

Family Communication and Family Meetings

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The factor most likely responsible for whether we have a happy and satisfying family life is how we communicate with each other.

Do we feel we are heard and understood by our spouse and our children?

Is the whole family involved in problem solving and decision making together?

Do we tell each other what's on our mind?

Do we listen?

One of the best methods for promoting positive family communication is to hold family meetings.

What is a Family Meeting?

- Family meetings are time set aside to promote meaningful communication and to provide for family discussion, decision making, problem solving, encouragement and cooperation.
 - Family meetings can be structured and rather formal or flexible and informal.
 - At family meetings, everyone has a part and something to contribute. No one is less important than another, and family members contribute according to their age and ability.
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Who Benefits from Family Meetings? EVERYONE!

All families can benefit from family meetings whether they are stepfamilies, dual-career, single-parent, intergenerational or traditional. Family meetings are an excellent way to practice problem-solving skills, promote communication and build family unity. When a particular plan is discussed and mutually agreed on in a family meeting, everyone -- even the youngest child -- feels a sense of "ownership" and thus is more likely to go along with the plan. Also, children are able to see their family working together as a group. They experience feeling stronger and smarter in a group.

Regularly scheduled meetings might deal with daily decisions such as who will drive the kids to sports practice or how chores are to be distributed. A one-time meeting might be called for a specific purpose, like planning a vacation, holiday party or family project; solving a problem, such as how to make Grandma's moving in more comfortable for everyone; or clearing the air after a crisis or squabble.

At times meetings may cover major issues such as setting new family goals or developing a plan of action for handling a drop in family income. At other times a meeting may be called for minor issues, such as deciding what color to paint the house.

How Do We Get Started?

The process is easier to initiate if meetings begin when children are young (age 4 to 5). Teens and school-age children tend to be more negative about new activities. There may be negative reactions and resistance at first, but most children come to value the process once they understand it's a time to air concerns, discuss possible solutions and share positive moments.

Simply make a decision to start, have a plan of action for what will be said or done, pick a date and go for it!

Structured or Unstructured?

As you start, think about your current family communication patterns. If you're comfortable sharing feelings and have an open communication style, you may be able to begin with more structure. You may want to establish a specific routine such as:

1. Open with each member stating one positive thing they have appreciated about each member since the last meeting.
2. Ask for subjects of concern or issues for discussion. Create a list and discuss each one at a time.
3. Close by planning a family event for the week!

Some families will be more comfortable with less structure. Meetings may be called at any time, incorporated into driving time when schedules are tight or following a family meal. Informal meetings allow issues to be dealt with as they arise. If your children are older and you're new to this process, try starting more informally, such as:

1. A problem is identified during a long drive and you ask everyone to please relax and treat this

issue as a problem everyone can help solve.

2. Ask each member to share their concerns and a possible solution.
 3. After everyone has contributed, work together to find a solution that works for everyone.
 4. Conclude by explaining that they just successfully completed their first family meeting! Decide how the family might continue to use this process in the future.
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What are some General Guidelines for Effective Family Meetings?

1. Begin family meetings only after you feel your relationship with your children is one of mutual respect and honesty.
 2. Use the following guidelines for effective family meetings:
 - Establish a specific regular meeting time. Weekly is a good way to start.
 - Take advantage of driving time to discuss issues when meetings are not possible.
 - Establish and stick to time limits.
 - Make sure all members have a chance to offer ideas.
 - Encourage everyone to bring up issues. Write them down, keep a list until the next meeting and discuss them in order.
 - Don't permit meetings to become gripe sessions.
 - Plan family fun to meet the interests of all ages.
 - Use your communication skills. Listen with sensitivity, speak with respect for feelings and never use put-downs.
 - Evaluate decisions at the next meeting.
 - Don't use family meetings to attempt to solve one person's problems. Meetings are not therapy sessions. Use the meeting to share feelings and make suggestions. Seek professional help for problems.
 - Even families with one child can benefit from family meetings. Decision making is still important for everyone.
 - Remember that parents are not the only ones in charge. No one person should have control over meetings. Take turns leading the meetings, and involve everyone in an age-appropriate way.
 3. Follow through on agreements. At the time agreements are made, build in logical consequences for broken agreements.
 4. All members participate in family meetings as equals.
 5. Family meetings are important if families want to function democratically.
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Barriers to Positive Family Communication

"In my day ..."

One thing parents seem to find irresistible is using examples from their childhoods to make a case for why something should be done (or not be done) and why something is (or is not) hard to do. "When I was a little girl, my father wouldn't let me..." "I used to get up at 6 in the morning and do chores before I went to school..." "In my day we didn't watch TV after school. We did our homework."

It's hard for kids to relate to this history. Their reaction is likely to be much eye rolling rather than giving any serious thought to what it was like when you were growing up. And when you say things like, "I'm doing it for your own good" or "You'll thank me for this some day," you have filled the air with words that have very little meaning.

More importantly, you have shifted the discussion and avoided giving any reasons for what you are saying. If there's a rule in the house that children must finish their homework before watching TV, be clear about the rule and don't hide behind cliches or stories of your past. Give your reasons and be open to a rational discussion with your children.

Explain exactly why a rule exists. If children have an alternative plan, be open to trying their ideas for a certain period of time. Have an understanding that you will all meet to discuss it again and decide which way worked best. This is a valuable learning experience. Never say, "I told you so," if you go back to the original rule.

"In my day" is OK once in a while, but be careful not to overdo it. Most kids enjoy stories. What they don't enjoy is a lecture!

Being a mind reader

Too often communication with family members doesn't go far enough. You may have agreed there is a certain job to do and that you are the one who will do it, but you have not agreed on -- or maybe even talked about -- when the job will be done. If Mom thinks her son is going to do a chore right away and he thinks he's going to do it after the baseball game -- or next week -- then they have different expectations. Try to settle on a time when the job will be done. This type of incomplete communication, in which expectations are not clearly spelled out, is very confusing and leads to problems.

Getting upset and angry

How individuals express anger or disagreement has great impact on family communication.

It's easy to let off steam after something negative has happened, and some people believe it's good for your mental health to do this. It may, in fact, make you feel better for the moment, but you may say something you'll regret.

It is how you express anger -- not whether you express it -- that is important. Ideally, you want to stay in control of yourself even though you are angry. After all, you are the grown-up, and you are modeling behavior you want your children (or your spouse) to copy.

To avoid harsh words and confrontation, try calming yourself with anything that works for you -- like counting to 10 or saying to yourself, "Life is short; I'm not going to let myself get upset about this."

You might want to say to a child or to another adult, "I'm angry now. I can't talk about it. We'll talk about it as soon as I calm down," or "Let's each go to our own rooms to think about it and we'll talk soon."

Separating yourself from the situation or the person is often an effective strategy to pave the way for a discussion when everyone is calmed down.

Talk less and listen more

Adults find it hard to listen to one another. We are often so busy thinking of what we're going to say next that we don't listen to what someone is saying to us.

We do this with our families also, anticipating what spouses or children are going to say and interrupting them or reacting to what they are saying before they say it. It's even harder with very young children who take a long time to put their thoughts into words. Our impulse is to hurry them along, finish sentences for them or put words into their mouths.

We not only need to listen to children and adults but we need to acknowledge that we have heard and understood what they said. This often includes thoughts that are not totally expressed by words alone. Body language and facial expressions also send messages.

When to talk

Each family has some times that seem more open to communication than others.

Bedtime -- when children are settled into bed and not before -- is probably the most comfortable time for cozy chats. Children are more relaxed and don't mind putting off sleep to talk.

When children reach school age and beyond, they are not always so open about telling you what's on their minds. You need to hang out with them for a while before they'll tell you something that is really bothering them.

Even the busiest parent should try to find time to just be with a school-age or adolescent child. It doesn't have to be a specially scheduled occasion. Doing chores together can be an opportunity for a good relaxed interaction -- as long as there's no interfering static about how well a job is being done.

A Final Note

It's always easy to tell each other what's wrong and what someone else needs to do to improve. But it's critical for family members to share the positive. Parents must set a positive example. One parent educator calls this "catching them at being good!" For example, you might say:

- Thanks for getting your chores done on time this week.
- I really appreciate it when you read to your little brother.
- I noticed you filled the car with gas after you used it Sunday. That was great because I could go to work Monday morning and not have to take time to get gas.

It's so easy for parents to dwell on the negative. Family meetings are a time to reinforce positive behaviors and teach positive skills for living with others.

Most families experience a little frustration in starting new ideas. If you have questions or problems, call the Parent Line at 1-800-258-0808 or 237-7923 in Fargo. Don't let barriers get in the way of the end result -- healthy and positive family communication.

Reference

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