

# 7. Being a Skilled Negotiator

Without exception, **family negotiations are the hardest in the world**, including arms-control talks and labor negotiations.

That is because in family negotiations (1) everyone involved has little or no training in mediation or negotiation, (2) the issues “on the table” are wrapped up in personal importance and are usually emotionally loaded, and (3) you don’t have attorneys and experts whispering advice in your ear.

And the rules are different — some of the more hard-line methods can’t be used if you are to achieve positive outcomes.

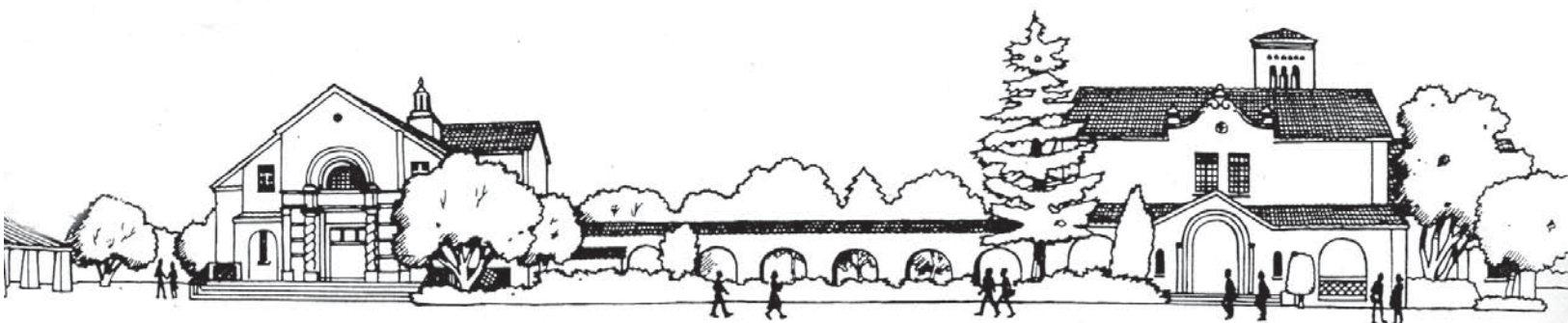
Following are four steps that can help you develop a key element in strong relationships — being a skilled negotiator:

**Be clear on what you want as an outcome, but be flexible — you might create an even better one.** “Negotiation” means a give and take. Lay out your specific interest clearly, briefly and positively, then listen completely and politely to the response. Be willing to consider a counter-proposal on its merits.

**Put things positively.** Talk specifically about what you want, not about the other person’s behavior or presumed intent. **Make sure your interests are understood.** Saying there is something you’d like to discuss changing is far more productive than just saying you don’t like something.

In preparing to negotiate, **consider the other person’s interests and proposals.** This is something to which all professional negotiators pay close attention. It provides you with a perspective and understanding that may affect how you approach the other person.

Remind yourself in advance that you are negotiating with people whom you care about and who care for you. **You should be seeking “win-win” outcomes.**



# Family LifeSkills Program

## Negotiating YOUR Way to the Win-Winner's Circle\*

**Negotiation is a blend of many skills.** You call into play just about everything you know about communicating clearly, controlling anger, averting blame, and being in charge of yourself in a way that influences the outcome — which affects you directly.

Trying to negotiate something without some grasp of these skills is usually ineffective, and sometimes makes everything worse. (If you set up a negotiation, it will be embarrassing if you blow up and stalk out in the middle of it. Before trying a negotiation, **it would be a good idea to go back over earlier LifeSkills publications.**)

Be positive. If you are unhappy or critical about something, see if you can rephrase that in a positive sense without losing the point. But be clear and specific about what positive thing you would like to happen.

**Use the “two-winner model” of negotiations, also called the “win-win” goal. Keep in mind, these are people you care for and live with. Good negotiations are when both parties feel they have been listened to, taken seriously and respected—and that some of their needs have been met.**

A **good book** on the subject is *Getting to Yes* by Roger Fisher, a Penguin paperback (available locally).

There are several concepts and techniques that lead directly to successful negotiations, or to frequent failure if one or more of them is absent. These are among the approaches used by professional negotiators as they tackle subjects as diverse as labor talks, arms control, hostage situations, political law-making and business deals.

**Negotiation is truly the primary alternative to war—both internationally and, on a small but important scale, within the home.**

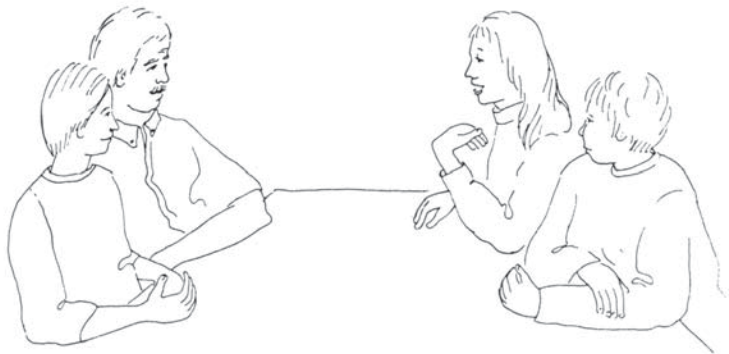
Here are some of the basics of family negotiations:

Think precisely about the **purpose** of opening discussions on a subject. Jot down where you are and where you would like to be, and why. Ask yourself if that is a reasonable expectation, or if it would appear reasonable if you were on the other side of the table. If you are clear and specific in your own mind, the discussions will reflect that.

Request a specific time to meet and discuss one or two issues that will improve your relationships. **Don't**

**try to bite off everything at once.** Let the other person or persons know you need some open time when they won't be rushed or distracted by other commitments.

In family negotiations, it is **vitaly important to be straight and open—to “lay your cards on the table”** at the beginning. **Stress early the importance of negotiation versus a control game — the idea of an exchange of values and ideas, reciprocity, give-and-take.**



Consider the other person's point of view and be responsive to that — both in advance of and during the discussions. How would you feel if you were that person? **Listen to other views with an open mind — don't try to hog the conversation.** Hearing everyone out considerately is a sign of a skillful negotiator.

**Think about what might be keeping the other person stuck on one point.** Is it simply non-negotiable (which calls for some reevaluation on your part) or is it based on past experience? If it is past experience, can you propose a compromise? Or just ask what would enable them to move: What is the specific concern?

**AVOID EITHER/OR CHOICES** in the negotiations. These result often in dead-end ultimatums or go-nowhere dilemmas. **Try brainstorming a list of ideas.** “What could we do about this? Let's just list the possibilities.” Then select the most promising possibilities and negotiate on those. **More alternatives mean more room for negotiation and a higher chance of successful outcomes for everyone.**

\* Thanks to John Wax, MSW, Chief of Social Work at the Palo Alto VA Hospital and a lecturer on negotiation, for many of the above ideas.

## ‘Contracting for Change’ in Families

A contract is an age-old form of commitment between two or more parties. It can be elaborate and legalistic or a simple letter of agreement.

A contract can be a few words on a signed piece of paper, or a verbal agreement sealed with a handshake.

In families, simple contracts have become popular — even though at first that seems a cumbersome and awkward way of reaching a family agreement.

**They have become popular simply because they work so well in helping family members alter how they relate to each other.** Another way of looking at contracts is as mutually agreed-upon rules of conduct.

**We all have unspoken expectations of each other,** and sometimes they are not completely clear or consistent — which leads to misunderstandings and arguments.

When the expectations are discussed openly, made clear and written down, then everyone becomes much more secure and comfortable, and the overall relationship prospers.

**Anyone can bring up the idea.** Just say you’d like to discuss ways to improve your relationship when it’s convenient for the other person.

A few contracting tips:

- **Make the items clear and put them positively.** For example, asking to be treated respectfully is specific yet avoids the direct criticism of asking someone to “stop being rude” — but even that’s better than nothing.

- **In general, avoid making contract items contingent on something: the “If...then...” trap.** Simply request more of the behaviors you would like. (In parent-child contracts, **spell out the consequences** of breaking the agreement.)

- Make a commitment to keep up your end of the bargain regardless of what the other person does. (Expect that he or she will “come around.”)

- Sign the contract and display it openly, both as a reminder and as a sign of successful negotiations.

**Review and revise contracts every few months or as needed.**

## A Contract That Really Worked

A brother and sister at play decided they could improve the way they got along, so they entered into a mutual, written contract.

“Andrew” and “Jessica” first discussed (negotiated) things they would like changed in each other’s behavior, then — because there were several points on each side — actually typed them up. Each signed and dated a copy, and gave a copy to a third party, their mother.

Each posted a copy in their room, so they would see it and be reminded of the commitments they made. This is the “contract”:

**“Jessica” requests that:**

- *Andrew is not to criticize my friends*

- *Andrew is not to make jokes, etc., about my clothes.*

- *Andrew is not to make any more mean comments to me.*

- *Andrew is not to be so judgmental.*

**“Andrew” requests that:**

- *Jessica not storm into his room uninvited.*

- *Jessica make no more “blunt” criticisms.*

- *Jessica not laugh rudely at jokes made about Andrew.*

- *Jessica not betray trust or confidences he has shared with her.*

- *Jessica respect his privacy.*

The contract was in effect for more than two years. **Yet after an initial adjustment period it was hardly needed**— once more positive behavior patterns were in place they quickly became natural.

A contract does not eliminate all problems, arguments or differences. But it does help weed out some habitually irritating things that get in the way of bigger issues.

The only improvement in the contract might have been a rephrasing of the “this bugs me” messages into specific positive actions — but the point of it still got across.

## For help and advice

**Teeline: 327-TEEN**  
**Parental Stress Hotline: 327-3333**



## Being Selective

No one wants to spend all their time negotiating, writing contracts, even shaking hands on things.

Besides, overuse might blunt the effectiveness. **These are once-in-awhile techniques.**

Selectivity is called for. Choose the **most important** issues, and go for those, without trying to sign off on everything under the sun.

## Using LifeSkills

LifeSkills information 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 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 'Shallow Breathing' Secret of Relaxing

We hear a lot about programs for “relaxation training,” “stress management,” and various techniques for controlling moods.

**These can be particularly helpful, or essential, during family negotiations.**

There are highly effective methods of relaxing and calming down — of self-control — that are simple, easy and completely free.

Two such ideas are as follows:



Always negotiate important matters (a) **after a meal** (there are seven times as many family fights before dinner as after) and (b) **when you are relaxed**.

Most relaxation methods encourage you to “breathe deeply.”

**BUT ...** when people breathe deeply or rapidly they decrease the carbon dioxide in the bloodstream, which changes the chemistry of the blood and causes a decrease in blood flow to the brain. This causes a lightheadedness and mild confusion — not conducive to creative, successful negotiations.

Instead, **breathe slowly** (at most three breaths every 15 seconds) **and take shallow breaths**. This increases the carbon dioxide in your blood, which induces a calmness and clarity of thought — just what negotiations need!

*Family*

### LifeSkills

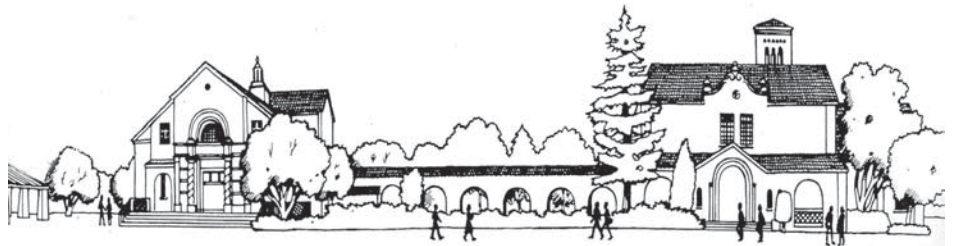
is a program to strengthen and enrich how family members interact — with the purpose of making each person and the family as a whole as psychologically strong as possible.

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**.

**Being a Skilled Negotiator** is the seventh publication in a program designed to help students and family members interact more positively and develop stronger abilities to negotiate and communicate. Copies of other publications are online at [www.PAMF.org](http://www.PAMF.org).

—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

## 7. Being a Skilled Negotiator: Getting Past the Present