

Whose Fault Is It?

By Sheila Rubin, LMFT, RDT, BCT

I come from a long line of blamers. When something was wrong, my mom said it was my dad's fault; my dad, of course, said it was my mom's fault. It had to be someone's fault. That was just the way things were in the world. Somehow all along the family tree there would be stories of who was to blame for what, stories that seemed to pass beyond the generations into the long distant past. Often there would be a cut-off, as in: We don't talk to them anymore. We just talk *about* them!

In watching all the blame, and sensing into the unexpressed pain under it, I determined not to be a blamer. I would do something different. But what else was there? I certainly didn't know—it had to be something that didn't hurt anyone. So in a clever moment as a young child I decided, instead of blaming someone, anyone, I would blame myself. Secretly, of course. If something was wrong, maybe it was my fault. It had to be someone's fault!

Now I work with families. And I notice that when people show up in my office and I ask what brought them there, often I hear the frustration, and often with the frustration is the blame.

Two young boys argue in the session about whose turn it is to start the game. I ask if this is what goes on at home. Everyone nods. I bring out the puppets for a little puppet play and ask every member of the family to choose a puppet that shows who they are in the family during the argument the boys had last night. I ask each puppet to tell me in words or movement what happened. And I ask, "Can you show me whose fault it is?" They boys both excitedly reach for a puppet to show me the scene of the recent argument at home over the toothpaste. The gentle rabbit puppet of the little brother who talks silently is not being listened to. Then he's being bitten by the older brother's shark puppet. So the little brother reaches for an even bigger shark puppet with bigger teeth to bite the brother's shark. I observe and name what is happening. I ask them to slow down and move in slow motion so I can do a play-by-play of the unfolding scene. I also name that in puppet play it's okay that we allow feelings and even aggression to come out in a safe way. With the puppet play we can play. To explore I ask, "Who's the boss?" And then we explore "Who has the power?" And finally I ask, "Whose fault is it?" All without anyone getting hurt. We can take out frustrations and hurt feelings through the puppet play. When things start to escalate I ask the boys to play in even slower motion.

The parent puppets watch from the couch. I ask the parents what they did when the argument turned into a fight yesterday. They say that they came in and told the boys to stop but the boys wouldn't stop fighting, so the parents threatened to give them consequences. I suggested we replay that by having the parents' puppets try to stop the argument. The wise panda and gentle giraffe come down to stop the fight: "You boys stop fighting!" As I expected, both boys say, "It's HIS fault!" "No, it's HIS fault." Playing with this dynamic instead of saying who is right

and who is wrong allows some of the feelings to come out. We play with the feelings and the frustrations through the puppet play.

In many families the familiar dynamic is to find someone to blame, someone to be the scapegoat, so they can be punished and peace can be restored. But underneath is the dynamic of blame. If there is blame then there is shame. And for someone who is the blamer that may feel good. To the one being blamed, maybe it hurts. Maybe it hurts a lot. The little rabbit holds his paws over his ears. I say, “Maybe his feelings are hurt when the shark puppet blames him for something he didn’t do. Maybe he feels everyone blaming him for something and maybe he doesn’t even know what it is.” The little brother holds tight to his feeling and rocks the little rabbit puppet in his lap. Maybe there is a way to express the little rabbit puppet’s feelings? Slowly in the puppet play we are able to talk about the feelings everyone had, even the silent rabbit. The family is full of excitement and ideas and everyone is listening to each other instead of blaming each other. The kids want to talk about punishments being “not fair” or too much. And someone suggests how to have a consequence that really means something so that everyone can feel like they are in the conversation about being a family together. The session ends with everyone having had a fun time playing with puppets and with a good plan for the next argument: Share feelings and use words or do some puppet play!

Drama Therapy with puppets allows feelings to emerge during the session. Now each family member has a voice—through their puppet—to play out power dynamics and, eventually, deeper feelings about their place in the family. And to be seen and heard and respected. By playing in a structured, playful way, by naming and then exaggerating the blaming through the puppets' expression and the feelings, shame (not wanting to be blamed or put down) can be talked about in a real way. We were able to connect and make a plan. Less blame and less shame. More fun for the kids. Better behavior for the parents!

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