

“Not another meeting!”

That tends to be the reaction from many parents when they hear the M word mentioned. Parents tend to associate meetings with the workplace rather than families. Even at work, meetings tend to be tolerated rather than keenly anticipated.

My research and my anecdotal evidence suggest that families that have a process to share decisions and to resolve conflict have more cooperative kids and less open sibling disputes. To be truthful, I stopped talking about family meetings in my presentations some years ago as people’s eyes tended to glaze over when I mentioned the M word.

But I am now ‘talking up’ the concept as many parents I have worked with in the past have remarked how useful they were in turning their families around from Me-centred to We-centred groups.

Family meetings are a useful way of unifying a family and developing a shared approach to its organization. They are based on the management principle that children like a say in how their family operates and that they are more likely to stick to rules and decisions that they have had a say in making rather than those imposed from above. In many ways, this is stating the bleeding obvious but we need a process to make this happen. That is where family meetings come in.

Following are ten basic keys for conducting family meetings:

1. They must be regular. Weekly or fortnightly meetings are ideal. If a parent calls a meeting when he or she wants then meetings just become a vehicle for mum or dad to get their point across rather than a means for children to participate in family-life.

2. Start when at least one child is five years of age. Children need the verbal and cognitive skills to participate. This varies but maybe around five years of age seems to be a good age to start.

3. Have an agenda. All good meetings need a chairperson and an agenda. Meetings are usually for one or more of four purposes:

- a) Plan for family fun
- b) Allocation of chores
- c) Resolving conflicts between people
- d) Discussion of family issues, procedures and routines. Parents need to be the initial chairperson but share the job around as children become more skilled.

4. Avoid overloading the agenda. You don’t have to slavishly work through all these areas. Two or three items may be enough and avoid the meeting from becoming a whinge session.

5. Have a talk sock. Have an object such as a sock or doll that the children must hold if they are going to speak, which teaches them how to take turns. The speaker, whether adult or child, must be holding the special talk sock.

6. Start each meeting with encouragement. Parents can model this initially by saying things like, "Thanks Marta for cleaning your toys away after playing with them this week. It was great have the family room so clean." This helps set a positive tone and teaches kids how to encourage.

7. Finish with a pleasant activity. A concluding game or a story will help reinforce a meeting as an event to anticipate.

8. They must be real. While meetings should be fun they are not a game you play with kids. You must be able to live with decisions that are made so you must be realistic about what is discussed and decided upon.

9. Short and sharp, not long and dull. Don't allow them to become bogged down. Keep moving them along. I know some meetings that have only gone for eight or nine minutes, but that's fine if objectives were met.

10. It is the process that is important. Sometimes meetings break down and decisions aren't made as they have descended into chaos. That happens but don't abandon the concept if nothing concrete comes of a meeting or two. It is the process of meeting and talking rather than the outcomes that are important.

Regular family meetings are a powerful means of improving relationships and building cooperation between parents and children. They provide the means for children to share and accept responsibility, participate fully in family-life and work cooperatively for the benefit of the group – their family.

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