

## Family Meetings

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As family therapists, we have often wondered how many families could have avoided the need for professional help if they had had family meetings on a regular basis.

Meetings can help families to:

- Improve harmony and communications—members feel “heard” and respected
- Practice positive thinking and being appreciative of others
- Resolve conflicts with the use of the “repair kit”
- Make effective plans and decisions
- Schedule fun activities

### Tips and Tools for Family Meetings:

Parents may occasionally need to be in an authoritative role during meetings, but one of the goals is for family members to express their feelings. During the feelings processes, all family members are on an equal footing with equal status and respect. Everyone should wind up feeling heard and understood for their feelings, even though they don’t necessarily get what they want.

Topics for meetings: Although a variety of options are possible, we recommend the following topics as a starter package. Going around the circle, everyone is encouraged to share:

1. Something new in their life that they feel good about
2. An appreciation of each family member
3. Something that was upsetting recently
4. As needed, use of the “repair kit” and “I-messages” to help members work out emotional hurts and upsets with each other
5. Suggestions for other topics to be discussed
6. Making decisions for the future, first using the “brainstorming” technique
7. Discussing schedules of events for the coming week
8. Setting personal and interpersonal goals for each family member—ways to help bring out the best in everyone
9. Ending on a positive note, with some music, fun, food or frolic!

Timing: Meetings can be arranged ahead of time or requested at additional times by any family member. We recommend that meetings happen initially once a week, but many families like to taper off to meeting every other week.

If possible, it’s helpful to initiate meetings when things are going relatively smoothly in the family. It’s good to practice and get the ball rolling when family members aren’t having lots of negative emotions.

Place: It usually works best to sit in a circle with everyone being on the same level. It can also help to hold the meetings in a neutral, fun place at home, and preferably not at the dinner table.

Leading the group: The job of the group leader for any given meeting is two-fold. First, to go around to different family members solicit their input, and second, to keep the process focused and moving so that things don't get bogged down. It's best for parents to run some of the initial meetings to demonstrate the role that an effective leader plays. After a while, it kids can take over this role as well when they're ready.

One of the most important goals of this process is showing care and concern for others thoughts and feelings through good, attentive listening. Parents should praise and encourage this, as well as coach members not to interrupt. Parents can also model deep "breathing" as a way of building patience and consideration. If certain family members tend to drone on and on, however, they should be coached to be more concise so as to not lose their audience.

Other pointers:

- Although some amount of negative "spewing" of feelings can be expected and helpful, sometimes it needs to be curtailed and replaced with some good problem solving.
- When discussing possible solutions to problems or challenges, use "brainstorming." This means that, without judgment or criticism, each member offers an idea or suggestion without criticism from others. This serves to loosen people's thinking and can add to greater creativity in finding solutions.
- Some decisions can be made democratically, and others are best left to the parents to decide. Children are ideally offered as much power and influence as they can responsibly handle, but no more. Good topics for group democratic votes are things like where or how to spend the weekend, vacation or free time. For larger decisions, for example those that have financial implications, parents can have the kids offer their ideas, yet might want to make final decisions behind closed doors.
- When making final decisions, family members who didn't get their way can learn how to patiently become a "consenting minority." Example: "Even though I would rather do X, I will make the best of the situation and have a good time." This is an excellent time to teach strategies of getting beyond self-centered attitudes— going along with the flow of things to bring out the best in everyone.