

Your Inner Parent and Your Inner Child

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2010, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Monday, July 23, 2012

This is the story of a rebellious child and his or her judgmental, critical parent. I speculate that you know these personalities well. That's because both individuals live inside you!

Oh, you also house a compliant child and a nurturing parent. They certainly deserve attention, too. But they are not the starring characters in this story.

You're probably familiar with the dialogue. "I should (you fill in the blank with a real-life "to do" activity), but I'd really rather (now fill in this blank with a more enjoyable activity)." There are many variations. If you can't think of examples that commonly occur for you, ask your spouse or some other individual who knows you well.

"I know I should exercise, but I'm just too tired." "I probably shouldn't eat any dessert, but it looks so delicious." "I brought work home tonight because I have to present my proposal in tomorrow's meeting, but I just don't feel like working on it."

The phenomenon I'm describing here is common in all of us. For some, the battle ensues several times a day. For others, the conflict may arise only infrequently.

If you are blessed in that your inner child rarely struggles with your inner parent, try to understand this phenomenon anyway. The team members you influence struggle with this condition all the time! By recognizing what happens in their lives, you can help them make choices that are more effective.

The controlling parent knows what "should" be done. The word "should," or its variations of "have to" or "must," is the typical language of the judgmental, critical parent. References to always/never, good/bad, or right/wrong are also common.

The rebellious child, in contrast, is amazingly creative. An objective outsider might exclaim, "If all that ingenuity were put to work productively, lots of beneficial progress could be made!" Ah, yes, but the rebellious child wants what's easy and fun. Unfortunately, those options are typically irresponsible.

If we could consult with Eric Berne (who died in 1970), he'd tell us there is a third alternative. He would remind us that we are able to merge or mediate the parent and child within us to make and execute decisions based on what actions will most likely deliver the outcome we desire.

Who is Eric Berne? He founded the theory of psychology known as "Transactional Analysis." Whenever two individuals interact, their behavioral "transaction" can be analyzed relative to the Parent, the Child, or the Adult of each participant. Eric Berne chose to capitalize those words to identify them as "ego states," differentiating them as terms with distinctly different meanings from their use in everyday dialogue.

The Adult ego state operates predominantly on an awareness of cause and effect. That is, if certain behaviors are taken, then the outcomes are somewhat predictable. This rational, analytical perspective is very helpful in solving and preventing problems. Actions are chosen based on what will likely deliver a desirable outcome.

With this third alternative available, why do our internal parent and child battle? Because we humans are driven more by our feelings and judgment than by data and fact. Our internal parent believes it knows what is right and good. Our internal child, however, prefers what's easy and fun. Each has its own opinion and wants to exercise its right to pursue it.

So what's the solution? Increased awareness! When you understand what's happening when the "I should, but" battle begins, you can make a more informed choice about what you actually will do.

It's not easy, though. Our habits are hard to break. Just because you know what's occurring doesn't cause you to choose the most logical behavior. In any given situation, what you choose depends on how dedicated you are to executing the behaviors that will most likely deliver the outcome you desire.