

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY: FAMILY MEETINGS

Family Meetings are a great way to communicate and address any problems effectively. I have a family meeting every Sunday and it is a great forum to bring up situations to problem solve together. Sometimes individual chats with one child are needed, but I find family meetings are useful because it doesn't single out one child, everyone gets a chance to bring things up that are bothering them, and we highlight how we work together as a team.

Family meetings are also great opportunities to practice your listening skills as well as to take the opportunity to self-evaluate. As you listen, notice if you are giving them your full attention? Are you showing genuine interest? Empathy? Respect? Are your kids feeling valued?

As well, through this process, your kids are learning important life skills. They are also learning to take accountability and responsibility for their actions by helping create rules and expectations. When they do, they understand the purpose of the rules and the consequences, which they otherwise don't necessarily know. They tend to be more empowered and cooperative when they understand and help create the plans.

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With family meetings, everyone has a chance to share their concerns. Here are a few pointers for success:

- Only talk when everyone is calm.
- Establish an inviting atmosphere so that kids a) don't equate the meeting to a lecture session and b) they want to participate. We always have a yummy snack and start every meeting chatting about the good things that happened. We end our meetings by planning a fun family activity for the upcoming week and then we play a game.
- Assign roles. We always have a chairperson who reads the agenda items and gives everyone a chance to talk. Our secretary writes any follow-up items, plans, assigned chores, and family activities. We also have a snack/dessert maker and the game chooser. Kids can choose their roles first.
- Agenda items. It is a good idea to set an agenda. We have an agenda box where everyone can write down anything they want to discuss at the meeting. The agenda box is useful to redirect conflict in the moment (especially to minimize parent nagging!).
- Make the meeting short and sweet. Focus on one issue at a time and state your concerns in one succinct sentence.
- Always let your kids bring their issues first and let them share their ideas for solutions first. Adults don't need to offer any other ideas if the kids come up with enough ideas themselves.

FAMILY MEETINGS

- Whenever your kids talk, use the same skills you have practices. Active listening, validating their comments, using I-statements, and summarizing.
- Write down everyone's ideas without judgment. Do not start to evaluate until everyone has given all of their ideas.
- Identify the best option A and then B and maybe even C or D. Focus on win-win solutions that everyone agrees with. We don't want kids to feel they don't have a say and are just going to do what you say anyway. They will lose trust and never want to participate again. If someone doesn't like the idea, see what other ideas they have. You may need to table the plan and readdress it later on.
- Set a time to evaluate whether the plan is working and adjust as needed.
- Family meetings are voluntary - never force your kids to come. If you have made it a fun time, there should be no problem. But, it's their choice. If there is a particularly important topic that needs to be addressed with them, perhaps meeting privately is better. The process is still the same. Or, they can forfeit going with the understanding that they will have to follow whatever decisions are made (so they are essentially agreeing to it beforehand). If they have a problem with it, they can address it at the next family meeting.

The more you engage in this process the easier it will be to communicate effectively with your kids.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Using scripts can be helpful in guiding effective communication. Be sure to use I statements to avoid blame and share what you need from your point of view.

I feel (am feeling) _____

When (describe the behaviour - don't blame) _____

Because _____

Get other's perspectives and then brainstorm a plan everyone can agree to!

For example

I feel really frustrated when others don't help clean up after dinner because I spend my evening cooking and then have so many other responsibilities that I don't get time to spend with my family.

Or

I worry when homework isn't done because it is easy to fall behind and my job as a parent is to help you be successful.

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Family Meeting Sample Agenda

1. Assign roles: chairperson, secretary, game chooser, snack maker
2. Review positive highlights of the week
3. Anything to review from previous week?
4. Concern to address: Brief statement about the issue to problem solve
 - Kids concerns (parents empathetically reflect and summarize)
 - Parents concern (if needed - one brief sentence)
 - Brainstorm possible solutions:
 - Win-win solution agreed upon:
 - Date to evaluate plan:
 - Was the concern solved? (If no: what is working? what is not working? Start the process again).
5. Plan fun family activity for upcoming week
6. Play game