

Transactional Analysis

Understanding our thoughts, actions and reactions



Introduction

Transactional Analysis (TA) was developed in the 1950s by psychiatrist Eric Berne, pictured above. He wanted to create a simple yet powerful way of understanding how people think, feel, and behave in everyday interactions. TA gives us tools to:

- Recognise patterns in communication
- Improve relationships
- Build greater self-awareness

At its core, TA is based on the idea that our personality is made up of three ego states: Parent, Adult, and Child. It is important to note that these each have better and less desirable characteristics, and that we all move between these states over the course of a day, week and beyond.

Why TA Matters in Coaching

Transactional Analysis is valuable because it helps us notice and understand our subconscious patterns of thought, feeling, and behaviour. By recognising which ego state we are in, we gain an awareness and choice to respond differently. This in turn can help to improve communication, challenge our limiting beliefs, and balance emotions with logic.

This simple yet powerful model gives clients practical tools for everyday life, supporting lasting transformation in how they relate to themselves and others.

TA in Action

The real power of Transactional Analysis comes when you apply it in daily life. Start by noticing which ego state you are in during conversations at work, at home, or in stressful situations. Pause before reacting, and ask yourself: *"Is this my Parent, Adult, or Child speaking?"* Then choose the most helpful state for the moment. Often the Adult for clarity, the Parent for care, or the Child for creativity and fun. Practising this awareness beyond coaching sessions helps you build stronger relationships, make better decisions, and create lasting change.

What are these ego states?

Let's take a deeper look at the three ego states; Parent, Adult and Child

Parent

- Learned from authority figures (parents, teachers).
 - Nurturing Parent → caring, guiding.
 - Critical Parent → rule-focused, judgmental.
 - *Clues:* Saying "should," "must," or sounding like a parent/teacher.
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Adult

- Rational, fact-based, present-focused.
 - Solves problems, weighs options.
 - *Clues:* Asking "What are the facts?" or "What's the best solution?"
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Child

- Replay of childhood feelings & behaviours.
- Free Child → spontaneous, creative, joyful.
- Adapted Child → compliant, rebellious, anxious.
- *Clues:* Acting impulsively or feeling strong emotions.

Exercises to try

Notice your state → Parent, Adult, or Child?

Pause before reacting.

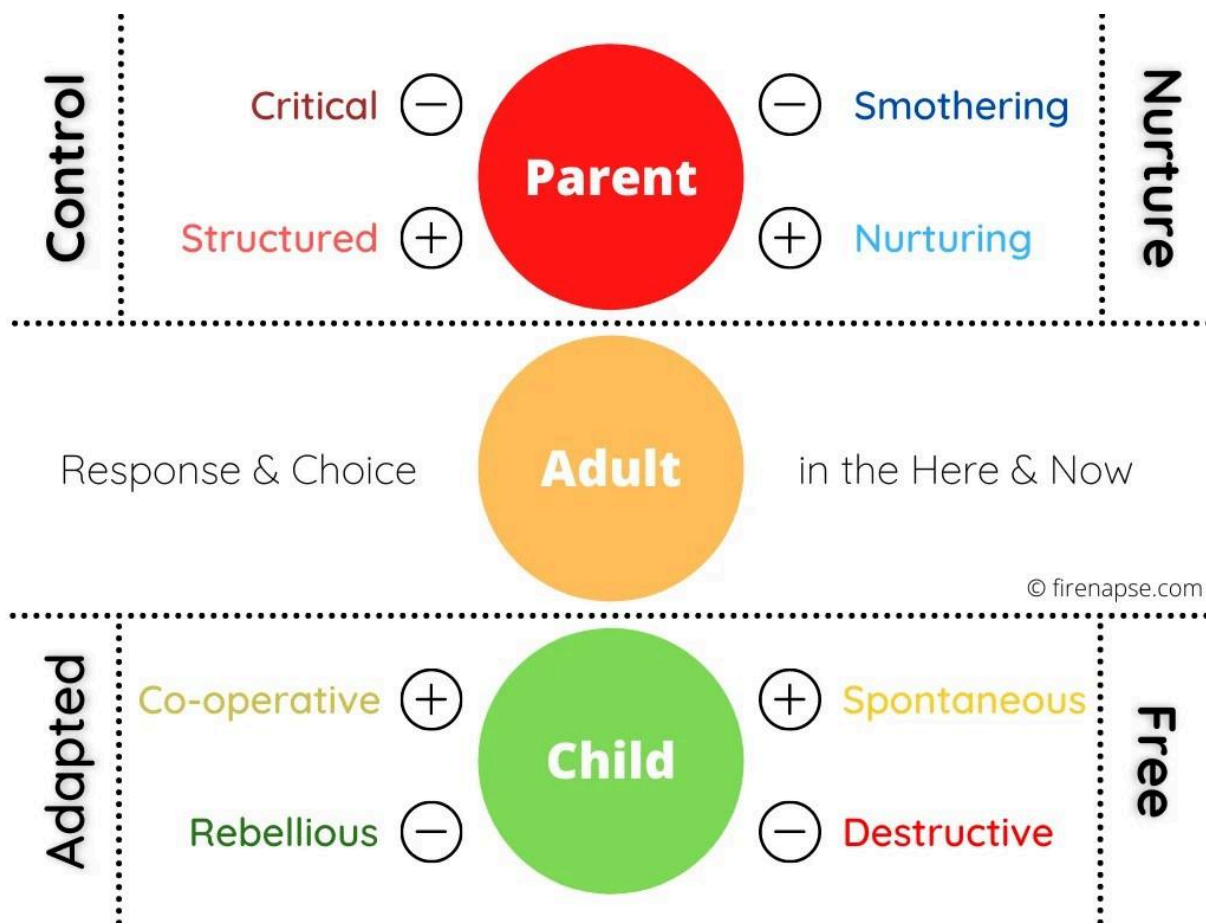
Strengthen the Adult → stay grounded in facts.

Balance all three → each has value.

Aim for Adult-to-Adult communication.

Journal your patterns.

Ask: "What's needed from me right now?"



Deeper Insights into the Parent, Adult and Child States

We all carry within us three parts, the Parent, the Child, and the Adult, and they each have subtleties that are often forgotten. Understanding them gives us the chance to live more consciously, more kindly, more fully.

Parent States

Controlling Parent

This piece of you shaped itself from what you grew up with: the expectations, the rules, the “shoulds” [or could’s with a side of shame as I call them]. Its positive side is structure: it helps define what’s expected, keeps things moving, offers direction. But it has a shadow side too: critical voice, judgment, harshness. When structure becomes unthinking criticism, it holds you back more than it helps.

Nurturing Parent

This is where your care, compassion, and inner support come from. The nurturing part of you reminds you you’re worthy, helps you recover, guides you with gentleness. Yet if you lean too far into nurture without challenge, you risk smothering your growth, shielding yourself from real challenges you need to meet.

Child States

Adapted Child

This is how you learnt to respond to the world’s rules. When you trust them, you cooperate. When they feel imposed unfairly, you rebel. Internally, you might push yourself to rigid standards, then rebel when you can’t, or see others not doing what you think they should. Recognising this part helps you find a healthier way: not blindly obeying, not automatically pushing back, but choosing your stance.

Free Child

Here lies your impulse to play, to be spontaneous, creative, joyful. When life gives you space, you flourish. When you feel caged in by rules, by expectations, by fear, you might lash out or shut down. The Free Child needs structure to live, but also needs room to breathe; those are not opposites but partners.

Adult State

The Adult is the part of you that holds space for all these voices. It sees the Controlling and Nurturing Parents, the Adapted and Free Child, without needing to be drawn into their drama. The Adult asks: *What's here, right now? What is helpful?* It balances feedback and compassion; it lets you transform internal criticisms into constructive insight. The Adult lets you be more than the sum of your experiences; it invites healing, curiosity, and choice.

Key Take-Aways

- The ways we treat others often echo how we treat ourselves. If you're sharply critical of others, examine how you speak to *you*.
- Your ego states shift constantly, often triggered unconsciously. Your power lies in awareness.
- Change isn't about adding layers of behaviour, it's about releasing what is no longer working.
- You always have two roles: the one who speaks, and the one who hears. You can change both, how you express yourself, and how you interpret what you hear, including your inner voice.

How will you practice noticing these elements over the next few weeks?