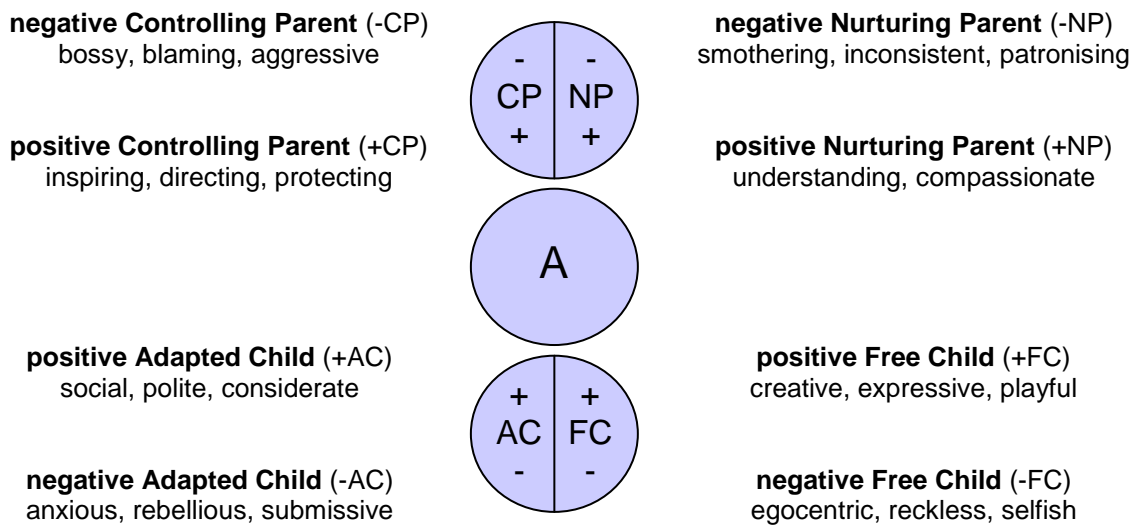
We constantly switch between Ego States as we interact with people and situations around us. We can find out which Ego State we (or others) are in by using **two** or more of the following methods:

- a) **Behaviour.** How does someone behave when they are 'worrying' or 'looking after' or 'ordering'?
- b) **Social environment.** What this 'hooks' in others. For example; '*your* Child hooks *my* Parent'.
- c) **Historical clues.** What we copied. For example; banging a fist, because that's what Father did.
- d) **Felt sense.** When it feels as though it's happening again. For example; when we are 'right back there in front of our teacher, being shouted at'.

**4. THE FUNCTIONAL MODEL – behaviour seen EXTERNALLY**

The Structural Model shows us **what** is contained within our personality, whereas the Functional Model suggests **how** it operates. In the Functional Model the Child is divided into the **Adapted Child** and the **Free (or Natural) Child**. These two 'Functional Ego States' have both positive and negative sub-divisions. We are in our Adapted Child when we do what is *expected*. This can be positive when we use table manners, or say please or thank you. This can be negative when we become over trained (and feel inhibited) or have trained ourselves (such as when we sulk). The Free (or Natural) Child is the child who does what they *want* to do. Our positive Free Child is spontaneous and inquisitive, whereas our negative Free Child is egocentric and does not consider the wants and needs of others.

The Parent takes responsibility and takes care of others. It is split into **Controlling Parent** and **Nurturing Parent**. When we are in our negative Controlling Parent we *criticise* or tell people to do things. (Usually for our own convenience). Our positive Controlling Parent provides structure and *guides* our self or other people. When we ask someone '*if they would like something*' we are in our positive Nurturing Parent. We are in our negative Nurturing Parent when we '*know best*' and do it for them regardless and remove their power of choice.



**The Adult Ego-State** is not sub-divided and is about problem solving, data gathering, planning, strategising and/or rational decision making. Using Adult is about asking questions, seeking facts and figures and checking assumptions. Over use can sometimes make us appear 'cold'.

**Take away message:** *The Parent takes responsibility. The Adult seeks objective evidence. The Child uses intuition. Where do you invest your energy?*

Ref: Tactics, Newton & Napper, 2000 / TA Today, Stewart & Joines, 1987 / Winning with People, Jongeward & James, 1973