

FAMILY MATTERS

...because family does matter

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Issue 4, Fall, 2007

FAMILY MEETINGS

In your family, how do you:

Work out sibling problems between your children?

Introduce a new routine, rule or event?

Handle grievances?

Communicate with each person?

If you answered, “Most of the time we handle things quickly and on the run” or “We talk to the kids, but they don’t listen,” you may be feeling quite frustrated - and your family harmony may be wearing thin. Family meetings are a

valuable way to foster safe, respectful conversation in which everyone can speak their mind. You can also use these meetings to connect with each person, celebrate small successes, support challenges, organize busy schedules, distribute chores fairly, share news that isn’t shared otherwise, create new rules and routines as well as resolve conflicts and complaints.



Benefits of family meetings:

- Enhance ongoing healthy family communication
- Improve self-discipline and cooperation amongst family members
- Teach decision making and problem solving skills
- Build stronger bonds with your children
- Support listening to different points of view

Many families naturally set aside discussion time. If you don’t, these meetings are worthwhile establishing. I am not suggesting being formal with a gavel. The purpose is for everyone to participate and listen. Family meetings have the greatest success when the atmosphere and tone are calm and not reactive. Handling important issues and improving family functioning are best done proactively.

When we are **reactive**, our hot buttons are triggered. We say and do things we regret when we’ve had time to cool off and think. Being reactive undermines our authority. It’s not the way we want our children to emulate us nor is it the way we want them to remember us. When we are **proactive**, we anticipate problems, develop plans and figure out appropriate consequences in advance. This takes the heat out of reactivity and the pain out of regret. When we are in control of ourselves, we behave consistently and dependably. We manage situations in timely and effective ways. Everyone is happier.

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Family Meetings Are Proactive

The following illustrations demonstrate general tips and guidelines for having fruitful family meetings.

- 1. Create a cooperative, warm and safe atmosphere where everyone is helped to listen.** Come with the intention to enjoy this time together, share information, work something out or solve a problem. Have the whole family present. With young children, explain what is being said on their level. They feel included while experiencing positive discussion. Keep the length of the meeting to the children's attention span and make sure there's enough time to devote to talking. Criticism and blaming don't work. While, you may feel frustrated and concerned, becoming emotional puts you back at square one. If the tone becomes reactive, end the meeting. It can always be picked up when people are calmer.
- 2. Explain that you are holding family meetings to talk about what's going on in everyone's life.** Perhaps you can begin with a non-digital interactive game or a "go around" question such as "Something that made you feel good this week." If there's time you could add a second "go around" with "Something that bothered you this week." These questions get everyone talking. Come up with other interesting go around questions that apply to your family.
- 3. Discuss upcoming events** (perhaps a vacation or grandma is coming to visit); plan how the whirlwind of weekend activities will be organized; develop a new routine (such as when chores or homework will be done); or that a change that will be occurring (e.g. a home renovation or house project). This will interest the children and they will likely have thoughts they'd like to add.
- 4. Cope with difficult situations** such as the imminent death of a family pet. In the family meeting communicate that your pet is very old or very sick and will not be living much longer. It helps prepare your children as well as share grief together, which also includes talking about what this pet means to everyone. It is a healthy way for children to experience loss and death. You can plan a burial/memorial service. This is preferable to the animal suddenly disappearing one day. It also allows everyone "to be in on what's going on."
- 5. Discuss adapting to new routines** such as family chores, a change in child care, mom has to go on an extended business trip). Changes become more tolerable when an opportunity is made for everyone to be heard and to collectively iron out details. It doesn't mean that your home is a total democracy with children having an equal say. Parents are in charge and make the final decisions AND consider how their children will be affected - a courtesy and consideration.
- 6. Solve problems, encourage better choices, air grievances and create consequences if the problems are not solved adequately.** Think about the ways difficult and repetitive behaviors are handled in your home. Do you lecture? Do you react angrily and punish? Do you do nothing, hoping it will disappear? Or, do you and your spouse's different styles give mixed messages? The family meeting can take the heat out of tempers flaring, blaming, giving up, or leaving the outcome to happenstance.

In actuality, most family problems are not one-sided; they are co-created. Family meetings level the playing field, so one child isn't the problem and another the victim. **Be curious as to how your kids would solve their problems. They often have excellent ideas.** Let each speak for himself, while the rest listen. Parents can model saying how they are affected using "I" statements. **Maintain the**

attitude, “we want to make positive changes.” If a child has special needs, assist him in getting his ideas across, hearing what others have to say and what needs to be done. Visuals can help everyone.

Let’s apply these concepts to an example. *On the Langer family car trips, the children would act up and get into the other’s personal space by pushing, grabbing, and screaming. Dad would stop the car on the highway shoulder, holler and dole out punishments. Mom tried to quiet everyone down but had a knot in the pit of her stomach. The whole sequence of events was predictable; yet Mom and Dad had not come up with a solid workable solution. The parents called a family meeting and a safe, pleasant atmosphere was created with a board game and some “go around” questions.*

Mom presented the problem for discussion without blaming, “We need to find a way to make our car trips better.” Six year old, Emily offered a good suggestion, “We need a break to run around.” Nine year old, Sam said, “Whenever it is my turn to play the game, Nick won’t give it to me.” Nick piped in, “You always grab it from me while I am in the middle. What else am I supposed to do?” Dad asked, “How can we work this out whether it is a game or anything else? When this happens all I want to do is turn the car around and go home.” Sam suggested not bringing the hand held game at all. Nick questioned why Sam didn’t remember to bring his own game.

Everyone contributed more thoughts before Mom asked. “Do you think these ideas will work?” Everyone stayed with the process until a reasonable, doable plan evolved. Then Dad asked, “What should the consequence be if the plan isn’t followed?” The kids decided that if they continued to squabble about turns or anything else, the games would be removed for an hour. Stretching and snack stops were a must. Mom and dad congratulated the children for their cooperation and good solutions. The plan and the consequences were written down and reviewed before the next trip. Those issues not ironed out, and experienced on the next car trip, were fine-tuned at the following meeting. This process made everyone feel good and even proud.

In the beginning, I recommend you address those issues that have the potential for successful outcomes. By creating a track record of proactive discussions, you’ll get the hang of setting the tone for tackling the knottier problems. These meetings will prove to be one of your family’s greatest assets. Good luck!

**“Whatever is human is mentionable. Whatever is mentionable is manageable.”
Fred Rodgers**

**Need help getting your Family Meetings started?
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Roberta Rachel Omin, LCSW, has her psychotherapy and counseling practice in Ossining and Rye Brook, NY. She is holistically and a system trained to work with families, couples and individuals; and has authored many articles on these issues. Currently, Roberta is enrolled in an Internal Family Systems program developed by Richard Schwartz. With more than twenty-five years of experience, she brings sensitivity; authenticity and wisdom to help the people she works with achieve healthier more satisfying relationships.

