

## **The No-Blame Solution**

### **By Bonnie Harris**

Blaming something or someone else when we are angry, criticized, or thwarted in any way is as common among humans as laughing or crying. We naturally and automatically defend ourselves when we feel attacked, but each one's perception of what amounts to an attack is up to individual interpretation. Unfortunately many parents feel under attack from even their smallest child. So we blame.

Blaming another for what is my problem, my responsibility, is clearly learned. To take responsibility for ourselves—our own behavior and emotions—is hard. We want others to suffer when we suffer. It's called retaliation. We learn to retaliate when we are blamed—often at very young ages.

Whenever we feel blamed, we get defensive. So does your child. "What did you do now?" "Why are you always doing that?" "I can't leave you alone for a second!" "How dare you?" "How many times do I have to tell you...?" Just a tone of voice can send blame showering over a child filling him with tension and resistance. He has no option but to get defensive. "I didn't do it!"

We live under a fantasy that a child who is blamed and yelled at is going to learn to take responsibility for her actions, own up to everything, and never do it again for fear of displeasing us. That's not how it works. When more spirited children feel blamed, their focus turns inward with self-protection, and they defend themselves against the blame to keep from "getting in trouble". They act out and learn how to get sneaky and shirk responsibility.

Children with a more adaptable temperament take blame personally, plummet into guilt, learn that "everything" is their fault, and lose self-esteem. These children look like the good girls and boys because they are able to shift their behavior to keep out of trouble—but at the cost of self-worth and confidence. These children are the reason we keep using blame and punishment because it looks like it works. But once self-esteem drops, trouble starts.

Many of these children become parents. Those who are used to blame continue to blame. It's hard not to. Teaching children to be well disciplined, respectful, and responsible can be done far better without blame. Once you understand the principle of blame and how it plays out, you will never want to blame again.

Blame provokes defensive behavior. Running away, laughing, hitting, pushing, lying, yelling, "you're not the boss of me", "you can't make me", "you're so mean"—are all defensive actions to "get back" for getting blamed. Some children become overly concerned about how you feel. "Are you happy, Mommy?" means the child has learned to take responsibility for your feelings and likely feels guilty if you are upset. Your happiness means he can relax.

A mother of two young daughters has been trying to convince her girls that they are not responsible for her feelings. The six year old said, "But when you scream at me for not turning off the television, I know you wouldn't scream if I turned it off, so that means I'm responsible for your feelings." Pretty astute for a six year old!

When we blame in anger, we indeed teach our children that they are responsible for our feelings and our behavior. "*You make me so mad. Why do I have to yell 10 times before you listen?* Or *"It makes mommy happy when you do that."*

We don't pay attention to the messages we send our children with blame. "*You're the bad one, I don't approve of you, My love is conditional on your behavior, You don't have a right to your own feelings and desires, You have to make other people happy with your behavior.*"

When we refrain from blame, even when one child has hurt another badly, we can put our attention on the hurt and allow the hurter to take in the situation he has caused. When he is blamed, he cannot because all he can focus on is getting out of trouble or blaming the other for starting it. When he is not blamed he actually experiences the consequences of his behavior. You can then offer him ways to make amends. "Do you want to get the icepack to hold on your brother's arm?" Later you can talk about his anger and how to express it differently.

Problem solving and conflict resolution promotes true accountability. Blame and punishment prevents it. When children know they are not going to get in trouble, the fear of trouble no longer drives them to defensive behaviors.

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