

Games Children Play

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INTRODUCTION

In a discussion about counselling and psychotherapy with adult clients an enlightened individual once said, "We keep dragging them out of the river downstream why doesn't someone go up stream to see who's throwing them in". Prevention is better than cure apparently. So lets look at the games children play. If they can be circumvented, then in 20 years time we will not have to be counselling the adults who have played the same games all those years.

In this article I will be looking at games as repetitive patterns of self defeating behaviour. Those communications that repeatedly happen where the person defeats self in the long run. When this happens people then have some feeling as a result. Usually they have had that feeling many times before in their life and it is commonly called the racket feeling.

After the repeated behaviour and the feeling then comes a thought which can usually be summed up as, "It just goes to show you that....." (I never get it right, you can't trust people, men only want one thing, women are users, and so on endlessly). This thought goes with the racket feeling. The feelings are most often the 'bad' feelings like sadness, anxiety, despair and shame. But you can also get other feelings like triumph, success or a feeling of winning. However in games these only come at the expense of someone else and when that happens it inevitably damages the relationship with the other person. If one does that repeatedly then of course the triumph is short lived and the individual suffers from the damage to the relationships.

This article will look at a number of games children play and in some instances discuss the games that these can lead onto in adulthood.

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

Game 1. Courtroom.

This game is about love

Two 7/8 year old siblings are happily drawing pictures in the playroom and then they ask mother, "which one is the best drawing?". You as the parent deliberates. You quite rightly think, 'Competition is a normal part of human nature, particularly between siblings. Tests and examinations throughout life continually rate people against one another, so it seems reasonable that I give an answer'.

Wrong! This is not general life, this is family life and that means love and acceptance enter into the equation. That is not meant to happen at school or the

work place. Or at least it is meant to be less important.

The mother says that they are both good in their own way, but the children persist putting more pressure on mother to say which one is best. The parent finally relents and says, "Johnny I like yours a bit better as the colours look very nice, and you have stayed inside the lines". Cries of appreciation come from Johnny and howls of protest and anger come from his sibling.

The racket or feeling outcome of the game is clear

The winning child will feel superior, triumphant and more loved or loveable.

The losing child will feel like a loser, less loveable and appreciated than the sibling.

The parent will feel frustrated and perhaps think, "It just goes to show you that....." I can't do anything right or I am in a no-win situation (The corner)

A derivative of Courtroom is the game, "He started it". Johnny and Jenny are playing quietly in the family room, then suddenly there is an outbreak of shouting and crying. The parent goes into the room and they are both arguing loudly.

"He hit me with that stick" Jenny protests.

"She started it, she smashed my lego building that I spent hours doing" Johnny retorts.

The courtroom is set up for mother. The ulterior transaction is set by the children - "Who do you love more - Johnny or Jenny?" The thing (who started it) is long forgotten and the children want the judge(mother) to rule on who is the most loveable. Or at least who is in the right and who is in the wrong.

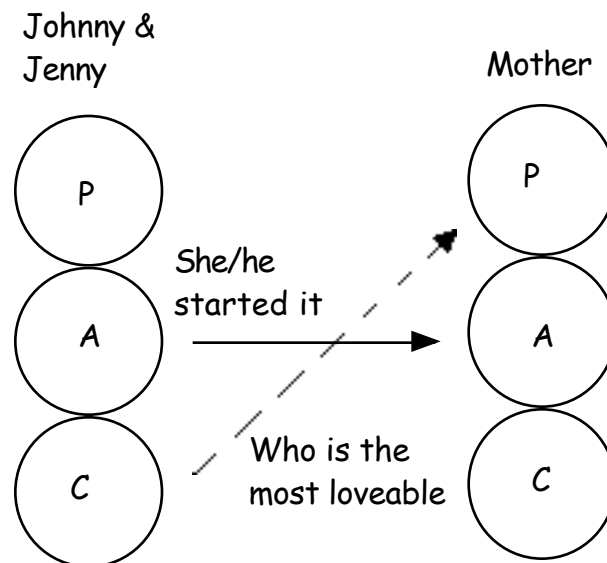


Diagram 1

The social transaction ("She/he started it") is a statement of fact about who started the dispute, but underlying ulterior transaction ("Who is more loveable") is about who is more loveable to mother or father. If the parent takes on the role of judge and makes an adjudication the game is completed.

In adulthood there is a derivative of this game which is called "Hypotheticals" and it is played between married couples. The husband and wife are having a quiet night at home and things are a little dull. The wife speaks up and asks her husband to answer a hypothetical question:

Wife: "Darling if I died and you could ask out any body, which one of our female friends would you choose?"

WARNING to all husbands - never answer that question, no matter how much pressure is applied. If you do you will be in the 'dog house' forever! The ulterior transaction from the wife is, "Who do you love more than me?" Games that involve one of the parties ending up feeling jealous can be a type of courtroom game.

Game number 2. Divide and rule

This game is about power

This game is gaining more popularity in recent times with the increase in divorces and parents living apart, but it can quite easily happen in a family where the two parents live in the same house as the children.

Parents have the power in the family, that has good and bad for the child. On the one hand the child likes this lack of power because it means it does not have to worry about making decisions and looking after self. That is taken over by the person with the power, who also then has the responsibility, such as to feed the child, make sure he is safe, get him to school on time and so on. Power and responsibility go together in this instance.

The downside is the child is powerless and humans don't usually like that. They usually want power because then they can decide what they want and don't want and when they can do what they like and so forth. All children would like to have the power to decide what time they go to bed, what vegetables they eat, what days they go to school and so on.

One way to gain power in a group is to divide the leadership. If the leaders are fighting amongst themselves then the member(s) can assume more power because the leaders are weakened and distracted.

The game goes as follows

- * Johnny asks mum if he can go to an M rated movie, when dad is not around
- * Mum says no because it is M rated
- * Johnny asks dad if he can go to the same movie when Mum is not around
- * Dad says yes

- * Johnny then gets ready to go to movie and mum sees what is going on and questions father about it. Mother and father start fighting about how to manage Johnny.
- * Johnny feels triumphant and powerful.

The leadership is divided. Even if Johnny does not get to go to the movie on this occasion, the parental rule making and boundary setting is weakened so Johnny is more likely to get what he wants in the future and to have the power.

In couples and marriage counselling one learns over time that a very common source of marital disharmony is when there is a disparity between the Parent ego states of both parties.

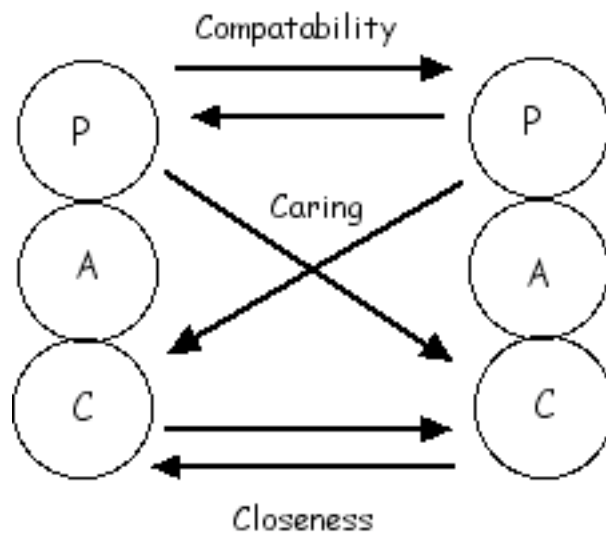


Diagram 2

Any well functioning relationship has three components. (See Boyd & Boyd(1980)) There is closeness between the Child ego states, both parties show caring from the Nurturing Parent and there is at least some compatibility in the Parent ego state values and beliefs.

The big three that spouses argue about are money, sex and child rearing. Often marital disharmony results from a significant disagreement about the right and wrong way to manage money, how the sexual relationship is supposed to be and how to manage and rear children. This is why interracial and intercultural marriage is a hazardous course to follow, because different cultures often have very different beliefs on such things as child rearing and the sexual relationship in marriage. If there is a significant disparity between the Parent ego state values of mother and father on how to manage children then there will be disputes. It does not take long for children to realise this and then the conditions are right for the game of Divide and Rule to commence.

Game number 3. Sibling uproar

This game is about anger and its expression. All siblings get into disputes and fights. So the game of sibling uproar is about excessive sibling rivalry.

In the first place it is necessary to look at the rivalry in its context. When, where and how does it tend to occur?. What has lead up to it occurring, does it tend to reoccur in a particular place, or time or before or after a particular event.

It can be as simple as being caused by boredom, tiredness, habit (in that this is how these two siblings have learnt how to get on), frustration (like on Sunday night when the kids know the weekend is over and a week of school is coming up), if they come from a competitive family it can be as a result of competitiveness between two siblings.

It can also be more complicated in that it is a reflection of the family's overall functioning. A child or children can often be a reflection of the state of the parents relationship. So repetitive sibling rivalry can be the public display of trouble in mother and father's relationship. Children can often be the psychological face of the emotional status of the family. They can 'act out' and do what other members of the family (usually parents) want to do but are usually too inhibited to display in public.

This is shown in Diagram 3. A family is composed of two parts the leadership (mother and father) and the membership (the children). Sometimes the leadership is in conflict as is shown by the arrows between mother and father. Such conflict is often concealed from the world because it is embarrassing or seen as shameful. (Hence we have the thick line boundary around the entire family). So it is hidden within the confines of the family home which leaves all parties more distressed. Sometimes there is one child who's natural temperament is to be demonstrative and to act out. They can then become the psychological or emotional face of the family and publicly display the pain of the family that is hidden from the outside world. They often do it with symptoms such as getting into fights at school, bullying, alcohol and drug use, running away behaviour, panic attacks, depressive episodes and so on. In such situations as a counsellor, it is important not to get lost with the child's symptoms but work more at a family level. If mother and father resolve their difficulties or separate then quite often the psychological face of the family calms down a bit and the child's symptoms abate.

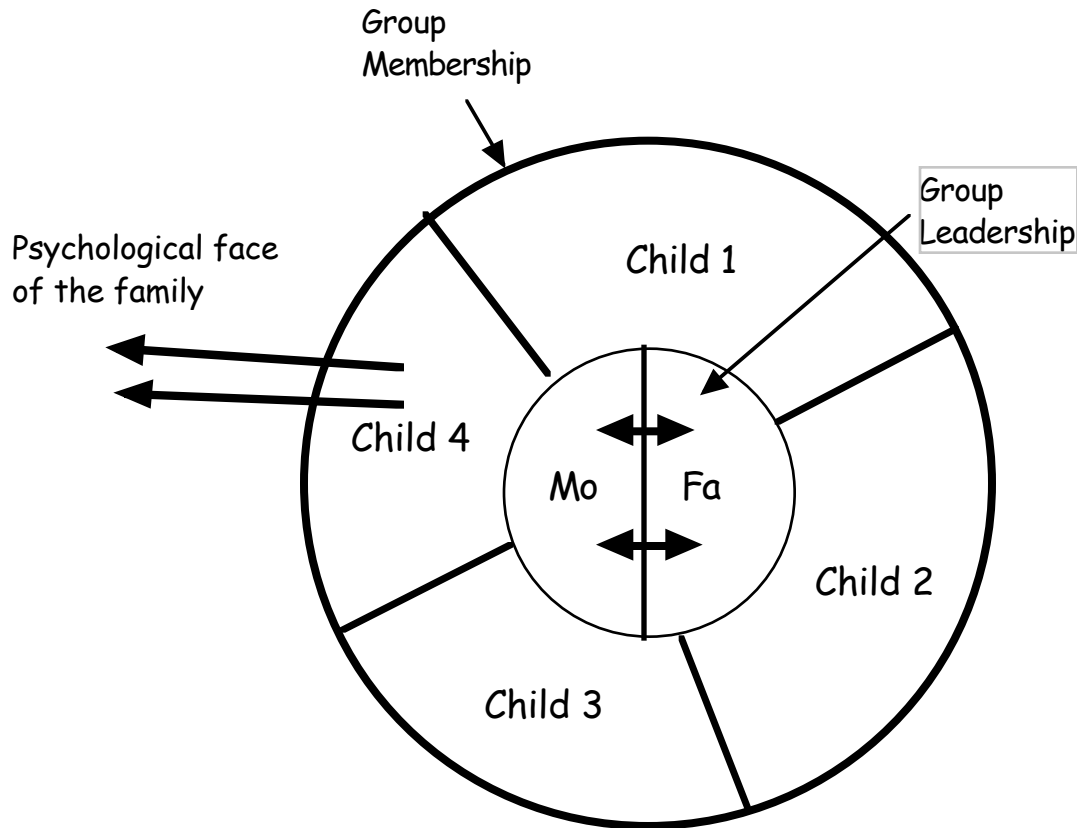


Diagram 3
Family dynamics for the development of a
psychological face of the family scenario.

It can also be attention seeking behaviour. If the parents provide little attention to the children the children can get strokes from the parents by causing uproar in the house and thus the parents must deal with them.

It can also be the defence mechanism of displacement. In some families it is not safe for the children to be angry at the parents. That may result in violence against the child or the withdrawal of love by the parents. So the child who feels anger at his parents can displace that anger onto a safer person, such as a sibling. This is particularly the case when the sibling rivalry gets to the stage of the Battered Sibling Syndrome(White(1993)). So the anger gets expressed, but does not 'hit the spot' because it is not being directed at the right person, and thus it becomes repetitive.

Game number 4. Stupid.

This game is about passivity or playing helpless (stupid)
"I can't do it, you do it for me" can be the child's statement, such as with homework.

So the child plays stupid and makes out it cannot do things intellectually or physically that it is capable of doing or at least is capable of learning to do. So the child discounts its own Adult ego state and maintains the symbiosis below.

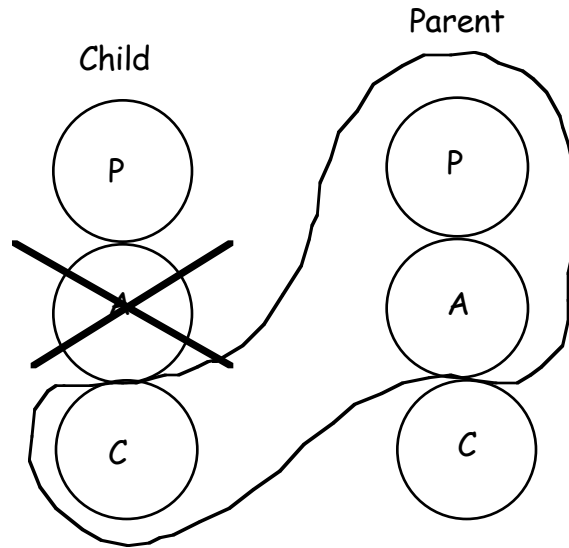


Diagram 4

This is a symbiosis where the child has reached the age where its Adult ego state is capable of doing certain tasks but the youngster discounts his Adult and thus the parents still take over its functions. So an unhealthy symbiosis begins to evolve. This can only continue for any length of time if the parents go along with it and accept the discount of the youngsters Adult or they may even initiate the discounting occurring in the first place

Why would this happen?. Again there are many possible reasons going from the simple to the complex.

The child can simply be lazy. It has always had things done for it so it feels that's how life is. This can happen with the child having the life position of I+U- (or more correctly I-U--).

It can be attention seeking behaviour on the child's behalf. If the child is from a large family the parents simply do not have enough time or energy to provide enough strokes for all the offspring. If the parents highly value education, children can learn that if they request help with intellectual tasks then they get the attention. They get the parent to sit next to it for extended periods of time and give it attention via explaining the task at hand.

It can come from parental guilt. "I chose to leave Johnny's father so he now has no father and I must make it up to him". So the mother does things for the child

as sort of a pay back and wanting to make the child's life a bit easier because she deprived the child of his father.

The parents don't want child to become separate for what ever reason. (Anxious the child will get hurt in the big wide world, needs the child around to make the parent feel wanted or meaningful, and so on.) So the parents discount the youngsters Adult and then after time the child begins the same discounting of its own Adult ego state to which the parents obviously respond favourably. Often this is out of awareness for all parties involved.

Game number 5. For the love or money

This is an associated game of Stupid and is sometimes called the game of Spoilt Child. If the parents play their part in the game of stupid then this new game can evolve. Here love and money get mixed up. The parents believe they can express their love to a child by giving it things. They may even end up saying to the child, "Of course I love you look at all the things I have given (done) for you".

So the parent is for what ever reason unable to express feelings of love or affection to the child. (Their parents may have done the same to them, they have a "Don't show your feelings" injunction, they may have their own closeness issues, they may equate affection feelings with sexual feelings and that scares them, they may just be self centred and have little interest in giving affection to the child because they want it themselves, and so on).

So the parents give things instead showing love or affection. A prime example can be boarding school in some instances. "I have sent my daughter to a very expensive boarding school so she gets the best education", (and by the way it also gets her out of the way so I can go and do all my things).

In this game, over time the child's bedroom begins to start looking like a shop of "Toys-r-us". The child gets a never ending series of toys and things with which it can play or be entertained by. Computers, computer games, bikes, flat screen TV, pets, DVD player, CD player, overseas holidays, swimming pool, and so on endlessly. (This is of course encouraged along the way by all the marketing which often portrays the line that if you buy this gift for your child then he/she will feel loved by you.)

The problem with this game is that it half 'hits the spot'. And that can trick both parties Child ego states. They think they are being shown love when in fact they are not. All humans have a need for love. That need can only be fully met when it is shown to the person first hand (so not mother telling the child that father loves her), face to face (so not via email or even the phone to some extent), with emotion involved, and with some form of physical contact. If that happens then the Free Child need of the person for love is met and satisfied.

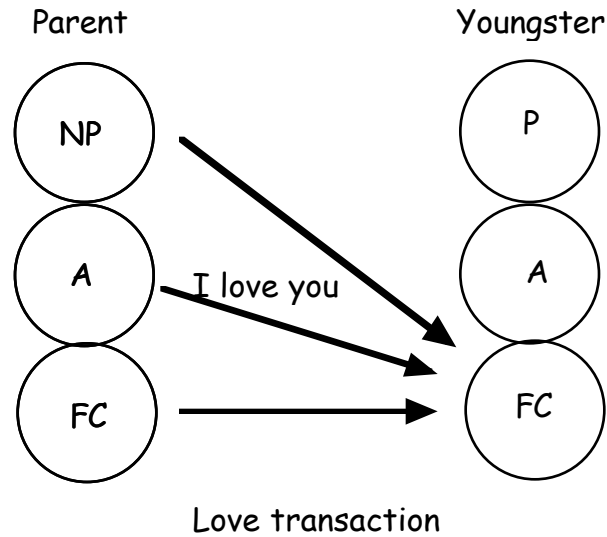


Diagram 5

False love transaction

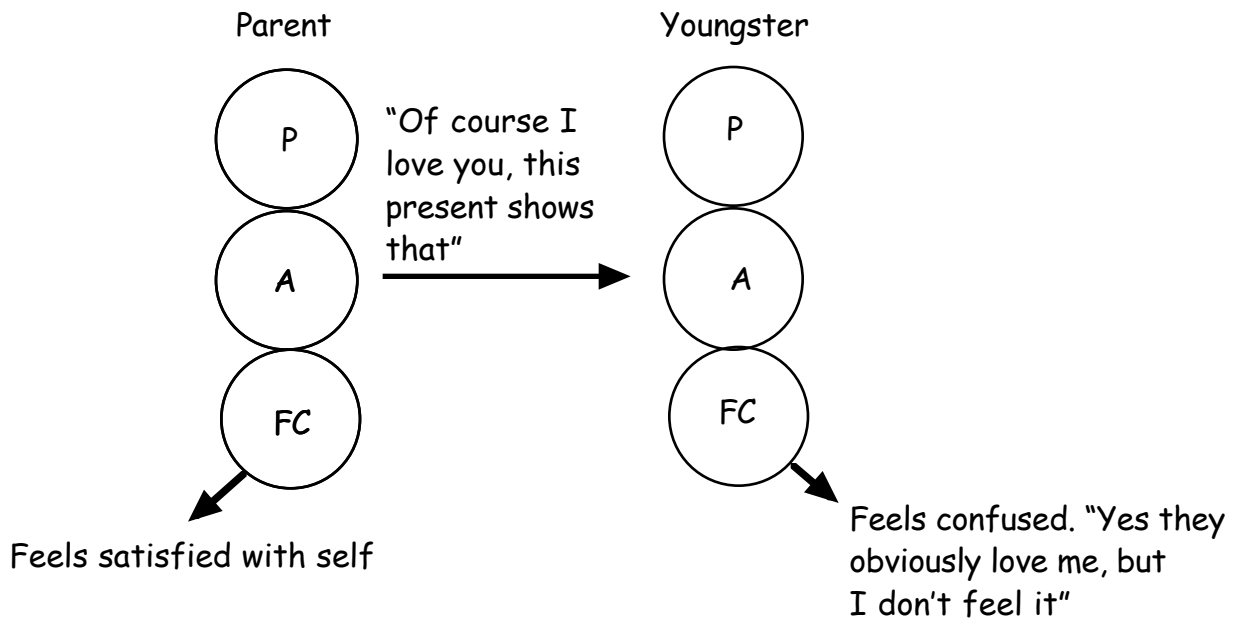


Diagram 6

I sometimes hear clients say; "I know my father loved me, even though he never told me that", or "I used to over hear my father tell others how much he loved me but he never actually told me". Unfortunately these only half meet that Free Child need for love.

Societies will even formalise times when that Free Child need for love is meant to be met. In our country it is often birthdays, and the birthday gift is meant to be an expression of love for the other person. But the physical gift is only a symbol of that love and to the Free Child that does not mean much.

This is summed up well by Coleman & White (1988), "To clarify this point, consider the example of a parent and child playing a game of cards. We would invite such a parent to consider the following question : Are you playing cards with your child, or are you playing with your child and that just happens to be cards at the moment? Toys, games and play activities can provide an effective way of avoiding contact with a child. They can allow the parent and child to become side-tracked into the activity and avoid closeness, contact or openness with each other. Parents who provide children with expensive toys particularly need to consider how they play with their children."(P13).

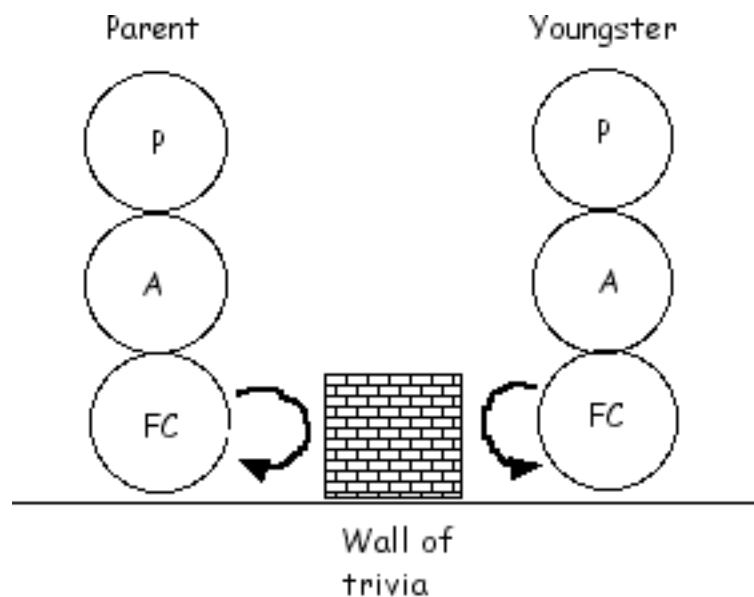


Diagram 7
(Goulding & Goulding(1979))

In the wall of trivia 'things' get in the way of the two parties actually getting close and having intimacy. The Free Child to Free Child transactions get blocked. Indeed in some marital counselling, the counselling can become a thing that gets in the way as well. It gives both parties a 'thing' to talk about other than themselves and their feelings for the other party.

A derivative of the game, "for the love or money" is the game of "Childhood obesity". In this game love does not get mixed up with an expensive gift but instead love gets mixed up with food. The parent has the mistaken belief that it can express

its love to a child by providing it with food and the child begins to take this on and when it feels full it feels loved. So it is provided with lots of food and it eats the food in its desire to feel loved. Again this only half "hits the spot". For a brief while the Free Child need for love is met when it eats but it does not last because the need is not really getting met in the way I described above. (Note there are many other reasons as well for the over weight child).

The other derivative of the game, "for the love or money" is the game of "Higher, faster, longer". In this instance love gets mixed up with achievement in the child's mind. "If I can jump higher, swim faster or run longer then mum will love me". "If I can win the gold medal then dad will finally notice me" The child believes that if it can achieve success in sport, business, education and so on then the parental love that it craves will finally be given. I would suggest that many high achievers are of this ilk. Again, it works for a little while, and the parents may in fact provide the contact with the child when it does achieve. The problem is there is always another race, there is always more that could be achieved. So the child never gets to the end and often high achievers are left with a hollow feeling as they look at their trophy cabinet, investment portfolio or degrees hanging on the wall.

Game number 6. Liar, liar pants on fire.

This is the child who is a repetitive or compulsive liar. They habitually or continually tell falsehoods or lies. There are two main types of compulsive liars:

a) The child who tells a lie where they are obviously going to get caught - why do they want to get caught? It can be for attention (strokes), there is some bigger issue going on and they want it brought out into the open (e.g. abuse of some kind, bullying at school), the child is a drama queen, the child is crying out for limits to be set.

b) The child who lies for expediency. To avoid conflict, punishment, escape the consequences of behaviour or obtain money/property. This is a more insidious type of lying and can reflect the beginnings of the development of the anti-social personality type.

An adult version of the game, is the game of "The affair". This is not that type of affair where it is a one off. For example both parties get drunk at the office christmas party and have a quickie in the storeroom. Instead this game refers to the affair that is ongoing and involves planned deception. For an affair to continue for any length of time there must be an ongoing series of falsehoods being told.

These are type A lies if the parties in the affair start taking more and more risks and thus continually increase the chances of getting caught. They want to get found out. Often this type of affair occurs because at least one party is

desperately unhappy in a marriage and does not know how to get out or to deal with it, so they create a situation that brings it to a head. Finally, the 'innocent' husband or wife forces the issues to be dealt with when they find out.

There are other affairs that are long term and no one ever gets found out and these would involve more of the type B lies.

Game antithesis -

Type A - find out what the motive for the lying and wanting to get caught is and then deal with that.

Type B - consequences of behaviour, developing a sense of morality and the rights of others as being important

Another possibility in dealing with these children is to get them into creative writing. They are often very good story tellers. Hans Christian Anderson was a very successful liar. He had the ability to present "false facts" in a convincing and effective manner.

Also, as with any piece of behaviour lying can become habitual. I particularly noticed this when I was working with drug users. To live in the drug subculture one has to lie at least reasonably often, so it becomes a habit and then you find sometimes drug users will lie when there is no reason for them to. They simply do it because it is a habit.

Game number 7. Wooden leg.

This game is about passivity.

The child says, "I can't do it because I'm sick/tired" when it is not actually sick or tired. So the child takes on a passive/dependent position and that immediately puts pressure onto the other person to take the active position and do something for the child. So it is an attempt by the child to establish a symbiosis.

A specific type of Wooden Leg is the game of "School Tummy". Child gets upset stomach on a school day around 7.00am and it gets better at 3.30pm. These days it is sometimes referred to as a stomach migraine.

Why would a child do this?

- * It is lazy or just wants an easy time for a while.
- * It is attention seeking or the child wants to feel special for a while. If it can scam mother and get to stay home from school, and all his siblings go off to school then he has special one to one time with mother. Parents usually respond to a sick child (it is sort of even genetically programmed in humans. So some children learn that to get attention (strokes) one gets sick. This often happens in the families of doctors, because they are usually busy people but will give a child attention when sick because it has meaning to them and they sort of know how to relate to sick

people/children.

* If you get repetitive school refusal such as through the game of Wooden Leg (School Tummy) then there may be some sort of separation anxiety occurring. This is described by White(1986). He states that children with separation anxiety "...show an excessive level of anxiety about being separated from those whom the child is bonded. The anxiety can be shown in relation to many different things. For example the child may be overly anxious about travelling by itself away from home. The child may refuse to go on a school camp or sleep over at a friend's house. When the child is expecting a separation such as a parent going on a trip the child may develop a whole array of physical complaints. Vomiting headaches, nausea and stomach-ache are common.

Other children with this disorder have sleeping problems. They may find it difficult to go to sleep and will demand that someone stay with them until they fall asleep. The desire to sleep in the parents' bed may also be apparent, and dreams of separation may occur.

The other common symptom of this condition is the child's fear of some accident or illness happening to the attachment figure. Depending on the child's age, the exact nature of the imagined mishap can vary from a well thought out identifiable potential danger, to a much less specific and undefined danger.

Of course the anxiety or fears which the child experiences must be excessive. Every child is somewhat anxious about going to school camp. It is when these fears become excessive or last for an extended period of time, that some problem is indicated."(P48)

Game number 8. Happy to help

This game is about survival

The good child. This child does what it is told, follows the rules, can be overly helpful, can be quite shy, is reluctant to express what it wants or needs, will put others before itself. If they are not so much the shy one they can become high achievers if they have natural talent in some area. They learn that to be good you do well at school, or in sport or in civic work and so they achieve in that way, by doing 'stuff', rather than hiding away.

Why would such a youngster exhibit excessive Conforming Child ego state and give up their Rebellious Child and Free Child ego states?

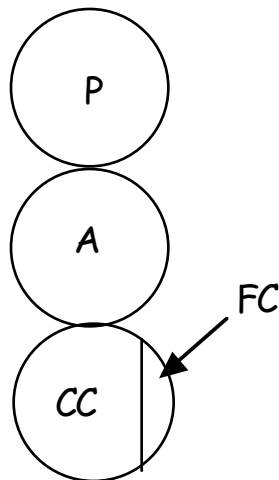


Diagram 8
Ego state structure
of the good child

There can be a number of reasons for this

* There can just be an excessive pressure for the child to conform by the parents who may be quite conforming themselves. "What will the neighbours think" is often the motto of such a family. The parents are reluctant to be non-conforming themselves and perhaps are merely parenting the way they were parented.

The pressure can also be applied because the parents use the child as a status symbol. Often this is the eldest child in the family or the one the parents believe have some natural talents. I recall one instance of an individual who was relentlessly pressured by mother to go to university and become a doctor. When ever there was a family get together it was repeatedly announced particularly by mother that he was a doctor. She was using her sons achievement to compete or gain credence in the wider family. You see people like this in counselling room in their 30s or 40s and they say things like, "I never wanted to be an economist, I just wanted to be an opera singer".

* This can be the oldest child in the family and the parents use that child as a live in baby-sitter for the younger siblings which frees up the parents. If the eldest child accepts this role this very much fosters the child to put its needs behind those of its younger siblings. Alternatively it can be a child who has a sibling who is disabled, or sick, or has extra needs of some sort. The parents simply do not have the time and energy to deal with the non-sick youngster so they force it to be good so it requires less attention. In large families as well you can get the 'forgotten child'. In today's culture any family that has over three children is quite possibly emotionally damaging to the children for the reason just cited.

People who are this type of good child often will tend towards the helping professions in adulthood. They can quite easily become transactional analysts because in such a role you focus on the needs and wants of others and do not discuss your own such wants. Your needs are secondary at least while you are working.

* Sometimes it is the only position left in the family. As a new child enters the family and grows into it he has to find where he fits. The parents have the Parent and Adult ego states covered and a sibling may have the outspoken, demanding position taken so the 'happy to help' good child position is the only one left. If the child's natural temperament is of that kind than it can very easily fall into the good child position in the family.

* The good child can be anxiety driven. If a child develops significant anxiety for some reason (abuse, abandonment, threats, etc), it can make the early decision, "To make myself safe I need to sit quietly and watch what is happening" or, "I must not rock the boat or bad things happen".

* The good child can be the result of a very low self image or low self esteem. This is not so much an anxious position but a despairing or given up position. This child can feel - "What's the point" or "Why bother asking for anything as I will never get it". If there is some anger in the child then this is often self directed and can include significant feelings of self loathing or self hatred.

The 'Happy to help' game in essence involves a contraction of the Free Child(FC) ego state. As mentioned before such game players often present for counselling in their 30s or 40s and ask the question, "Who am I?" in some form. Without good access to the Free Child you cannot answer that question. If you are high Conforming Child (CC) the answer to that question is - "I am who you want me to be". If the person is high Rebellious Child (RC) then they answer - "I am the opposite of who you want me to be". Both the RC and CC are adaptations to the parents. If they are left to do what they want then they are lost, they do not have a sense of who they are and thus will not have a direction in life and will never find their true passion in life. The person with good access to their FC will be able to answer the question, "Who am I?". They can answer that with the practicalities of life, but they will also have a sense of who they are. They will feel it inside. The RC and CC do not feel it.

TREATMENT PLAN

So the games have been played. What is an approach to the children who play these games. When the parents or guardians bring a child to see me I keep four different avenues of treatment in my mind. Often there is more than one solution required.

1. Simple solution. Is there a simple solution. For instance is the child playing Liar, liar pants on fire, as a cry for help because he is getting bullied at school? Are the

children playing Sibling uproar because they are bored.

2. Intrapsychic solution. This looks at the psychology inside the child himself (ie intrapsychic). For instance the script decisions that the child has made about self, life and others. The child plays the game of Stupid because he has decided I'm not OK, You're OK. I cannot deal with life so I need to look after me. If this is the cause then one works with the child's intrapsychic (internal) conflicts such as between their own Child and Critical Parent ego states.

3. Goodness of fit solution. How well does the child 'fit' with the primary caretaker(s). Does the personality of the mother naturally fit with the personality of the child or is there a clash of personalities.

4. Family dynamics solution. A child is being disruptive because he is the psychological face of the family. There is some emotional pain or conflict within the family unit that is being kept quiet or from public view. The child's disruptive behaviour is the public reflection of that silent pain in the family.

CONCLUSION

Human communication is ostensibly such an easy task. A child feels a need for recognition or love, so he asks the parent, and the parent gives it. There is nothing too hard about all that. However just as spam has now infiltrated email communication and made it more difficult, or less simple, human communication also gets full of 'spam'. Unwanted and unnecessary information or action gets in the way of the simple task. Hence children learn to ask for and get their needs met in round about ways which is what games are. that is getting your emotional needs met but having to wade through endless rivers of spam to achieve that.

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