

# Conflict-causing communication in shepard's buried child



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Conflict is inevitable in any relationship. However, if left unresolved, conflict can fester and make things worse. Sam Shepard writes plays that tackle issues with the mid-21st century American family and the American dream, including unresolved conflict and terrible family secrets. In Shepard's *Buried Child*, an unnamed family struggles with conflict-causing communication styles, but when effective communication is restored, the family is able to prosper again. These five styles are denial, disqualification, displacement, disengagement, and pseudomutuality. Shelly, an outsider, is the unsung hero of the story. She encourages the family to stop using the conflict-causing communication styles and to face their problems head on.

*Buried Child* is structured around an unnamed dysfunctional family. Right away, audiences can see that the family is not communicating effectively, having some sort of a "pact of silence" about a serious issue (Porter 110). The audience can only hear snippets of discreet conversations because the family members are trying to pretend that a certain problem does not exist. When Vince and his girlfriend Shelly come to visit unexpectedly, Shelly sees firsthand that there is a terrible secret hidden beneath the surface, literally and figuratively. The secret and the child are uncovered at the play's end with the help of Shelly. The unnamed family, which includes Dodge, Halie, Tilden, Bradley, and Ansel (deceased) was once a "well-established family" (Shepard 3. 369). However, Halie and Tilden have an incestuous son, and Dodge, out of anger and resentment, kills the child and buries him in the backyard. After the baby is conceived, the family is no longer a normal family in pursuit of the American dream. The family members dance around

the problem of the baby for years. Their shame makes them “suffer from alienation among themselves and isolation from society” (Porter 107).

The buried child is the start of the breakdown of communication – a breakdown that is not restored until years later. According to Opiari, the family’s strained communication is a coping mechanism for the “emotional destruction” brought about by the incest (123). The Family Systems Theory says that when a family deals with a stressor, communication and flexibility are key (Blom and Dijk 208-209). Thus, in the case of the Buried Child family, this closed-off communication system is what affects “their ability to cope in an emotionally stable manner” (Opiari 125). Even further, Blom and Dijk report that the real problem with conflict is its “tendency toward excessive stability, perhaps even ‘rigidity’” (212). It is not just the incestuous child that is causing the family’s problems; it is also their lack of communication about it. The family wants to retain their “stable” image by hiding their secrets underground.

In essence, the family has such terrible problems because none of them will communicate openly, honestly, and effectively with each other. The characters refuse to back down from the five conflict-causing communication styles for years because they “desperately insist on the reality of their illusion” (Varró 347). Furthermore, Varró says the Buried Child family members have found the most effective means of communication between them to be repeated insult, something that houses neither love nor compassion (350). Families are considered a system, so the parts (individuals) must contribute to the well-being of the whole (family) for the system to be successful (Blom and Dijk 197). However, Shepard’s unnamed  
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family does not contribute in a positive way to their family system. Instead, each of the members is only concerned about themselves.

The first conflict-causing communication style is denial. Denial is when one partner refuses to acknowledge the problem (Cox and Demmitt 22). The family denies that almost all conflict exists, not just the conflict about the buried child. This happens many times in the play, mainly coming from Tilden and Dodge. For example, when Dodge tells Tilden, " I know you had a little trouble in New Mexico," Tilden responds with, " I never had any trouble" (Shepard 1. 198-200). Dodge even denies that he has a drinking problem, " What whiskey? I haven't got any whiskey" (Shepard 1. 235). When Dodge tells Tilden to shut up about the baby, Dodge is hoping silence will convince everyone that nothing ever happened. The family has tried to " establish normalcy" through the suppression of the event, thinking that is the best solution (Opipari 123). It is important to note that the characters are unreliable narrators, and almost all of them lie (Porter 111). It can be inferred that all of the characters remember the incident of the buried child and know their own faults, but lie to cover it up, choosing to live in full denial of the past. To prove this, Shelly finds a picture in the house that has the baby in it and confronts Dodge about it. Although the family is denying the dead baby out loud, they still have a picture of it, which prevents them from forgetting entirely. Something as simple as the individuals refusing to take blame or responsibility for the family's problems is what has continually caused the conflict to deepen and remain unresolved.

The second form of conflict-causing communication is disqualification, which is when a person intends to cover an emotion and deny that a real conflict

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exists (Cox and Demmitt 22). Bradley is the key source of this communication style and the main character who refuses to let Shelly be the hero. For example, in Act III, Bradley is terrified of having the police invade his parents' home. He hides his fear and denies the problem when he says, "I'm not telling her anything! Nothing's wrong here! Nothing's ever been wrong! Everything's the way it's supposed to be! Nothing ever happened that's bad! Everything is all right here! We're all good people!" (Shepard 3. 341-343). By covering his evident fear, Bradley instead displays anger toward Shelly, which further aggravates the problem. Another example of disqualification is when Halie asks Dodge if he has taken his pills. Instead of expressing his humiliation over his health, Dodge denies the problem by developing a sudden interest in the weather, saying "It's not raining in California or Florida or the racetrack" (Shepard 1. 331). Dodge would rather deny how insufficient he feels than be honest with himself and his family. With Dodge being the patriarch of the family, it is likely that Bradley learned his violent behaviors and disqualification conflict style from him.

The third form of conflict-causing communication is displacement. Similar to disqualification, it is when a person places emotional reactions somewhere other than the real conflict source (Cox and Demmitt 22). Halie is the family member who has the most problem with displacement. Whenever there is conflict, instead of addressing it, she only wants to talk about her dead son Ansel, his greatness, and how he could have stopped all the problems from happening. This happens multiple times throughout the play, the most obvious being when Dodge confesses to drowning the incestuous child, "Ansel would've stopped him! Ansel would've stopped him from telling these

lies! He was a hero! A man! A whole man! What's happened to the men in this family? Where are the men?" (Shepard 3. 409-411). Halie's dysfunction begins when " Tilden turned out to be so much trouble, I put all my hopes on Ansel." (Shepard 1. 275-276). However, Dodge appears to communicate with this style as well when he says he let Halie have the incestuous child on her own (Shepard 3. 388). Instead of communicating his hurt to Halie, he displays anger and forces her to deal with the full pain of childbirth. A final example is when Shelly, the intruder, is trying to unveil the family's secret. Dodge and Halie, to hide from the confrontation, suddenly develop " concern" for where Tilden is. Instead of addressing the family secret, they try to get off the topic and put their uneasiness and unrest into finding Tilden.

Halie also displays serious problems with disengagement, the fourth conflict-causing communication style. This is when family members avoid conflict by simply avoiding each other (Cox and Demmitt 23). Halie's first display of this is when Dodge declares his flesh and blood is buried in the backyard (Shepard 1. 392-393). To this, Halie responds, " That's enough, Dodge. That's quite enough. I'm going now. I'm going to have lunch with Father Dewis" (Shepard 1. 394-395). When Vince asks Dodge where Halie is, Dodge responds, " Don't worry about her. She won't be back for days. She says she'll be back but she won't be. There's life in the old girl yet!" (Shepard 2. 97-98). Dodge may think Halie's avoidance is for infidelity, but she is actually hiding from the shame that Dodge holds over her. Halie's disengagement gets much worse when Dodge is sharing the secret of Halie's incestuous child, " I'm not listening to this! I don't have to listen to this!" (Shepard 3. 377-378). Halie thinks that if she hides from her family, she will in turn be

hiding from her problems. However, this is not true. An outsider, Father Dewis, even encourages Halie to hide from the problem when he says, “Halie, maybe we should go upstairs until this all blows over” (Shepard 3. 467). Hiding from a problem does nothing good because a problem will never be exposed without direct confrontation.

Finally, there is pseudomutuality - when family members appear to be perfectly happy and delighted with each other so that no hint of discord can spoil the perfect family image (Cox and Demmitt 23). Opipari says this is “typical of families who hide a shameful secret” because they want to “appear functional to the outside” (127). This is perhaps the strangest style, but there are still instances of it in *Buried Child*. Pseudomutuality can also come from the actual appearance of a family’s residence, as seen when Shelly says, “It’s like a Norman Rockwell cover or something” (Shepard 2. 7). A comical example of pseudomutuality comes from a stage direction when Halie finds Shelly in her house, “She lets out a shriek of embarrassment for Father Dewis” (Shepard 1217). This indication reveals that Halie does not want any outsiders to see that her family is less than perfect. She may know that her family is imperfect, but for pseudomutuality to succeed, no one from the outside can find out the truth. This continues when Halie says, “Father, there’s a stranger in my house. What would you advise? What would be the Christian thing?” (Shepard 3. 185-186). Halie again fuels the flame with this conflict style when she says, “They almost cover the stench of sin in this house. Just magnificent!” (Shepard 3. 195). In this example, she is saying something rude or offensive to the family, but does so in a way that outsiders (Shelly, Father Dewis) should not be able to

follow along. Halie is clearly trying to impress Father Dewis by being an approachable and fair housewife, without giving away any hint of discord in the house.

Shepard's unnamed family in *Buried Child* is a mess, so he gives Shelly, an outsider, the role of dissolving the family's denial of their problems and uncovering the secret. Only she can see the truth. She realizes that the family refuses first to acknowledge the past, "So the past never happened as far as you're concerned?" (Shepard 3. 83). She then sees right through the family's denial when she says, "I know you've got a secret. You've all got a secret. It's so secret in fact, you're all convinced it never happened" (Shepard 3. 335-336). Once Shelly calls out the denial, Dodge finds the courage to finally speak about the buried child. However, not all family members are as ready as Dodge to spill the secret. Halie does not want to listen and Bradley is angry because "We made a pact between us!" (Shepard 3. 360). Shelly is the only character who will accept her own flaws, which is why she is the perfect character to help the family. When Vince and Shelly first arrive at the house, Vince tells Shelly that "They might think something's wrong with you" (Shepard 2. 37). But instead of taking the defensive side, Shelly simply says, "There is" (Shepard 2. 38). Although a minor detail, the fact that she accepts her flaws proves that she is the only person who can help the family heal.

Once Shelly encourages the family to communicate effectively and talk about the buried child, good things begin to happen. First Dodge dies in peace. It is not until after Dodge tells the story of the buried child that he "settles my affairs once and for all" (Shepard 3. 481). In his last speech, he <https://assignbuster.com/conflict-causing-communication-in-shepards-buried-child/>



leaves the house to Vince. Soon after, he dies peacefully. It can be inferred that Dodge would not have died until the family's communication had been restored. If not however, the cloud of guilt and shame would have still covered the family even after Vince took over the estate. Second, Shelly has the courage to leave. When she and Vince first arrive, Shelly is afraid to be there because none of the family members seem to recognize them. Slowly, she gains confidence and feels safer around the family. But it is not until after communication is restored and Vince returns that Shelly has the courage to leave the unnamed family and Vince behind. In this way, she is the unsung hero of the story and is only present when she is needed to resolve the conflict.

In addition, the rain stops. It is not until the beginning of Act III that there is "no sound of rain" (Shepard 1213). When the rain falls, the family is living in denial of their problems. However, when the rain stops, the family restores their communication and relationships. Finally, more vegetables can grow in the garden. Halie concludes the play with words of admiration, "I've never seen such corn. Have you taken a look at it lately? Tall as a man already. This early in the year. Carrots too. Potatoes. Peas. It's like a paradise out there, Dodge. You oughta' take a look. A miracle" (Shepard 3. 540-553). Although it is implied that the vegetables have been growing since the beginning of the play, it is not until the end that Halie notices. To her, the growing of vegetables is a miracle that she can see after the family's communication is restored. The blindness is lifted from her eyes so she can finally see the truth.

Without Shelly's intervention, the family may have never fixed their communication problems or acknowledged the buried child. When the secret is uncovered and Dodge dies, most of the strife disappears. Vince is left behind to continue the legacy, for better or for worse. In light of an American Dream lost, Shepard encourages audiences to focus on what really matters - relationships. To make relationships successful, families need to communicate openly, honestly, and effectively. In *Buried Child*, Shepard successfully presents a broken family that, with the help of Shelly, makes things right in the end when they learn to communicate.

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