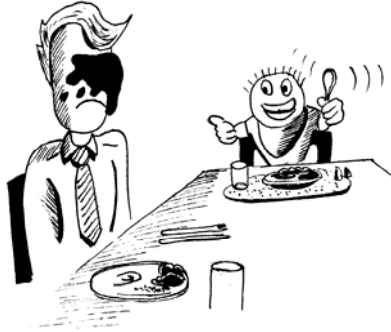


FAMILY MEETINGS



A family meeting is a structured discussion time that typically involves all members of a family. Family meetings should be regularly scheduled (for example once a week). Special meetings can be called to discuss an important issue that cannot wait until the next regularly scheduled meeting. Holding family meetings on a regular basis has many benefits for a family. First of all, family meetings help open lines of communication. Second, they help family members, especially children, learn to work and solve problems within a group. Family meetings also allow children to have a say in their day-to-day life. Having input into decisions will help boost children's self-esteem, because they will feel heard and respected. Finally, children who take part in family meetings are given some

responsibility for what goes on in their lives.

Family meetings work best with families whose children are school-aged or older. In families where there are younger children (infants and toddlers), it is probably a good idea to schedule meetings after they have gone to bed.

At first, it is usually best to keep family meetings short - about 15 minutes. As families get better at communication and decision-making, the meeting times can be lengthened.

What to Discuss at Family Meetings

Family meetings can be used to discuss and deal with a variety of issues including family problems, to plan family activities, to discuss chores, and to discuss good things that have happened. Parents should be careful not to dominate the conversation. Every family member should be given a chance to express his or her views.

Location

The best place to hold family meetings is in a place where there are few distractions. For example, it

is probably not a good idea to hold family meetings in the living room with the television on. One good place to hold family meetings is around the kitchen or dining room table (after the dishes have been cleared). It is not a good idea to hold family meetings during mealtime.

Important Details of the Family Meeting

Listed below are some very important parts of successful family meetings:

***Regular Schedule.** It is very important for families to come up with a consistent time to hold family meetings. They then need to stick to the schedule. No one will take family meetings seriously if they are frequently canceled or forgotten. Everyone involved in the family meetings should make an effort to get to each meeting on time, especially the parents. If parents don't treat family meetings as an important part of their lives, their children will not either. Meetings should be held, even if there appears to be no critical issues for the family to discuss. When there are no critical issues to discuss, families can talk about the positive things going on in the family.

***Agenda.** Family meetings will run much more smoothly if there is a set agenda for each meeting. A good way to set the agenda is to have an "agenda list" in a prominent location in the house. Each person who has something they would like to discuss at the next family meeting should then write it down on the "agenda list." This list of items can then be used to guide the discussions that take place at the family meeting. Families should include positive things that have happened during the week on the agenda list. Families should try to start each meeting by mentioning the positive events and efforts made by family members during the week.

***Ground rules.** At the first family meeting there should be a discussion of the ground rules of family meetings. Some good ground rules to establish are discussing only one topic at a time, not moving on to another topic until everyone agrees to do so, taking turns speaking, no putting other people down, and no fighting or arguing. It should also be decided what will happen if someone misbehaves or breaks a rule during a meeting. Disruptive behavior (for example yelling) could be dealt with by sending the offenders to time-out or to their room for a

specific time period. They would be allowed to rejoin the meeting after the time period is over.

***Chairperson.** There should be a chairperson elected to lead each meeting. The chairperson's job is to direct the meeting. He or she decides whose turn it is to speak, when to move on to a new topic, and when to take votes. Families can select a chairperson at the end of each meeting to be responsible for the next meeting. Chairpersons can be chosen in a number of ways, for example, in alphabetical order, by age, etc. What is important is that each family member takes turns being the chairperson.

***Secretary.** Families can also choose a secretary for each meeting. The role of the secretary is to write down all decisions made at each meeting, and all topics discussed. Family members selected for this position should be limited to those who are able to write.

***Problem Solving.** Family meetings should be used to teach problem solving skills to children. For each problem, families should begin by trying to clearly define exactly what the problem is. Then they should try to generate a list of possible solutions. Families should try not to

evaluate potential solutions until the list is complete. When the list of solutions is complete families should go through the list and evaluate the positive and negative aspects of each solution. Then families should try to reach a consensus on the best solution for all involved.

***Attendance.** Family meetings will not be effective unless every member participates. Therefore, it is probably best that attendance be required of each family member who is school-aged or older. Parents should set a good example by making every effort to attend family meetings. Of course, there will be times when one family member or another cannot attend. In these instances, the family member who misses the meeting should be told that family decisions will be made in their absence.

***Consensus.** Important decisions are often made during family meetings. It is best for families to strive for consensus (agreement of all members) when decisions are being made. If consensus is not reached and the issue being voted on is not one that must be decided immediately, it can be put aside and voted on at the next family meeting. However, there will be times when certain decisions cannot be put off

and consensus has not been reached (for example, where to go on this week's family outing). In such instances, a popular vote can be taken.

***Fun Activity.** Families can plan some fun activity to take place at the end of each family meeting, such as playing a game together. This way, each family meeting will end on a positive note.

Family meetings can be a very effective way of improving communication within a family. Parents as well as children will benefit from having a regularly scheduled time to get together and discuss issues that are important to the family.



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