

**WORKING WITH
THE
PARENT EGO
STATE**

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Definition of Parent Ego State

Berne (1961, in Erskine, 2003) defined Parent Ego States as “a set of feelings, attitudes, and behaviour patterns which resemble those of parental figure”.

The internalisation of the personality of one's own parent(s) occurs in early childhood and, to a lesser extent, throughout one's life.

In psychotherapy, when working with the internalised Parent Ego State or Ego States we need to see them as distinct realities and afford them the same dignity and respect as if they were in the clinical room setting with ourselves.

Another clinical note to offer at this point is that when working clinically with the Parent Ego State, the Child Ego State is always “listening on” and the clinician needs to consider the Child Ego State and Parent Ego State in totality. In other words, they are unconsciously/consciously connected, ie you will need to address both the Parent Ego State and the Child Ego State in the relational dialogue.

Working therapeutically with the Parent Ego State

After careful Ego State and Script analysis which will mean a more in-depth understanding of the client and necessary therapeutic progression, you will by definition more likely work with the Child “deficits” and deeper relational unmet needs.

It’s important to establish a relationship with the “Child Ego State” before you consider clinical work with the Parent Ego State. There are many reasons for this consideration, none more than providing “protection” for the emerging Child Ego State.

Once you have established a clinical relationship with the “Child Ego State”, you may consider working with the Parent Ego State in service of either decontamination, deconfusion, redecision work or addressing unmet relational needs.

Two Chair Work

One of the therapeutic techniques for dealing with Impasses, Confusion and internal conflicts is two chair work.

Two Chair work was created by the late Fritz Perls in the late 1960s. He developed this technique primarily to help people own the different parts of themselves. This technique has been used by Gestalt therapists, drama therapists and TA therapists not only to help clients take ownership of the different parts of the self but as an effective way to help their clients resolve old conflicts with their parents or people who were in their environment as they were growing up.

John McNeel (1976) talked about the use of Two Chair work as an effective means of injecting affective content into the cognitive processes of Transactional Analysis, structural analysis, game analysis and script analysis (Berne 1961).

When utilising Two Chair work in the service of the client, you would traditionally have two chairs, one would commonly be what we might call the "Parent part of the self" and the other chair the "Child part of the self".

The therapist would invite the client to dialogue between the two parts of the self in order to not only hear external conversation but to have a further understanding of the stuck position between the two parts of the self and what needs to happen therapeutically for resolution.

Within this work the therapist may interrupt the dialogue to talk to the Parent and Child parts of the self in order to aid therapeutic change or resolution. This might involve of course decontamination of the Child Ego State and/or deconfusion of the Child Ego State.

Parent Therapy

An extension of the Two Chair technique might be what we call Parent Therapy, which would involve the therapist talking more extensively to the Parent part of the self and more specifically the "Child in the Parent".

This takes some skill from the therapist who needs to make sure that they don't get caught up in a Parent to Parent battle or competition and that they are focussed on a relational dialogue with the vulnerable part of the Parent.

The Parent Interview

Why do a Parent Interview?

- * Psychological relief to the client (often specifically the Child Ego State)
- * Empowerment for the Child Ego State (listening on)
- * To highlight the "stuck" place/impasse between parent and child ego states
- * For the Child Ego State to understand more fully the internalised parent's story (this may include increased compassion, if any, from the Child of the client)
- * Child Ego State awareness - understandings - and possible connections

Stages of the Parent Interview

1. Set out **three** chairs which will be for the 3 parts of the client, ie the Parent Ego State, Adult Ego State and the Child Ego State.
2. Before you start the actual Parent interview, you will need to contract with the client what they want to achieve from the Parent interview.
3. You will invite the client to be the internalised Parent.
4. The therapist's relational inquiry with the Parent Ego State needs to not only focus on the Adult part of the Parent but more specifically with the Child in the Parent (the vulnerable part of the Parent).
5. Use empathy and your nurturing channel to encourage the Child in the Parent to emerge in the therapeutic dialogue with yourself. In other words, encourage the Child in the Parent to tell their own story.
6. This Parent interview may take anywhere between 20 to 30 minutes.
7. It is important to make sure that you give the Child Ego State the opportunity to respond to the Parent conversation.
8. You must end the therapy interview with the Child response to the Parent.
9. You may wish to then invite the client into the Adult chair to do a debrief.

Clinical Considerations

1. Before doing a Parent interview it is vital that you have a robust working relationship with the client, and you have done an effective Ego State/Script analysis and have embarked on therapeutic work with the Child Ego State. This may be decontamination, deconfusion of the Child Ego State, or working with child deficits/unmet relational needs.
2. A working guide would be that you would not do a Parent interview for at least nine months. This will give you time to do the necessary work outlined above and have a strong working relationship with the Child Ego State of the client.
3. The therapist needs to be more potent than the client's Parent Ego State in order to offer the necessary psychological protection for the client when working with their internalised parent figure or figures.
4. It's important that you have an accurate understanding of the Script of the client and their internalised Parent/Parents or significant others.

If you conclude that the internalised Parent may be crazy or even psychotic, then you would not do the Parent interview. (Do not invite them into the Parent's crazy world).