

Family Meetings

Imagine trying to run a business where there are no lines of communication between management and staff or among staff themselves; management is burdened with solving all problems, and staffing conflicts are left to fester. In the business world, this is a recipe for failure. Now apply this same business sense to a family and the running of a household. It remains true that the success of a family also depends upon establishing lines of communication.

Importance of Family Meetings

Family Meetings (FMs) are one of the core aspects of the Positive Discipline Approach. Although parents provide the leadership in the family, holding FMs allow children a significant and meaningful way to contribute. FMs provide:

- A means of communication (to appreciate, compliment, vent concerns and feelings).
- The opportunity for children to be appropriately and actively involved in the household.
- Life skills (problem solving skills, how to work as a team).
- A sense of significance because everyone at the table has an important voice worthy of being heard.
- A time to cooperatively establish routines, develop schedules, share tasks.
- Opportunities to model and teach core life values: Cooperation, Contribution, Caring, Connection, Commitment, and Capability

Continued participation in FMs creates strong connections to our families; people feel heard, solutions are found, things get done. In the process, children can learn tools that will carry on into their future relationships and careers. This sense of empowerment and social interest will last a lifetime.

Family Meeting Format

Follow the format, made up of four components:

1. Compliments and appreciations
2. Agenda Items:
 - Decide on a time frame for meetings
 - Review past decisions
 - Use consensus, and table and item if no decision can be found
3. Future Plans (family activities, trips, birthdays, projects, etc)
4. Fun Time (dessert, board game, sharing stories)



Getting It Started and What's Involved

Keep it simple to start. Just do compliments and appreciations at first.

Lay the groundwork. Before respectful problem solving can occur, do some skill building with family members to: learn how to listen without interrupting, look for helpful solutions instead of revenge, express feelings appropriately, no name calling, try new ways of doing things knowing things can be changed or modified.

Gain buy-in by addressing one or two child-focused items on the agenda for the first few meetings. Build from there.

Encourage children to add their issues to the agenda when things come up during the week. When you hear, "She's taking my toys again!" respond with, "Why don't you put that on the agenda."

Rotate Family Meeting jobs as children show interest and capability (Chair, time-keeper, note taker, other?)

Have Family Meetings regularly, same day and time.

Keep a FM journal. Record decisions made. Revisit the list of other options if an issue remains a problem. Your journal will become a family treasure of meaningful times together.

Adjust your expectations for attentiveness for two and three year olds. Compliments and Appreciations or planning Family Fun time are for all ages Then younger ones could stay but play nearby.

HOW TO MAKE FAMILY MEETINGS SUCCESSFUL

Children may think FMs are a way for parents to manipulate them. It is more important for children to learn that this is a safe place to address problems or concerns that any family member might have. First, it is important to get “buy in” from the children. This is done by parents following these guidelines.

- Remember the long-range purpose: to develop the feelings of belonging, significance, and capability, and to teach valuable life skills. Don't use FMs as a platform for lectures and parental control.
- Post an agenda in a visible place; encourage family members to write down ongoing family issues. Only post items that are appropriate for children to help decide.
- Start with compliments so family members learn to look for and verbalize positive things about each other.
- Use consensus to decide solutions, not majority. Brainstorm solutions to problems. Start with wild and crazy ideas (for fun) and end with practical ideas that are useful and respectful to all concerned. Then choose one suggestion and try it for a week.
- Calendar a family fun activity for later in the week, as well as all sports and other activities (including a chauffeur schedule).
- Keep FMs short (10 to 20 minutes) depending on the ages of your children. End with a family fun activity, game, or dessert.
- Create a win-win environment that values mutual respect and each person's point of view so that neither children nor adults dominate. Model how to listen; be attentive and quiet as others speak; ask questions instead of telling. Work to make meetings fun and productive.
- Remember learning these skills takes time. Even solutions that don't work provide an opportunity to go back to the drawing board and try again. Always focus on respect and solutions.

Going Deeper

Family Meetings can become one of the most effective and useful parenting tools when done well and consistently. Once FMs have been established, it can help solve a number of challenges, such as:

Sibling conflicts. Siblings now have a place to respectfully flesh out problems, share frustrations and take responsibility for coming up with their own agreeable solutions. Loud, domineering children learn to listen, and reserved children are given room to speak.

Time Outs. In the Positive Discipline Approach, Time Outs are used to calm the brain down in moments of heated tantrums or arguments. FMs provide a structure for conflicts to be addressed later when calmer and rational heads prevail.

Follow-Through. This tool keeps parents from letting issues slide. FMs provide a consistent structure for past agreements to be assessed. Children will experience accountability for agreements. They also will experience their concerns being addressed and not forgotten.

Addressing irritations. “Bugs and Wishes:” Parents and kids are invited to express their irritations this way: “It bugs me when you leave your mitt in the driveway; I wish that you would put it on the shelf in the garage.”

Key Steps

- Establish a day and time to meet as a family.
- Together establish ground rules and practice these skills (no interruptions, respectful language, rotate leadership role, everyone gets an equal vote, all electronics off, etc.).
- Establish buy-in from children: keep it short, give them room to talk, end with dessert or fun activity.
- Post an agenda board accessible to everyone; record items as they arise during the week.
- Follow the FM format:
 1. Compliments and Appreciations
 2. Agenda items
 3. Future Plans
 4. Family Fun time
- Keep the meeting mutually respectful (no parental lecturing, no controlling children).
- Focus on solutions, not blame. Table items that remain unresolved for the next meeting.
- Record solutions in a family journal for later references.
- Work to make meetings fun and productive.



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