

Organizing Family Meetings

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Feeling of Belonging: In the establishment of good relationships within a family, it is important for each member to feel he is an integral part of that family. Usually this is not the case unless parents work at providing a climate in which each child can feel he is a contributing member and that his services are needed to maintain a good family experience.

Giving children a real part in the family pays off in many ways. It helps them feel, “this is my family”, and makes them more willing to take responsibility in it. It reduces general complaining since they have been consulted about an issue.

Viewed as Individuals: A main point is that children need help to understand that their parents consider them as individuals rather than as something to be exploited. Children have the possibility of earlier maturity today than any previous generation. By feeling they are a real part of the family; they gain valuable experience in making decisions, in taking responsibility, and in learning to handle such problems as finances.

Voice in Decisions: Possibly the best way for encouraging children in this kind of development is to assist them in organizing a family meeting. There are times when parents must make decisions without the help of their children; however, if they can be given a voice, the family can become a cooperative, more smoothly functioning group.

Rules for the Family Meeting

1. A time should be set for the family to meet each week. It is not advisable to call a meeting whenever one member wishes; nothing is so urgent that it must be settled right now.
2. All members of the family are invited to participate; however, participation is not forced upon anyone. Since absence of a member can be used to reach decisions he may not like, most members will attend.
3. All members participate on equal footing, so each one has one vote. Everyone should be encouraged to contribute and express his ideas. However, any member who disrupts the session can be asked to leave if the others all agree.
4. The Chairmanship rotates, so that each member has this privilege and responsibility.
5. Parliamentary order provides each member with the opportunity to express himself freely and with the obligation to listen to others. If sessions are used by parents to preach,

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scold, or impose their will on the children, the family meeting is not democratic and fails in its purpose.

6. In the absence of a decision by the council everyone has the right to do what *he* considered best, but no decision that affects others has validity, unless it is approved by the family. In most conflict situations (during the interim between family meetings) it is usually sufficient for the parent to withdraw and leave the children to their own resources, without an audience.

7. The family meeting should not be a “gripe session”, but a source of working out solutions to problems. Each person expressing a complaint is expected to present his suggested solution. Emphasis is always on what we do, rather than on what any one member should do. It is important that decisions made during the family meeting include a plan for action if and when various members do not carry out what they decide at the meeting.

8. Parents are usually afraid of wrong decisions—usually proposed by the children. However, these can be used to advantage; parents should let children see what will happen. At the next meeting the children will agree on a better solution.

9. Once a decision has been made, any alteration has to wait for the next session. In the interim, no one has the right to decide on a different course of action or to impose his decision on others.

The family meeting is the only authority. No individual can lay down the law, or make decisions for others. At the same time, no one person has to shoulder the full responsibility for the well-functioning of the household. If parents are willing to accept the family council as supreme authority, they do not need to feel guilty if things do not always go as they should. It is more important that the children accept their responsibility than to have things going smoothly all the time.

Instituting the family meeting requires the realization that a fundamentally new and untried course of action has begun. Parents and children alike are not prepared for it. Children are afraid that this is another trick to make them behave and do the things they do not want to do, and parents fear demands and decisions by their children that are out of place. But if all the difficult period can be weathered, its effects should be highly beneficial for all concerned.

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