



Coming Together: Ideas for Successful Family Meetings

Most people want a healthy and united family. But how does a parent go about making a family strong? Research points to the importance of communication and commitment within the family. One of the best ways to foster open communication and commitment is by making time for family meetings.

What are family meetings?

Family meetings are time set aside to promote healthy communication, make decisions, solve problems, and encourage strong family relationships. There are two basic types of family meetings: scheduled and informal.

What is the purpose of a scheduled family meeting?

A scheduled meeting provides an opportunity to get together and discuss family issues in a clear and organized manner. These meetings are sometimes called family councils, because the whole family comes together to talk about an issue that affects every member: Who's going to do what chore? What should we do during vacation this summer? How are we going to help Grandpa, now that he needs our support? The entire family works together to answer such questions.

Family meetings should include an open dialogue, allowing everyone

to express his or her opinions and respond sensitively to one another. Interrupting, criticizing, and correcting should not be allowed. Openly discussing an issue together shows that everyone's opinion is valued and that the family is a team.

To be successful, organized meetings should be short and well planned. Share responsibility for planning and conducting the family meeting. Find ways that even young children can help.

You may want to develop a simple written agenda or chart describing what will be covered at the meeting. Parts of this agenda might include the weekly calendar, future plans, family issues or problems, or refreshments. Keep track of the decisions made, and post the decisions as reminders.

A scheduled family meeting can also be an ideal place to deal with problems as they arise. Parents should not point fingers, but instead invite the entire family to brainstorm. When children are involved in the solution process, they are much more likely to comply with decisions. Rather than mandating or dictating what is to be done, parents should have some idea of a desired outcome and primarily listen and help guide their children toward an acceptable solution.

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Tips for holding scheduled family meetings

Parents should decide together that they want to hold a scheduled family meeting. Find a time that will work for everyone.

- Parents should facilitate the first few meetings and begin sharing duties, such as refreshments, activities, or calendar updates.
- Try the “Go Around” method, giving each family member the opportunity to respond to a topic, such as “What made you feel good this week?” “What bothered you this week?” “What is something that you want to work on or accomplish next week?”
- Offer a motivational thought. Try telling a story or sharing a quotation. Almost everyone loves a short story with a message.
- Make it fun. Play a game. You might have a weekly quiz or contest, or just play a family game during or after the meeting.
- Have things for young children to do during the meeting. For example, have little ones draw pictures of what they want to do. Sometimes it’s easier for kids to talk when their hands are busy.
- Have a family calendar ready so that everyone knows what is happening during the next week or month.
- Create something during the meeting. Make a family poster, calendar, or a gift for someone.

How do I have an informal family meeting?

The second type of family meeting is much less formal and occurs whenever two or more family members get together and talk. These meetings should be frequent, as they build relationships and

create emotional connections. Some examples include: discussions at the dinner table, talks before bed, a daddy-daughter date, doing dishes together, a car ride discussion, or a game of basketball. Times like these, when family members can talk openly, help make more formal discussions possible later. Even though you may be doing something else, make sure you really listen and appreciate what your child is saying

When you find a moment to talk to your children, start by getting rid of distractions. Turn off the TV if you are at home, or turn off the radio while you travel in the car. Next, share a little about how things are going for you, and gently ask how they are doing. Start at their level. Ask about current interests, successes, and frustrations. Listen closely, and let them know you heard them. Every family member is different, so be patient and focus on improving the quality of each relationship.

What if I’m a single parent?

Single parenting can pose a very real challenge to communication. After working all day, coming home to cook dinner, and doing everything else a single parent must do, finding time and energy for a family meeting may seem impossible. However, the more stress there is in a family, the more important family meetings become. The key is to make the effort to connect with your children and provide order in their lives.

Single parents should not overlook the powerful resources grandparents can often provide. Grandparents can offer wisdom and guidance to scheduled and informal family meetings. Make them welcome if they are nearby, or find other ways to seek their counsel and support via e-mail or phone calls.

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