

A LINE ON LIFE

12/25/94

Managing Family Meetings *

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If your family does not have family meetings, maybe they should. Families might differ in size and other attributes, but family meetings need to be a priority. If you want to have family meetings, here are some important points to be remembered.

- **Set aside a certain time *just* for family meetings**, preferably each week. (The meeting should not be called solely because parents perceive a problem that they want to correct.) It can be in the evening or at a meal, but it should be a time free of phone calls and other distractions, when nobody has other commitments. This lets your children know that this time is important – and they are important.
- **Start each meeting on a positive note.** Compliment the positive things that each family member has done during the week. Express appreciation for things accomplished. Not only does this make each person feel better; it models positive statements rather than "*put-downs*" or other hassles.
- **Keep an "*agenda board*"** posted in a conspicuous place like a refrigerator door. Get family members to write their ideas or problems on it for the next meeting. Then be sure to discuss them. This allows children to vent their frustrations. If problems have not been solved or forgotten by the meeting time, the family can brainstorm to solve them at the meeting.
- **Meeting activities should respect the rights and opinions of all family members.** In **brainstorming**, at first all ideas are accepted *without* evaluation. A statement like, "*Well, that's a stupid idea!*" can turn a family member against meetings permanently. Ideas are evaluated in brainstorming – but *only* after the group is finished expressing their ideas. What seems to be a silly idea on the surface may turn out to be an effective way to solve a problem. In addition, children will learn an efficient way to deal with problems.
- **Whenever possible, decisions should be made by unanimous agreement rather than by a vote.** Those who lose in a vote might become resentful. If agreement cannot be reached, postpone the decision until the next meeting. By then, things might have cooled down, or new ideas may be developed.

**It is not enough to tell children how to make decisions.
It must be demonstrated and practiced.**

- **Have a person to chair the meeting and a secretary to record decisions.** As the children get older, rotate these positions among them. Once they understand the procedures, they can do a good job. Not only will they enjoy being in charge, but also this rotation indicates that parents are willing to consider the abilities of each child.
- **End each meeting on a positive note.** This can be a dessert, a game or plans for some family activity during the week.

Family meetings have many long-term benefits.

- This special time demonstrates commitment to the family. Appointments are kept with co-workers, friends or even strangers, but often not with our children.
- The meetings develop mutual respect when members solve problems together. Time is set aside for conversation, understanding and just getting to know one another.
- Children are given a chance to believe that their ideas, thoughts and feelings are taken seriously. This builds self-esteem, confidence and feelings of capability. In addition, parents might gain insights they have not had before.
- In these stressful times, times together can be difficult to find. Developing a tradition of family meetings can lead to special times together and enjoyable memories later.
- Through modeling and practice, children learn effective methods to solve problems and make decisions.

Wouldn't starting a tradition of family meetings be a good way to begin the New Year?

* Adapted from *Empowering People: Newsletter and Catalog*, Summer, 1994, page 10, and excerpt from Nelson, Erwin and Delzer's book, *Positive Discipline for Single Parents*, Prima Publishing, 1994.