

## Introduction to Ego States

Transactional Analysis was developed by psychotherapist Dr Eric Berne<sup>1</sup> who evolved his theories as he observed behavioural exchanges between his clients. He noticed that the same individual appeared to show different aspects of themselves depending on the behaviour of the other person (words, tone of voice, non-verbal reaction) they were reacting to. He observed people changing their behaviour (unconsciously) to manipulate others into responding in certain (sometimes destructive) ways. These he labelled 'games'. He also noticed that people behaved in what seemed like predetermined ways, as if on stage and responding to a 'script'. TA has its roots in psychotherapy and its *only* goal is to raise awareness. Once people know how they manipulate others, the games they play, the scripts they act out, they are able to change. No one can change something they are not aware of.

As we learn and grow, we assimilate the things that happen to us and store them, rather like a videotape that are replayed when triggered in later years. Berne conceptualised the personality structured as three ego states, Parent, Adult and Child.

### Parent

The parent ego state is the part of us, which takes care of others and decides what is right and wrong in life. Responses from this ego state are copied from our actual parent and carers from our past, like relatives, school teachers, etc.

We could say that when a person is responding from the parent ego state, he/she is providing us with an insight of what these early figures of authority were like.

### Adult

The adult ego state is the part of us that weighs up our past experiences in the light of current circumstances. Responses from this ego state are directly related to 'here and now' situation. The adult ego is often associated with the rational part of us although feelings do exist with this ego state as well.

We could say that when a person is responding from the adult ego state, he/she is using their grown-up resources as a person and is operating from a place of choice.

### Child

The child ego state is the part of us that conforms, rebels and behaves in uncensored ways. Responses from this ego state are replayed from experiences from our childhood.

We could say that when a person is responding from the child ego state, he/she is providing us with an insight of what they were like during childhood.

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Eric Berne. Games People Play. Grove Press, 1964

## Understanding the Parent and Child Ego States

It has been recognised for a long time that our early years played a crucial role in forming our personality. The concept of ego states shows us how to recognise that these character forming experiences are still contained within our personality and how they exercise influence on our behaviour today.

The parent and child ego states are the areas within our personality which house thoughts and feeling from our past. When we are responding from either of these ego states, we are replaying responses from the past; they are historic. Both ego states sub-divide and we can respond from each part either positively or negatively.

### Critical/Controlling Parent

This is the part of us that seeks to control or criticise in a manner copied from our actual parents or parent-like figures. Right and wrong, should and shouldn't, and many value judgements and rules for life are contained in the critical parent.

Examples might be when we say to a child, "look both ways before you cross the road" or "you shouldn't accept sweets from strangers".

### Positive and Negative Controlling Parent

We are in positive critical parent when our directives to others are genuinely aimed at promoting their well-being. Examples might be the doctor saying, "you really should take more exercise" or perhaps a work colleague saying, "you really should take a break from time to time".

We are in negative critical parent when our behaviour entails a put-down in some way to another person. Examples might be the boss snarling, "this piece of work is rubbish" or perhaps the work colleagues saying, "you should pull your weight like the rest of us".

### Nurturing Parent

This is the part of us that seeks to provide care and give help to others.

Examples might be when we pick up and cuddle a child after it has fallen over and hurt itself or perhaps helping an elderly person to cross the road.

### Positive and negative Nurturing Parent

We are in positive nurturing parent when we seek to provide care from a position of genuine regard for the person helped. Examples might be when we offer to help a colleague who is struggling with a piece of work, giving him/her the choice to accept our help.

We are in negative nurturing parent when we offer help to another from a one-up position that discounts him/her in some way. Examples are where more help is given to another than is wanted, effectively offering him/her little choice in the matter – smothering.

## Adapted Child

This is the part of us that conforms or rebels to authority over us. In earlier years it would have been the authority of our parents. Later on in life we can be in adapted child when dealing with other figures of authority like the boss, doctor, solicitor, etc.

The adapted child can be conforming to authority-like figures and as such is when we obey the rules. Alternatively, it can be rebellious by turning these rules backwards and doing or saying the opposite to what is expected.

For example, imagine a person being reprimanded by their boss at work. In their boss's office they are sitting with their shoulders hunched, wringing their hands, eyes downcast and promising to do better. They are in their conforming child state and these behaviours are probably reminiscent of how they behaved when told off as a child.

Let's say that after leaving the boss's office, in a safe space, they throw their papers on the desk, stamp their feet and says, "he hasn't got a clue and I'm not going to do exactly as he wishes, in fact, I might just start looking around for another job". They are now in rebellious child state, again probably indicative of how they behaved as a child.

The adapted child can function either positively or negatively. Everyone needs to conform to some extent in order to get along with others and as such conforming can be positive. On the other hand, we can find ourselves conforming inappropriately, doing ourselves a disservice; this would be a negative use of the conforming child.

Similarly, there are times when it is appropriate to challenge authority and when this develops into a constructive activity we could say that the rebellious child has been used positively. On the other hand, the rebellious child can be used inappropriately, too often, or as a way of avoiding responsibility; this would be a negative use of a rebellious child.

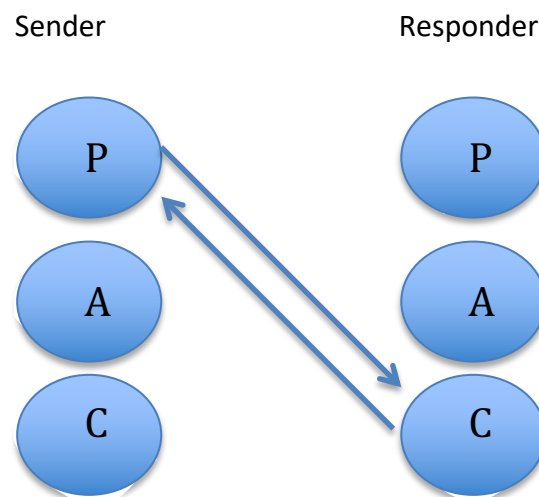
## Natural Child

This is the part of us which causes us to behave in ways that pay no attention to parental rules or limits by way of conforming or rebelling.

This can be positive, for example, when we 'let our hair down' and join in at parties or in a safe situation simply crying over losing someone. It can also be negative for example when carrying out child urges like driving too fast/dangerously, getting drunk and causing offense.

## Transactions

A transaction is any exchange between two people, or more accurately, between an ego state of one person and an ego state of another, Represented as:



### Complimentary transactions

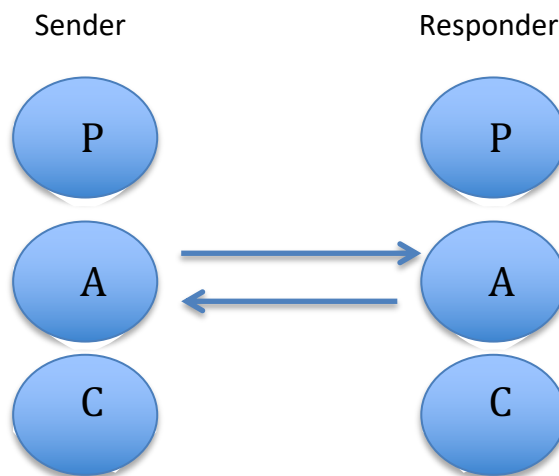
Some transactions are complimentary, like the one above. This occurs when the message is sent from one ego state to a specific ego state in the other person and gets the expected response. The example above might be as follows:

*Boss to direct report (with irritated tone and expression) "Have you finished the monthly figures yet?" (Critical Parent)*

*Report to boss (looking worried) "I'm really sorry, I've had trouble with the spread sheet" (Adapted Child)*

This is complimentary because (unconsciously) the boss's persecution is 'designed' to provoke a victim response, and it achieves it.

With a different tone and expression a different set of transactions might ensue:



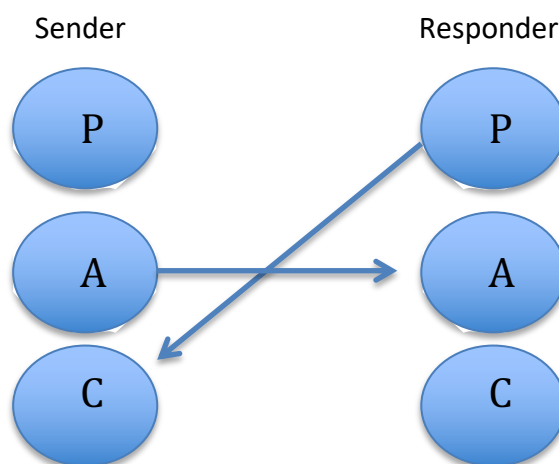
*Boss to direct report (neutral tone) "Have you finished the monthly figures yet?" (Adult – seeking information)*

*Report to boss "I'll have them for you by lunchtime" (Adult – giving information)*

In the first example, the exchange may not be a particularly healthy one, but each party is 'playing the game' in that each is acting out their 'scripts' for this kind of situation.

### Crossed Transactions

A crossed transaction is one where the 'expected' reply isn't returned. For example, when a question sent from an Adult ego state is responded to from either the other person's Parent or Child ego state. For example:

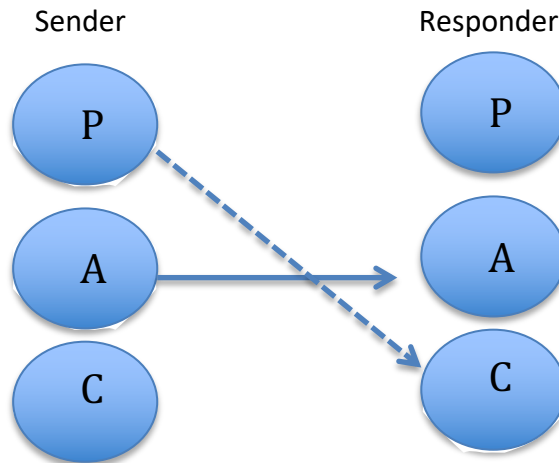


*Colleague A to colleague B (neutral tone) "Do you know where the Marketing file is?" (Adult)*  
*Colleague B (critical tone) "It's exactly where you last left it" (Critical Parent)*

Crossed transactions usually result in one or both parties feeling puzzled, hurt or glaring at each other and at this point people tend to withdraw or change the subject.

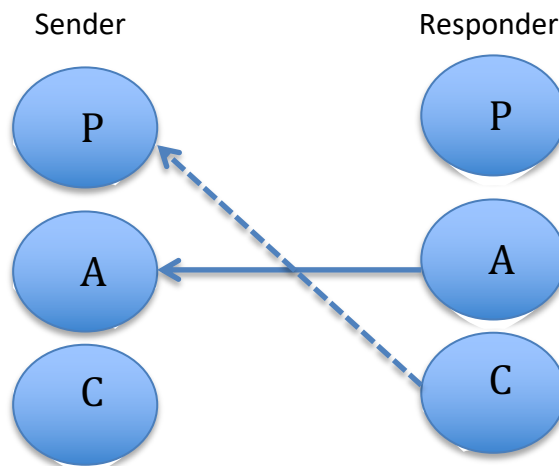
### Ulterior Transactions

These transactions have a hidden agenda, a double message. There is the surface message, generally sent from Adult Ego State to Adult Ego State, but the intended message (indicated by the dotted line) is sent to either the Parent or Child ego state:



*Surface message from Adult: Boss to direct report “You might find this new project very challenging”.*

*Ulterior transaction from Critical Parent: “You’re not really up to it”. If the responder’s Adult ego state receives the message their reply might be something like “Yes, it’s certainly something different for me”, in which case the ‘game’ stops there. But if their Child ego state picks up the ulterior message, they may send a reply:*



*Surface message from Adult: “Yes I think it will be”. Ulterior transaction from Adapted Child: “Just you wait, I’ll show you!”*

Finally there are two other kinds of transactions. The *Indirect Transaction* is where A speaks to B when really trying to influence C (e.g. Mother to father “Don’t watch too much TV tonight” really wanting the son to go to do his homework). *Diluted Transactions* are half-

hostile and half-affectionate, e.g. the jokey put-down where the receiver isn't clear what the real message is.

### How to give up games

Self-awareness is the precursor to any change. You can't change something you don't know about. But if you can develop your awareness then you have a choice:

Then you can begin to:

1. Give an unexpected response – e.g. return a Parent or Child transaction with an Adult one;
2. Stop rising to the bait of an ulterior transaction from someone else;
3. Build your and others' self-esteem by giving, seeking and hearing positive feedback;
4. Stop rescuing – helping those who don't need it:
  - a. don't ever believe that another person is helpless
  - b. help people who are feeling helpless to find ways in which they can apply what power they have
  - c. don't do more than 50% of the work / make more than 50% of the effort;
  - d. don't do anything you don't really want to do. Distinguish between what you want to do and what you believe you ought to do. But if you do something that you truly believe you 'ought' to do, do it as a conscious choice, and don't then persecute someone else for 'making you do it';
5. Stop persecuting criticising those who don't need it or blaming others instead of taking responsibility yourself;
6. Stop playing victim – acting helpless or dependent when you are fully able to take responsibility.



## Attributes of the Ego States

| Ego State                                   | Typical words/phrases  | Typical voice tones   | Typical behaviours  | Typical attitudes   |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| <b>Controlling/<br/>Critical<br/>Parent</b> | That's disgraceful<br>You ought<br>You must always<br>Don't ask questions<br>Because I said so<br>Ridiculous | Sneering<br>Angry<br>Condescending<br>Critical/stern<br>Disgusted<br>Emphatic | Furrowed brow<br>Pointed finger<br>Scowling face<br>Set jaw<br>Pounding on table<br>Crossed arms                            | Moralistic<br>Judgmental<br>Authoritarian<br>Opinionated<br>Protective              |
| <b>Nurturing<br/>Parent</b>                 | Well done young man<br>What a splendid effort<br>Don't worry<br>I'll sort it out for you                     | Sympathetic<br>Encouraging<br>Comforting<br>Loving                            | Pat on back<br>Consoling touch<br>Benevolent smile<br>Offering support  | Caring<br>Supportive<br>Understanding<br>Smothering<br>Looking for waifs and strays |
| <b>Adult</b>                                | How?<br>When?<br>Where?<br>Let's look at it again<br>It's 6:30<br>What are the options?                      | Clear<br>Calm<br>Enquiring<br>Without strong emotion                          | Relaxed<br>Attentive & aware<br>Level eye contact<br>Note taking  | Non-judgemental<br>Open minded<br>Interested<br>Confident<br>Attentive<br>Clinical  |
| <b>Adapted<br/>Child</b>                    | I'll try hard<br>Please can I?<br>Sorry<br>I can't<br>Please<br>Thank you                                    | Whiny<br>Placating<br>Mumbling<br>Taunting<br>Argumentative                   | Polite<br>Downcast eyes<br>Vigorous head nodding<br>Nail biting<br>Slumped and dejected posture<br>Spitefulness<br>Confused | Compliant<br>Defiant<br>Delaying<br>Passive<br>Complaining<br>Respectful            |
| <b>Natural<br/>Child</b>                    | I want<br>Wow!<br>I feel great!  | Loud<br>Fast<br>Playful<br>Excited  | Laughing with someone<br>Demonstration of feelings<br>Self-centred<br>Impulsive   | Curious<br>Energetic<br>Fun loving<br>Spontaneous                                   |