

## **Parents, Adults, and Children—Part 1**

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In 1964, Eric Berne published a book entitled “Games People Play.” Three years later, Thomas Harris published “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.

I often use these concepts as I train business leaders. The idea is that within each of us resides three “ego states,” any one of which might interact in a given situation with any of the three “ego states” in another person.

Although common terms are used to describe the three states, the terms have specific meanings. To remind users of this, the capitalized first letter is usually used.

When our Child state is dominant, we feel and act like the child we once were. The Child resists growing up and is emotional, self-centered, and irresponsible. The Child can be loving, hateful, playful, sad, spontaneous, fearful, creative, ashamed, impulsive, etc.—and can change instantly!

The Parent is like a tape-recorder, having collected judgments and values about what is good and bad, right and wrong, appropriate or not. The Parent can be nurturing and supportive or critical and controlling. The Parent wants to resolve situations by using its pre-recorded tapes of “how people should be.”

The Adult is the rational, analytical, fact-processing predictor of outcomes, evaluating each person’s behavior in the context of his or her desired goals. The Adult operates on data, not emotions, and makes decisions and solves and prevents 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, 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’ll 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. You started out life being a Child to a Parent, so you recognize these many conflicting feelings—some loving and safe and some pretty resentful. Yet throughout life, we easily lapse into this relationship with other individuals (that’s the common experience we share with all nine of these interactions). While still young, you experienced the fun and frustrations of being a Child with another Child. If you have literally been a Parent, you have guided and directed the life of a developing Child. 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 for long periods of time.

The other five combinations, however, feel awkward and uncomfortable. Because of this, they tend to break down quickly into one of the four linkages mentioned above. Your analytical Adult feels pretty uncomfortable trying to deal with my irresponsible Child. And your emotional Child doesn’t have much fun being in the presence of my rational Adult. Similarly, your logical Adult doesn’t quite know how to handle my controlling Parent. And your judgmental Parent doesn’t want to hear the facts that my rational Adult insists on delivering! Finally, your controlling Parent won’t tolerate very long my judgmental Parent’s attempt to manipulate you!

Now we have everything we need to look at typical interactions that occur in the workplace, and we’ll do that in next week’s column!