

Parents, Adults, and Children—Part 1

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In 1964, Eric Berne published a book entitled “Games People Play.” Three years later, a student and colleague, Thomas Harris, published a follow-up book, “I’m OK--You’re OK.” Popular best-sellers, these books described in relatively simple terms an approach in psychology that everyday people could understand and use (which was not at all common in those days).

I often use these concepts as I coach and train business leaders. Eric Berne's concept is that within each of us resides three “ego states” (his term), any one of which might interact in a given situation with any of the three “ego states” in another person.

Although Eric Berne used common words to describe the three ego states, the terms have specific meanings. To remind users of his concept, Berne capitalized the first letter of each word.

When our Child ego state is dominant, we feel and act like the child we once were. The Child is often emotional, self-centered, and irresponsible, preferring fun activities. The Child can be loving, playful, sad, spontaneous, angry, fearful, creative, etc.--and the emotions can change instantly!

The Parent ego state often manifests like a recording of life-long collected judgments and values about what is good and bad, right and wrong, appropriate or not. The Parent can be nurturing (compassionate and supportive) or critical (demanding and controlling). The Parent ego state wants to resolve situations by using its authority and its pre-recorded ideas of “how people should be.”

The Adult ego state is the rational, analytical, fact-processing predictor of outcomes, evaluating each possible behavior in the context of desired goals. The Adult operates on data, making decisions and solving and preventing problems based on cause-and-effect logic.

The model's use of these three terms does not mean that emotions are inappropriate or valueless. The model allows us to be rational and logical, separating ourselves from our emotions. Further, the model does not imply that being rational or logical is the optimum state. Healthy, balanced, mature human beings function in all three states, moving fluidly from any one state to each of the others.

At any given time, any of your three states might interact with any of my three states. This gives you nine possible combinations of interactions with me. Let's take a quick look at these nine. Next week, we will look at how to use these most productively in building leaders in your organization.

The first four combinations are natural, easily observed in others, and frequently experienced personally. Let's look briefly at these four. (1) You started life as a literal Child to a Parent, so you recognize the many conflicting feelings of childhood--sometimes loving, safe, and nurturing, and sometimes confused, hurt, or angry. Yet throughout life, we easily lapse into this relationship with other individuals. (Unless you are aware of your attitudes and behaviors, you “lapse into” each of these three ego states at times.) (2) While still young, you experienced both the fun and frustrations of being a Child with another Child. (3) If you have been a literal Parent, you have guided and directed the life of a developing Child. (4) And we all know the experience of planning together as a logical Adult with another problem-preventing Adult. Any of these four linkages can be stable, potentially existing with a given individual over many years.

The other five combinations, however, feel awkward and uncomfortable, and they usually will break down quickly into one of the four more stable linkages mentioned above. (5) Your analytical Adult feels quite uncomfortable trying to deal with my irresponsible Child. (6) And your emotional Child does not have much fun being in the presence of my logical, rational Adult. (7) Similarly, your logical Adult doesn't quite know how to handle my controlling Parent. (8) And your judgmental Parent does not want to hear the facts that my rational Adult insists on delivering! (9) Finally, your controlling Parent will not tolerate my judgmental Parent's attempts to manipulate and perhaps even intimidate you!

Now we have everything we need to look at typical interactions that occur in the workplace, and I invite you to explore that with me in next week's column!