

2. Beyond the Blame Barrier

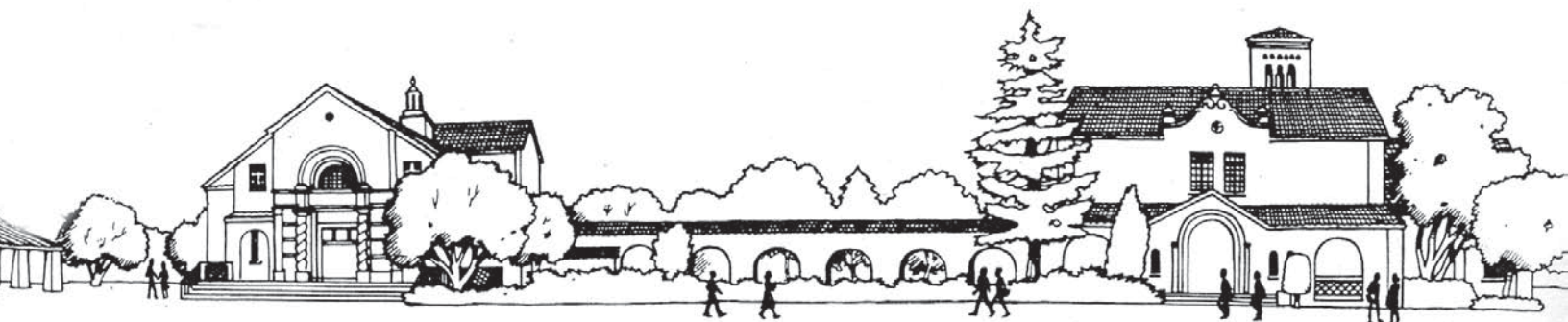
Blame can take many forms, such as: “It’s your fault!” or “Why didn’t you do this?” Blame can be a one-way projection, or a back-and-forth argument, or a form of personal guilt.

There are two things all types of blame have in common:

- Blame blocks effective communication.
- Blame sends an unspoken message: “I have no power and no responsibility to help change the situation. I am a helpless victim of what is happening.”

Here are four ways that some families have found helpful in moving past the blame barrier:

- Take a “time out.” Stay cool.** Anger is a natural defensive reaction, but it will not help build positive communication. To get more information about anger, check out “Being an Anger-Tamer.”
- Conditionally accept part or all of the responsibility** for a situation: “Maybe it is my fault, but let’s talk about what we can do about it.” Or: “OK, so what can we do to avoid this next time?” Be flexible and understanding — perhaps the other person feels at fault, too.
- Try to **think of a creative response**, such as: “What if we tried something like...?” Try to analyze the situation as objectively as possible. Step aside and think about how you might advise another person to respond.
- Suggest a sharing or division of responsibility.** “Maybe from now on, I take care of this and you take care of that.”



LifeSkills Program

Leave the 'Blame Game' on the Shelf

Nothing stops a good (or even a bad) conversation like a dose of blame: "Why do you ALWAYS do that?" is a double whammy — containing both the accusatory "Why?" and the exaggerated and unfair "always." Yet the "Blame Game" rivals the latest electronic video game as an American pursuit.

Family counselors report that new clients will nearly always start the sessions by recounting all the things that others in the family have done. "I tell them this is family therapy, not a history class," Clinical Psychologist John Marquis of Palo Alto says.

"There is no way anyone can change past behavior. They can only change their behavior in the future."

Dr. Marquis has borrowed a term from the law courts: **stipulation** — when both parties agree to a set of facts or conditions. "I have them make a **stipulation** that both have done terrible things — but those things belong in the history department!"

One real problem with blame is it dredges up past injustices, and rekindles the original anger. Then the old anger gets in the way of addressing the important issues involved in the current situation.

Another crippling consequence of blame is that the person doing the active blaming (with words or actions) is putting himself or herself in the role of helpless victim.

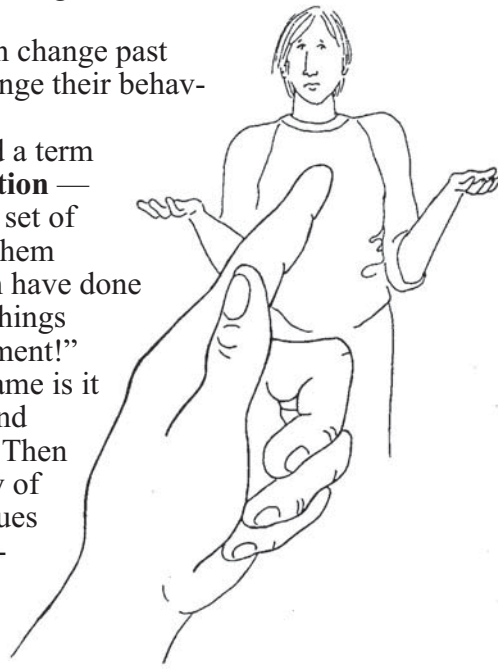
This "victim scenario" leaves a person feeling weak and unable to influence the other individual(s) or the overall situation. That feeling leads directly to a sense of vulnerability — as if everything is happening TO you and you have no power to make anything happen.

Young children feel this when they spill something, like dropping an egg on the floor, or breaking a dish or a vase — as if things just happened to them that they had no control over, and thus they would not be held accountable.

What's the first defense? "The cat did it!" (If life were a chess game, the "Blame Defense" would be a popular strategy.)

Blame brings communication to a halt. **And it means you don't have to face any fresh choices (or risks) in your relationships:** The rules are already rigidly set.

It also means you don't assume any responsibility, and you can remain a victim.



—Kate Lemmon

Time to Get Your iPod Fixed?

One reason blaming others is such a popular form of family entertainment is that the habit is often treated as a family heirloom — downloaded from generation to generation.

Parental messages keep playing in our heads and reinforce feelings, in a process that has been called "tapes." Just as with a Walkman or MP3 player, we carry them with us and they play ONLY to us (until we replay them to someone else, such as OUR kids).

This particularly negative form of inter-generational "self-talk" impacts how we relate to ourselves and others. (See "1. Being an Anger Tamer" publication.) Sometimes we are able to identify and verbalize the taped messages; sometimes they play softly (but deeply) and we are not consciously aware of them.

Tapes can include everything from harmless homilies ("Don't cry over spilt milk" — a good anti-blame motto) to positive messages ("You're a good kid; I love you") and destructive, name-calling insults ("You're stupid, lazy and incompetent").

In extreme cases, tapes become quite loud: One woman, aged 65, reported hearing a distinct voice forbidding her to have a piece of candy at an office birthday party — very upsetting! Only later during a therapy session did she realize it was her mother's voice.

These sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant messages often find new ways of playing themselves.

When you think you've got a negative one singled out and modified or erased, you may later discover it playing in a different way.

A fascinating topic for family conversation can be discussing these "tape messages," according to families that have tried it. Write them down. Young persons are almost always interested in childhood experiences of their parents, and parents are invariably intrigued by what is going on in their children's heads.

Sharing tape collections can be a positive, not-so-threatening way of looking at what's behind some of your family interactions.

Life Doesn't Have to Be a Series of 'Grudge Matches'

"But what if it really IS his (or her) fault?"

Well, so what? Does it help to insist on pointing that out or rubbing it in?

Even if 100% blame could be assigned, and you did contribute little or nothing to the overall situation, experience shows that the more time spent on assigning blame the less time (and inclination) there is to work on constructive things you can change.

But what happens when you really are angry or hurt about something another person did, or another person's pattern of behavior?

Things sometimes seem to just build up, and the background of resentments can evolve into a grudge

— a kind of extenuated, continuing blame.

We know that acting nicer toward others will help the relationship — but what if we don't FEEL

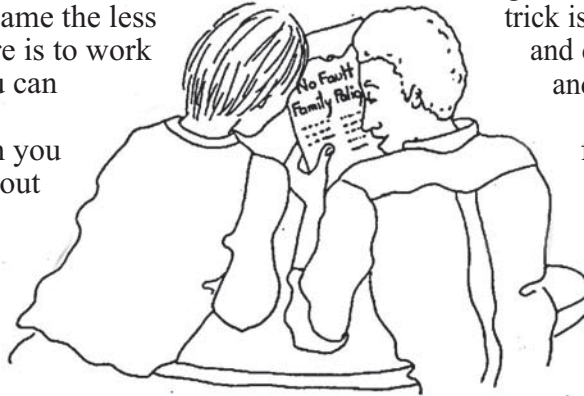
like being nice? **A grudge can eat at you, make you feel bad about yourself, about others, or the world in general.**

"We need time to get over a grudge after someone has wronged us seriously," says psychotherapist JoAnn Magdoff of Long Island University.* "The trick is to distinguish between appropriate and disproportionate amounts of anger and anguish.

"If a grudge persists, makes you feel unlovable, stops you from acting positively, causes you to behave in self-destructive ways, examine how you may be helping to keep the grudge alive.

"The key thing to know about a grudge is that you're HOLDING ON to something."

If you can realize what you are doing to perpetuate the feelings, you can assume responsibility for them and begin to let go — making way for new patterns for the future.



'Scapegoating' Isn't Kid Stuff

When the oldest daughter reached 13, everything seemed to go wrong. Her grades dropped; tension built up in the family. She felt her parents were "doing these things to me." Her parents felt she was doing these things to them.

Years later they realized that they had been caught in a "scapegoating" trap — in which all problems of the family are focused on one member, who accepts and plays out that negative role. **The real problems end up unresolved.**

There are many varieties:

- Sometimes a parent gets nailed — a father too busy to spend time with the family; a mother who is wrapped up in her own concerns.

- Sometimes two children will scapegoat a third — assigning him or her the "troublemaker" role.

- Sometimes parents experiencing relationship tension will assign it to a "troublesome" child — whose behavior may in fact be reflecting their tension.

- Sometimes a child just gets into personal trouble, and is then assigned all the bad things in the family.

Tragically, the scapegoat often internalizes the assigned blame — which can manifest itself as guilt, anxiety, a sense of worthlessness and inadequacy, self-hate and personally and socially destructive ways of behaving.

Scapegoating also creates an environment in which no one seems able to do anything about it — a "learned helplessness." Just as with one-on-one blame, families need to move past collective blaming if they are to address real issues constructively.

They need to start by just being nicer to each other, making positive requests for change, sharing responsibility and concentrating on doing the good things families can do — not by dwelling on who's at fault for what, or who's playing blame games.

Feel Cornered?

If you feel cornered in a no-win "blame/guilt" trap, get confidential (even anonymous) help and advice:

* **Teenline 327-TEEN**

* **Parental Stress Hotline 327-3333**

Using LifeSkills

The information in this publication can make a real difference in your life — but only if you read it and share it. Here are two ideas about how you can make most effective use of the concepts.

1. **Pass it on** — Share it with friends and family members. (It probably works best if you don't force it on anyone — just leave it around or make a comment without being "holier than thou.")

2. **Leave it around** — Once you've read it, just lay it around the house. Others will check it out, maybe without your even knowing about it. **Leave it on the kitchen or dining-room table, or a coffee table, in the bathroom or pinned to a bulletin board.**

The Guilt Trap

Guilt is a form of internalized blame that can paralyze personal relationships just as effectively as external blame. **When you are blaming yourself, you are indulging in a heavy dose of negative "self-talk" (inner messages) and making it harder to see new ways to resolve a difficult situation.**

Turning Criticisms Inside Out

Blame is a form of criticism — a particularly destructive form. Some types of criticism can be constructive and useful, and lead to positive, specific changes in behavior.

How you receive criticisms makes a tremendous difference in your ability to respond without getting angry or defensive.

It really helps to be able to “turn criticisms inside out,” as follows:

- ■ Stay calm — don’t get defensive. When you are being criticized, think, **“I can handle this with a few simple steps.”**
 1. If it is a “non-verbal” criticism (a dirty look, a tone of voice, a sigh) **get the person to verbalize it** with something like: “I get the feeling you didn’t like something I just said,” or, “Is there something you’d like to say about what I did?”
Be straight in your comments and reactions — don’t load them up with unspoken messages of your own.
 2. If the criticism is general (“You have a lousy attitude.”) **get the person to make it specific** (“Please give an example....”).
 3. Move from the criticism to the future: **“How could I do this better in the future?”** or, “What could I do to make you feel my attitude has improved?” **Ask for specific-action requests.**

Family

LifeSkills

is a program to strengthen and enrich how family members interact — with the purpose of making each person and the family as a whole as psychologically strong as possible.

It was developed originally by **Palo Alto High School** and the **Palo Alto Medical Foundation** for Health Care, Research and Education, and expanded to Gunn High School.

It is now being co-sponsored by the **Palo Alto Weekly**, **Palo Alto Unified School District** and other community organizations, with major support from the **California Family Foundation**.

Beyond the Blame Barrier is the second publication in a program designed to help students and family members interact more positively and develop stronger abilities to negotiate and communicate. Other publications and newsletters will be mailed during the school year.

—LifeSkills Planning Committee



Family

LifeSkills Program

25 Churchill Ave., Palo Alto, CA 94301

For information: (650) 329-3717

For help or Advice: (650) 327-TEEN; 327-3333

2. Beyond the Blame Barrier: How to Pass Up the Past