

Family Meetings : Are You Using

The Most Powerful Parenting Tool?

By Cliff Crain, MFT

Most of us do not like to attend meetings, and this commonly held attitude can keep us from using what may be the single most powerful parenting tool we have in our parenting toolbox: the **regular family meeting**.

Regardless of the configuration of your family (traditional, single parent, step-family, etc.) or how old your children are, creating a regular time to sit down as a family unit to discuss issues and make plans can benefit your family.

Here are some possible benefits from meeting regularly:

- It creates a safe environment to discuss problems that may arise between family members.
- It offers you the opportunity to model and teach negotiation skills.
- It sends a strong non-verbal message to all the children that the family unit is important.
- It gives children a tangible voice in the family.
- It teaches children communication skills, and encourages the habit of giving appropriate appreciations.
- It teaches family members the value of planning and scheduling.

FIRST: It is important to **reflect upon your personal goals** for the family. If you want all family members to feel safe, relaxed, respectful, and appreciative, then all of these values must be incorporated into any meetings you might have. If your family has already developed unresolved tensions between members, you may want to start by having some one-on-one meetings to discuss rules and goals. You may want to consider bringing in a professional if the tension is very high and you feel powerless to improve the situation.

SECOND: Once your goals are clear, **choose a time and place** so the family looks forward to meetings, like Sunday night just before dessert. Keep the meetings short and, in the beginning, keep the goals simple... like scheduling a family outing. It is important to have a clear agenda, and keep notes about items to discuss in the future.

THIRD: Teach and model gratefulness by having each meeting start with family members saying something they can thank another family member for that happened recently.

FOURTH: Use a white board where family members can write down topics to discuss during family meetings. This will help everyone feel like their particular

issue will not be swept under the rug, and it also avoids trying to solve hot-topics will upset. Remember, “the time of conflict is never the best time to resolve an issue.”

FIFTH: It is vital that parents **learn to listen calmly** to their children, even when we disagree! We must understand that children have their own perceptions, feelings, and agendas. This does not make them bad or wrong. We, as parents, must learn how to listen with compassion – with our ears, eyes, and heart – so our children feel loved and respected. This does not mean that we will always agree with them, or do what they want. The ultimate decisions about family rules, chores, and discipline always rests with the adults. Parents who are not afraid to take charge (in a loving way) help make the world safer and more understandable for their children. (See Parenting With Love And Logic by Jim Fay)

SIXTH: Use the family meeting time to **review the family calendar**. Go over upcoming events, changes to the usual routine, and family plans so everyone is on the same page about the week’s schedule and up-coming events. A wise parent (leader) might want to prepare before the meeting and have a list of important items/dates to share with the family.

SEVENTH: **Find a fun way to close each meeting**, with some shared jokes, and or special appreciations for each family member. Giving a rotating reward – like having one member get to select one dinner meal during the next week – can make the meeting more enjoyable. Some families like to have a family board game, or family video, after each meeting.

Good luck. It can be difficult, but it is worth the effort!

Some general rules:

- #1 Keep family meetings short.
- #2 Keep expectations low and reasonable.
- #3 Do not expect children under the age of four (4) to participate.
- #4 Try to have the family meetings weekly, at least at first.
- #5 Parents should run the meetings until children are at least nine years old. After that leadership can be shared.
- #6 Parents are responsible for keeping notes in a family binder, and keeping the family calendar accurate.
- #7 Family Meetings ought to be thought of as a fun time, and lecturing is inappropriate and usually ineffective.