

Games people play at work

At the office, act like the adult you are, don't be tempted to behave like a "child" or a "parent".

By Nancy Kline

First published in Cosmopolitan - July 1994

At a women's conference I heard a company manager say, "I'm 34 years old and highly qualified. Some people say I could be a director by the time I'm 40. But most of the time I'm in the office I feel like a child."

People assume when they get a job that there will be adults at work. But, in effect, most workplaces are populated by "children" and "parents".

Psychologist Eric Berne explained this phenomenon in his personality theory called Transactional Analysis. Berne identified three personality modes: the "child", the "parent" and the "adult". And he described the destructive "games" they play together.

If, as an employee, you find yourself feeling "like a child" at work, it may be because your managers are operating in their "parent" mode and you are responding in your "child" mode.

Your "child" makes you feel small, afraid, undervalued, demotivated and rebellious. These feelings make you undermine, withdraw, gossip, procrastinate, obey blindly, plot revenge or attempt to please in order to be rewarded. In this "child" mode you cannot become a successful professional.

Conversely, if as a manager you find yourself feeling like a parent, it may be because you have flipped into the mode you learned from your parents' response to you years ago. The "parent" mode makes you feel superior, detached and impatient.

These feelings can then make you harden your tone, not listen to people, punish them by shouting or by calling them stupid, "bribe" them into complying and criticise them more than you appreciate them.

However, there is a better option. You can choose to behave in the "adult" mode all the time. As the "adult" you feel good about yourself,

respectful of the talents and lives of others, delighted with challenges, proud of accomplishments and expectant of success.

These feelings make you respond to others by appreciating and listening to them, using respectful tones, perceiving the facts, considering alternatives, having a long-term view and delighting in life.

When you feel your “child” about to make you withdraw, gossip or undermine, you can choose instead to participate, find out the facts and resolve your differences.

Or when you feel your “parent” about to make you scold your employees, or command, threaten, bribe or take over, you can choose instead to speak warmly, be patient, listen and find joy in the challenge. You can invite collaboration - even inspire.

The “parent”, “child” and “adult” respond very differently in a given work situation. For example:

Your manager says to you, “You got that promotion because of your beautiful smile.”

Possible responses:

Parent: “I’ve told you not to say that sort of thing. Now just stop it.”

Child: “Thank you, Mr Tebbitt, you’re very sweet.”

Adult: “Mr Tebbitt, I’m sure that’s not what you meant to say. We both know my qualifications for this job. I’d appreciate it very much if you did not say that again.”

You assistant is late for work, delaying your departure for an important meeting.

Possible responses:

Parent: “You’re hopeless. Will you ever learn to manage your time?”

Child: “See what you’ve done to me? I hate it when you do this.”

Adult: “Next time, if you know you’re going to be late, I’d appreciate it if you’d let me know so I can go on ahead.”

A new position opens up in your department. You notice that your team is tense.

Possible responses:

Parent: “Don’t worry, girls, you’ll live through this. Now, get back to work.”

Child: “You’re all making things hard for me.”

Adult: “Let’s plan a time to discuss that way this change will affect us.”

Your team tells you that the MD has set an unrealistic deadline.

Possible responses:

Parent: "I don't want to hear any complaints about you having to stay late or come in early."

Child: "One day I'll show that bastard."

Adult: "Let's figure out how to get this done. We're a good team and we can pull this off."

Office games

Many of our interactions at work also become what Berne calls "games". The game occurs when one of us suddenly switches out of the "adult" mode. One type of game he calls *See What You Made Me Do*. Consider what happens when one person asks for advice and the other gives it.

Anne: "Jane, would you please tell me what you think of this office memo I've written?"

Jane: "Of course I will."

Later, Jane returns the memo to Anne.

Jane: "I think it is fine except I'd make the second sentence more direct."

Anne: "Okay, thanks very much."

At this point both people are operating "adult" to "adult".

The game begins the next day, when Anne switches into "child" mode after hearing that the memo was considered offensive throughout the office because the second sentence was too blunt. Anne then returns to Jane to say, "Thanks to you, I'm in trouble now." (*See What You Made Me Do*). "Adult to adult" has become "child to adult". Anne as "adult" would have said, "Jane, I'm annoyed with myself because I felt uneasy about your suggestion but decided to do it anyway. I should trust myself a bit more, I guess."

Another game people play is *Now I've Got You*. I witnessed this game in an office recently:

Sarah: "So what have you accomplished this morning, Evelyn?"

Evelyn: "Oh, well, I've nearly finished this drawing. It's taken me hours."

Sarah: "So, you've been here the whole morning?"

Evelyn: "That's right."

Sarah: "That's funny. I saw you nattering away in Bob's office two hours ago."

Evelyn: “Yes, I popped in there for a few minutes. I thought you were asking if I had been in the building all morning.”

Sarah: “Don’t get technical on me, Evelyn. You knew perfectly well what I meant (Now I’ve Got You). I’ve never thought I could trust you.”

Sarah has switched to the punishing “parent” and will try to force Evelyn into defensive “child”. Evelyn can remain in the “adult” mode by responding, “Sarah, what is the problem we need to solve here?”

Gender games

Although both men and women can equally react as “child”, “parent” or “adult”, men’s conditioning (to control, criticise and compete in order to be real men) reinforces “parent” behaviour. Women’s conditioning (to defer, diminish themselves and please men) reinforces “child” behaviour.

Being *raised* male or female is more the issue here than being *born* male or female. I know many female managers who have been taught that the male-conditioned (“parent”) way of leading is the only way to manage. Female employees of these male-conditioned women often feel betrayed by them. They say they want women to behave better than men.

There is a common gender-game I call *No, But Here Are Some Delicious Chocolates*. This switch of personality mode often occurs in discussions about advancement.

Kate: “Hello Dale, I’ve come to discuss my becoming a director next year. You’ve said you want more women in leadership positions in the company.”

Dale: “I do, yes. And you qualify for advancement.”

Kate: “I agree. So do 20 other women in my department.”

This was fine, with both people in “adult” mode, until Dale said, “I’m not sure about that (*No*). That might be destabilising. But (*But Here Are Some Delicious Chocolates*) we could consider you for Chair of a Women’s Leadership Committee.”

Dale was threatened by Kate’s “adult” assertiveness and so responded in the way a parent might try to hush a child with a bribe. In order, then, not to become the “child” in response, Kate must stick to the original topic of career advancement: “Chairing a committee is not what I want. I want the job of director. And we both want more women in top positions, so let’s keep strategising about that.”

If Kate does not remain “adult” in this way, a new game of powerless victim could begin, which I call *What Can You Expect Anyway?*

Kate: “I could’ve predicted this. You men always seem to talk about women’s advancement but you’ll never actually make it happen. But, then...(What Can You Expect Anyway?)”

Here, Kate is lost in the “child”. In order for progress to resume, someone will have to go back to the “adult”. One of them will have to stop playing the game.

The next time you are at work, notice the “parent” and the “child” speaking, and the “adult” making a rare but refreshing appearance.

Think how organisation and companies might improve if everyone at work responded as an “adult” in every situation. For one thing, there would be fewer people hooked on chocolate.