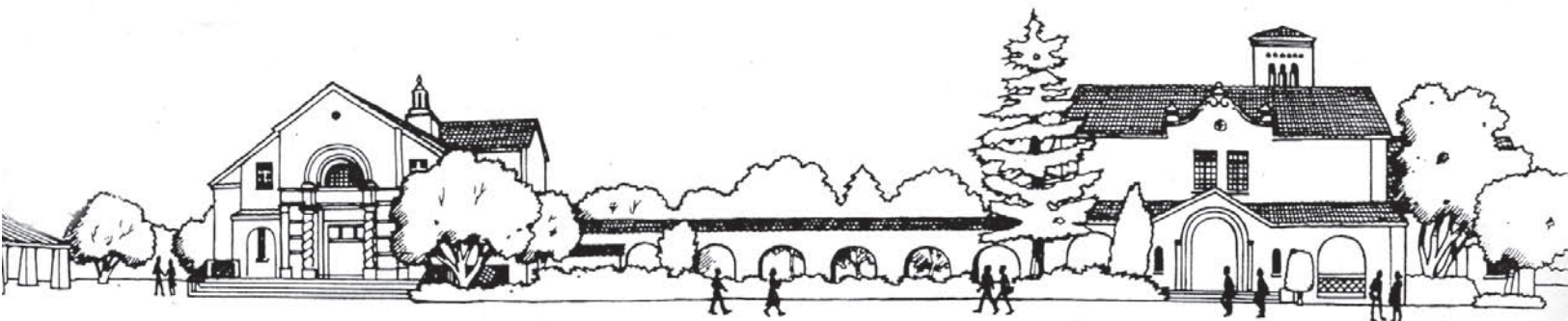


8. Family Problem Solving

A “problem” is defined as “something that lacks an easy solution.” *Solution* is part of the definition. The first step in approaching a troublesome family problem is to think that **the solution is in there somewhere** — **all you have to do is find it**. This approach differs sharply in its outcomes from the approach of those who feel that a problem is something you have to tolerate, as if it will always be with you unless it just happens to go away.

Many “problems” arise out of how decisions are made within a family (or any group of people living or working together). A basic grasp of decision-making and problem-solving skills will prevent many problems from arising and will help resolve many others. Some initial steps and concepts include:

- Write out two or three things that need to be decided that might help resolve problems for you or your family. Ask yourself if those are the most important ones. Pick THE most important one. (You have just taken a basic step: setting a decision-making priority.)
- Remember that decision-making has several levels: It involves the “**power balance**” in your family; it involves logical and creative thinking; it involves change (sometimes scary); and it involves your overall relationships.
- Using the “negotiation” approach, ask a family member involved in your “top priority” if he or she would sit down with you and discuss how to tackle the decision or address the matter in a new way.
- Explore alternatives together. Write them down as you go — that will help clarify the decision(s) to be made. **Be straight, not manipulative; listen carefully; stay on the issue; be cool and patient; don’t promise more than you can deliver.** You may not get all you want — this time around. Good negotiations involve give and take.



LifeSkills Program

A Good Decision Means One Less Problem

Many “problems” arise out of how decisions are made within a family — or any group of people living or working together.

Making decisions within a family can be complicated. Family decisions usually have emotional backdrops (such as old anger or blame), ways people interact, confusion between “relationship” versus decision-making, and perceptions and assumptions about other family members.

Making decisions is intimately tied to solving (or creating) problems. A good decision means one less problem, but a bad one — or a series of poorly made ones — can create serious problems and weaken the overall relationship.

Knowing some **techniques that work** before tackling tough decisions really increases your family’s odds. The first thing to understand is that decisions involve power, authority and influence.

Every interaction is related to power: power does not exist without relationships; relationships do not exist without relative power. Some families (or groups) have the benefit of having learned ways of making decisions in a more cooperative, open fashion, with few competitive, defensive patterns other families have developed — but which they could change if they worked at it.

Some things social scientists have learned are:

- Conflict develops when both persons or sides seek the most personal gain and there are no rules for reaching decisions about either big or little matters in their lives. **Every family needs rules**

about sharing resources, from storage space to money. They also need ground rules for allocating decision-making authority and how to go about making decisions.

• Perception is a major factor in both decision-making and general interactions. A “belief” is powerful because you base your actions on it. If you believe family members don’t really love you, or will betray you, then all of your actions toward them follow from that.

“**Words have power**” because they influence belief and *belief dictates action*. When one member of the family is particularly forceful, other members may be cowed into accepting decisions they don’t really like. In making family decisions, as with negotiations leading to them, the goal should be a decision everyone can live with — even though parents are ultimately responsible.

The person on the short-end of a lose-win situation tends to undermine the agreement, directly or indirectly, through forms of “passive aggression” or other means. This means one-sided decisions can be worse than no decision at all — they don’t really solve the problem and weaken the commitment to the overall relationship.

Many decision-making traps can be avoided by drawing upon basic skills of listening, consulting, clarifying, avoiding anger/blame, and collaborating. The expression of mutual agreement prior to enacting the decision is an important element of the process.

The ‘Powergram’ Sorts Out Who Decides What

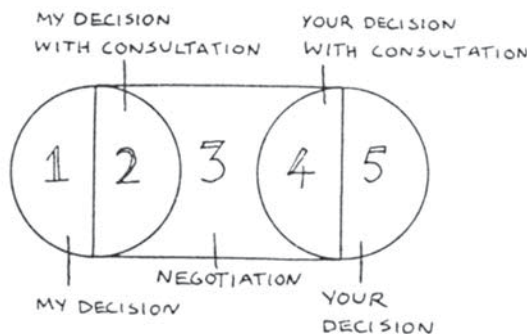
No one can make every decision for someone else — and if they try, the relationship usually suffers.

Dividing up authority between family members can help families break out of “decision traps” by clarifying who’s in charge of what. Richard Stuart, D.S.W., developed a tool to help do this: the “Powergram.” The Powergram creates five spaces representing areas of decision.

The first space represents the area in which one party can make the total decision (with rare veto power); the fifth space represents the same for the other person. Spaces 2 and 4 are the where each person “usually”

makes the decision, and the center is where joint decisions are made.

To use the Powergram, have each party mark in each space who they THINK makes what decisions, work-



ing from a series of common family questions: Watching TV, buying a car, taking a trip, going to movies, changing jobs.

Next, mark it the way you would *like* the decisions to be made.

Then try trading areas of authority. “How about you making these, and I those? Divvy up the decisions — make the center (joint-decision) section a small as possible to avoid argument and make it clear who is responsible.

Realities of Family Problem Solving

“In ordinary affairs we usually muddle ahead, doing what is habitual and customary, being slightly puzzled when it sometimes fails to give the intended outcome, but not stopping to worry much about the failures because there are too many other things still to do.”

This classic observation by a sociologist still holds true — in families, at work and in school. We seldom take time to slow down and analyze why something didn't work, particularly in human relationships. If we did take such a look, we might discover obvious reasons why something fell apart — and that we could prevent that.

Some basics of problem-solving:
Communications: Words mean — and imply — different things to different persons. Good communication increases understanding.

- **Assumptions:** Beware of assuming the other person already knows what you feel or think. Seek a free exchange of ideas, including ideas from outside the “closed system” of the family.

- **Power and authority:** A well-defined family power structure aids problem-solving — allowing for both full discussion and consideration, a sense of equitable outcomes for all.

- **Openness:** Families do well if they are open to conflicting ideas (as opposed to open conflict). Many families fear the threat of disagreement instead of the opportunity it provides for growth and learning for all parties.

- **Outcomes:** Seek the best possible approach instead of any one person's proposal. The best outcome often involves collaboration.

- **Trust:** Without a balance of trust, people suspect each other's motives and arguments. Trust is the basis of good-faith bargaining.

- **Setting criteria:** Agree to aim for the “mutually satisfactory” instead of the “perfect” outcome.

Redirect personal attacks to the issue at hand. Don't let statements deflect the discussion from the important topics to be decided.

Hazards and Quicksand Traps

There are common hazards that can swamp your attempts at family problem-solving. Getting agreement on this basic starting point is often hard because everyone first must agree that (1) something's wrong, and (2) a group effort can lead to a solution.

When a problem is identified, there is a tendency to rush to find a solution right away rather than to take time to define clearly the problem and outline possible solutions.

- Families tend to tackle problems at the end of the day, when people are tired, hungry and irritable.

- People tend to “piggy-back” unrelated issues on the problem at hand — and wind up with a pile of mixed agendas, mixed messages and mixed results.

- The task at hand often becomes tangled up with the overall

relationship.

Groups of strangers tackle a problem in three steps: (1) orientation, where they learn about each other and explore the problem; (2) evaluation, during which they develop ideas and alternatives; and (3) a phase in which they seek to influence each other.

But families tend to skip the first two steps — members think they know where the others stand. (They usually don't.)

Decision-making tends to be strongly “power oriented” instead of focused on the desired outcome. So much energy is focused on the relationship little is left for the problem.

Families with a persistent inability to discuss issues calmly or who are stuck in some of the above traps could benefit from a neutral “coach” who could provide guidance.

For help and advice:

Teenline: 327-TEEN
Parental Stress Hotline: 327-3333



Redirection

The best response to personal attacks is called “redirection.”

If you are the target, stay calm and just redirect the discussion back to the issue.

Resist the natural inclination to argue back or “straighten out” the other person.

Use positive comments: “Let's concentrate on the facts,” instead of “Why won't you stick to the issues?”

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.

Looking Back — and Forward — with Family LifeSkills

Some years ago a few people from the Palo Alto High School and the Palo Alto Medical Foundation met to discuss what can be done about perceived problems with teenage (and adult) stress and depression.

The Family LifeSkills program is the result — an attempt to respond positively with substantive information and ideas to common difficulties in families. Please tell us what you think about it.



The eight Family LifeSkills mailings covered important basics communicating with others — essential skills in family, school, friendships and work relationships. The publications were:

1. Being an Anger Tamer
2. Beyond the Blame Barrier
3. The Power of Showing You Care
4. Six Communicating Tricks
5. Taking Care of Business
6. Taking Care of Yourself
7. Being a Skilled Negotiator
8. Family Problem-Solving



PDF versions of these brochures are available at www.pamf.org, and print copies are available at the Palo Alto Family YMCA, 650-856-9622.

Scores of persons — from professional counselors to teachers, parents, physicians, volunteers and students worked on the program. **Was it worth it to you? Please write or e-mail: beacomb@pamf.org or write to: Family LifeSkills, Palo Alto Medical Foundation, 795 El Camino Real, Palo Alto, CA 94301.**

Family LifeSkills

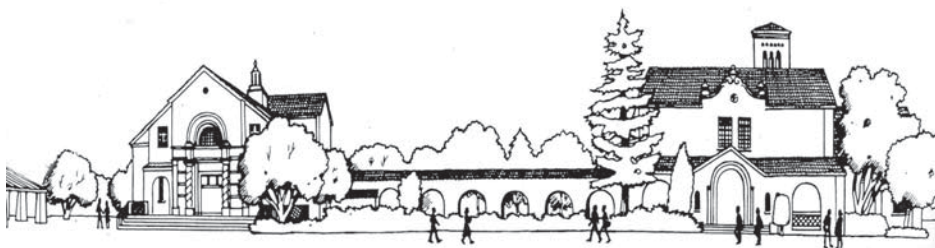
is a program to strengthen and enrich how family members interact — with the purpose of making each person and the family as a whole as psychologically strong as possible.

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**.

Family Problem Solving is the eighth and final publication in a program designed to help students and family members interact more positively and develop stronger abilities to negotiate and communicate. Check out **LifeSkills Online** at 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

8. Family Problem Solving: Getting to Good Decisions