

The Art of Family Meetings

By Dr. Jenn Berman

Family meetings are a great way to strengthen the family bond and communication. Well run family meetings give children the opportunity to have a say in their day to day life and make them feel seen, heard and valued. Family meetings create a sense of belonging, which goes a long way towards creating good behavior in kids. In addition, they help children learn valuable skills, such as communication, public speaking, decision making, problem solving, cooperation, social interaction, language development and impulse control in a group setting.

Laying Down the Law

In order for a family meeting to run smoothly there must be rules that reinforce the importance of the meeting and foster respectful communication. Meetings should be kept short, no more than 15 to 20 minutes, shorter if there are younger children. You may want to start with the following rules and add others over time:

Meetings take place on the same day and time every week and everyone (age four and up) attends.

This time is sacred and should not be interrupted by phones, computers, television, iPods, toys, etc.

Everyone takes turns speaking and there is no interrupting. It may help to introduce a "talking stick," where only the person holding the stick gets to speak.

Only discuss one topic at a time and don't move on to the next topic until everyone agrees.

No criticisms are allowed. All ideas—no matter how crazy—are considered and respected by parents and children.

Everyone gets a chance to share opinions and ideas. Youngest children should go first so they are not influenced by older ones.

An agenda or list of topics can be created for every meeting and posted where members can add to it during the week.

Each meeting will have one leader. In the beginning, the adults can take turns being the leader. As soon as everyone understands how they run, children should start participating in that responsibility. After that, each week there will be a different leader. This can be determined by age, drawing straws, or alphabetically, as long as everyone gets a turn.

Decisions are reached by a combination of discussion and voting, with unanimous decision being the goal.

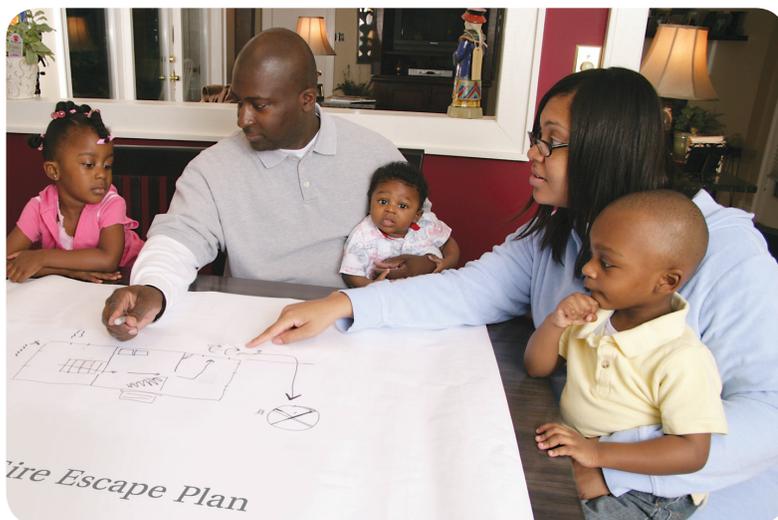
Unresolved issues are tabled until the next week.

Getting Down to Business

Try to follow the same structure every time. As you have more meetings you may choose to add or subtract from the structure. Consider starting and ending each meeting with something meaningful, like reading an agreed upon statement of your family philosophy, a short poem, a song, saying a prayer, or a declaration ("The Smith family meeting has now begun!").

Open with each person in the family stating one positive thing they have appreciated about each member since the last meeting in order to start on a positive note.

Each family member states one desire, complaint, concern, or proposed project or event to add to the agenda.



For each agenda issue, the family will work together to problem solve. All ideas should be written down in the family meeting journal and taken seriously. Even the silliest of ideas can lead to great ones.

For older kids, this is a good time to coordinate calendars and disperse allowances.

Each member can state a personal goal or a way they plan to make the family better during the coming week.

Make sure to use the meeting to plan fun things like family vacations, outings and charitable contributions. Family meetings can be a fun way to bring your family together and work towards common good.

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