

Such a strategy helps maintain the relationship because the decision is not influenced by who is most powerful or who holds out the longest in an argument.

### Skills in Blocking Blame

The effectiveness of family–school problem solving is influenced by the degree to which blocking blame techniques are used (Weiss & Edwards, 1992). A sample of typical blaming statements made by parents or by teachers is included in Figure 11.3. Try to read these examples as if they were directed toward you first as a teacher and then as a parent. What would you do, and how would you feel? How would you respond if these statements were directed at you?

**Figure 11.3** Examples of Parents' and Teachers' Blaming Statements

#### Parents' Statements of Blame

- You do not understand my child. My child has a unique learning style that requires attention that you are unwilling to provide.
- You wait until there is a problem to call me. Don't you think I can be helpful before the problem arises? I know my child better than you do, yet you never asked my opinion.
- You teachers act as if I know less than you do. I never know what goes on in my child's classroom. Don't you think I would understand?
- You are too hard on my child. You single him out to make him the example for the rest of the class.
- You treat me as if it is my fault that my daughter is failing. You expect me to teach my daughter at home. I work full time, and I don't have time to do my job and yours too.
- You treat us parents as if we are nuisances. I get the feeling that I am not an important part of my child's education.
- You never have time for my child. I think you give all the attention to the lower-level students; meanwhile, my child is not getting the education she deserves.
- You are so hard to reach. I always have to leave a message when I call the school. Sometimes it is days before you even call me back.

#### Teachers' Statements of Blame

- Parents are demanding. They don't realize that I have 29 other students and many other parents to deal with.
- Some parents don't care enough about their children. How am I supposed to teach a student who hasn't had breakfast? Parents don't send their kids to school ready to learn.
- Parents do not understand my responsibilities and what a busy schedule I have. I teach six classes a day, which means I see 120 kids a day. Parents expect me to keep track of their child and know his or her progress the second they call.
- I am a teacher, not a social worker; yet I am expected to educate and handle my students' emotional needs.
- Parents are hard to reach. They don't like me calling them at work, and I don't get paid to call them after 5:00 P.M.
- Parents don't support my decisions. They undermine my instruction by questioning my judgment in front of their child.
- Most parents don't respect what I do—as if teaching is a less prestigious profession. I bet most parents would not last a day in my classroom.
- Parents are not involved enough with their children's education. They don't even help their child with their homework.

Source: Adapted from Christenson, S., & Hirsch, J. (1998). Facilitating partnerships and conflict resolution between families and schools. In K. C. Staiber & T. R. Kratchowill (Eds.), *Handbook of group intervention for children and families* (p. 312). Boston: Allyn & Bacon

Some of the most helpful skills for conducting problem-solving meetings are skills for blocking blame. At various times during the family-school problem-solving meeting, the facilitator may need to block blame of both self and others. If blame is present, the group's proposed solutions are doomed to failure. In Figure 11.4, there are descriptions and examples of specific strategies developed by Weiss and Edwards (1992) of the Family-School Collaboration Project for blocking blame among parents, teachers, and students and include *direct blocking*, *reframing*, *probing*, *refocusing*, *illustrating*, *validating*, and *agreeing*. These strategies help maintain the focus on mutual responsibility for problem resolution.

For example, to use the *probing* technique, the facilitator listens to the blaming statement and then asks for additional information to help understand the context that is

**Figure 11.4** Techniques for Blocking Blame

**Direct Blocking:** Signaling that the purpose of the interaction is not to blame, but to solve a problem. For example:

- Student: *Johnny always starts the fights—it's not my fault.*
- Teacher: *We're not here to find out who's to blame, but to figure out how you and Johnny can get your work done instead of fighting.*

**Reframing:** Providing an alternate point of view about a set of facts, which gives the facts a more positive, productive meaning. For example:

- Teacher: *These parents drive me crazy—all they're concerned about is whether their child is going to get into the top class. It starts in pre-kindergarten.*
- Teacher: *It sounds as if they're trying to be an advocate for their child's education and get them started off on the right track.*

**Probing:** Eliciting additional information to clarify the context leading to the blaming. For example:

- Student: *The teacher always picks on me.*
- Teacher: *I certainly don't intend to pick on you, David. What do you see me doing that makes you think I'm picking on you? Give me some examples.*

**Refocusing:** A statement that redirects the discussion from a nonproductive or nonessential area to an area relevant to helping the student. For example:

- Parent: *Joe did great last year with Mrs. Johnson. We think that Mrs. Williams is just not as good a teacher.*
- Counselor: *I can see that you're very concerned that Joe has a good year this year, too.*

**Illustrating:** Giving concrete examples of areas of concern. For example:

- Parent: *He doesn't act that way at home. You just don't know how to deal with him.*
- Teacher: *What I've observed is that Johnny acts that way when he is with his friends. They enjoy talking with each other so much that they do not seem to be able to stop when it's time to get down to work.*

**Validating:** Recognizing the validity of another's perceptions or efforts. For example:

- Parent: *I know June needs me to spend more time with her—maybe I should quit going to school.*
- Principal: *I can understand your concern about spending time with June, but your going to school is also a positive role model for her. Let's see if there are other ways you could be helpful to her.*

**Agreeing:** Confirming someone's perception of a situation. For example:

- Teacher: *It really drives me nuts when people come in and think they can just take over the classroom.*
- Parent: *It would drive me nuts, too, if I thought someone was trying to take over something that I was responsible for.*



leading to the blaming or anger. For example, a parent might say, “You treat my child unfairly.” A probing response by the teacher might be, “I did not intend to treat your child unfairly. What do you see that I am doing that makes you think that I am treating her unfairly? Can you give me some specific examples?”

A *validating* technique can be used to recognize the legitimacy of another person’s efforts or perceptions. In response to a parent’s saying, “I am angry because I don’t think that Doug is getting the attention in class that he deserves,” the teacher might validate the parent by saying, “I can understand that you would feel angry if you thought Doug was being shortchanged in some way.”

A somewhat paradoxical technique for blocking blame is to *agree* with someone’s assessment of the situation when he or she expects you to get defensive. For example, if a parent says, “It makes me crazy when you tell me how I should be raising my own child,” the teacher might respond by saying, “It would make me crazy too, if I thought that someone were telling me how to raise my child.”

A *refocusing* technique is used to redirect the dialogue from an irrelevant or non-productive area to an area relevant to helping the student. If a parent says, “You don’t have children. You can’t possibly understand children until you have one yourself,” the teacher could respond by asking, “What would you like me to know about your child that would help him do better in school?”

Giving specific and concrete examples to help explain a situation depicts use of the technique of *illustrating*. A parent might say something like, “He never misbehaves at home. I can’t imagine that he would behave the way you say.” An illustrating technique used by the teacher might sound like this: “Let me give you a few examples of what I have seen. Johnny has gotten in trouble three times for throwing food in the cafeteria. He also has been stopped two times for running in the hallway.” Having the appropriate materials available can also help illustrate your perspective to parents. For example, if the issue is student attendance, you should be prepared with your attendance record. If the concern is work in a specific subject, be prepared to show the parent your grade book and student work samples.

A *direct blocking* technique involves saying directly that the purpose of the interaction is not to blame anyone for the problem, but to help the student. To block the parent who says, “Danielle is never a problem at Girl Scouts or at church. There must be a problem with the way you are running your classroom,” the teacher could say, “We are not here to blame anyone for the problem, but to find a way to make things better.”

The final blame blocking technique is *reframing*, or providing a more positive and productive alternative perspective about a set of facts. For example, a parent might say, “My child is always trying to do everything the boys down the street do.” In response, the teacher might say, “Sounds as if he is trying hard to belong and be accepted by his friends.” A quote from Fisher, Ury, and Patton (2011) aptly summarizes the process of blocking blame:

★ If pushing back does not work, how can you prevent the cycle of action and reaction? Do not push back. When they assert their positions, do not reject them. When they say attack, you don’t say counterattack. Break the vicious cycle by refusing to react. Instead of pushing back, sidestep their attack and deflect it against the problem. Rather than rely on force, channel that energy into exploring mutual interests and inventing options for mutual gain. (p. 108)

To improve your ability to conduct productive family–school problem-solving meetings, other important skills to master include (a) structuring, (b) listening, (c) brainstorming, (d) consensus building, and (e) action planning. *Structuring skills* are used to



**TABLE 11.2** Consensus Building: What It Is, and What It Is Not

| What It Is   | What It Is Not      |
|--|---------------------|
| General agreement by most of the group, team, or committee | Reached by voting   |
| Encourages everyone to participate                         | Majority rules      |
| Seeks to erase the imaginary line                          | Horse trading       |
| Seeks a win-win solution or mutual gain solution           | A win-lose solution |
| The best collective judgment of the group                  | Averaging           |
| A fusion of information, logic, and emotion                | Individual opinions |
| Hard work  |                     |

set up and follow the framework of the meeting and include being able to follow the process given in the six steps. Providing a clear structure for solving problems helps all participants feel less anxious and helps problem solving work more efficiently.

The listening and communication skills we discuss in Chapter 8 are essential to successful problem solving and include paraphrasing, summarizing, using open questions, and empathic listening. Another way to think about the process of listening effectively is to practice the following: (a) Pay close attention to what is being said, (b) ask for clarification if needed, and (c) repeat what is being said to check for understanding (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011).

In *brainstorming*, group members give their ideas to solve a problem. No criticism of initial ideas is allowed. Once a list of ideas is developed, promising ideas are starred, and if possible, improvements to these promising ideas are suggested. The process of suggesting ideas without judgment leads to more creative decisions, and the process of improving on the most favored solutions helps dovetail the interests of different parties (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011).

*Consensus building* is the construction of shared understanding from people with divergent perspectives. Consensus has been achieved (a) when all members of the group feel respected and heard in full; (b) when they have been honest in sharing their concerns and feelings; (c) when all perspectives have been considered without prejudice; (d) when relevant information has been shared equally; and (e) when members of the group give full support of the decisions made and are willing to implement the decision as if it were their own. Table 11.2 provides a fuller explanation of the distinctive characteristics of consensus building.

### **Using Family-School Problem Solving with Culturally Diverse Families**

Given the widely varying communication and conflict resolution preferences of culturally diverse families, it is most important that you gain some understanding of the cultural background and communication preferences of the family with whom you plan to work. For example, having children who have become proficient in English translate for their parents in a family-school meeting may seem practical on the surface. However, “placing children in a position of equal status with adults creates dysfunction