

# PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

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## Family Meetings

### REMEMBER:

- *Family meetings are a great way of developing life skills and responsibility in your children*
- *They can be formal or more casual depending on your family*
- *Meetings can build positive feelings within a family*
- *Problem solving can be included in every meeting but they should not be the main focus*

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Family meetings are an idea that many parents find useful to improve family relationships.

They are a time when the family can get together to plan activities, solve problems, and most importantly to spend some positive time together. Initially it might be hard to find the time for a meeting, but they can save time by preventing and solving many problems.

### WHY HAVE A FAMILY MEETING?

One of the most important benefits of these meetings is that the family is regularly brought together. This allows everyone to connect with one another and to work co-operatively on making the family work better.

If we do not set aside some special time each week to talk with family members, we can end up talking about important issues when we are rushing or perhaps in a bad mood. This can mean that our decisions are sometimes made without a lot of thought. We can best use our skills of listening and problem solving when we have time.

Family meetings are also a great way for children to learn how to become responsible adults. Children can become skilled at speaking up for themselves, listening to others, negotiating, and solving problems.

Family meetings can smooth the transition for teenagers to adulthood by providing an opportunity to slowly negotiating with them boundaries and responsibilities to them as they mature.

Most importantly these meetings allow everyone to spend positive time with one another on a regular basis. Shared good times are part of the 'glue' that can help keep a family together during difficult times.

## **DO I HAVE TO CALL THIS TIME A 'FAMILY MEETING?'**

Some parents and children are uncomfortable with the name – “family meeting.” It can sound a bit too formal or artificial.

Other names that families have used to describe these times are ‘family time’, ‘the family meal’, or ‘the Friday night get-together’. Some step or blended families may prefer to use the word ‘household’ instead of ‘family’. Think of a name that you are comfortable with and make it your own.

## **DOES HAVING A MEETING MEAN THAT OUR CHILDREN ARE NOW RUNNING THE FAMILY?**

Having family meetings does not mean that parents give up all their power and responsibility and that their children are now making all the rules.

Parents have to be sure they are comfortable with the level of input they allow from their children. This is an individual decision, but generally the more influence we allow our children to have in family matters, the more co-operation and goodwill we will create.

It is important that parents remember that some areas should not up for negotiation at all – ever! These are the family guidelines or rules around areas such as health, safety and respect. While these are not negotiable they are certainly worth discussing and reminding everyone about during family meetings.

Family meetings provide an opportunity for parents to gradually hand over more and more power and responsibility to children as they mature. This happens naturally as children go from infancy to late adolescence. Family meetings can make this natural process a little easier and less painful.

Remember that young children will need our help and support to ensure that they are heard and to feel that they have an important part to play in the meeting. Do whatever you can to enable their participation, regardless of age.

## **WHAT CHALLENGES COULD WE HAVE?**

Family meetings challenge parents to do less talking and more listening. These times give children the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about issues in the family and their lives that affect them.

They allow young people to have some say and take some responsibility in the way the family works. Having this voice makes it more likely that they will be cooperative family members.

We need to encourage our children to speak up in a respectful way, and we need to resist any urge we have to dominate the meeting by speaking too much.

It is also important to remember that family meetings do not work if there is a focus only on problems. At least half the time should be spent on positives such as compliments and fun activities. These are the things that bring the family together and strengthen it.

Sometimes a family member will say that they do not want to attend family meetings. Often this family member is an adolescent. If anyone says they do not want to be involved, hold the meetings anyway.

Ideally everyone should take part, but one person should not stop this important family ritual. Usually the person will eventually realise that they are missing out on something important and enjoyable and start coming again.

It is important that you don't expect family meetings to run without problems. Family meetings are about learning the skills to get on with other people. These skills take time to develop and none of us ever become perfect at them.

When problems arise try to see them as an opportunity where, with your support, children can grow and mature.

But always remember that growing up is a lifelong journey made up of many small steps.

If your child has had a history of behaviour problems, you will need to keep strong boundaries during meetings until they learn how to behave during meetings as well.

## **HOW DO I SET UP AND RUN A FAMILY MEETING?**

Just as every family is unique, so is every family meeting. Each family has to feel comfortable with their own way of running them.

Some families run meetings in a very structured way. They have roles for everyone such as a chairperson, a secretary to take the minutes of the meeting, a timekeeper, etc.

Other families might simplify things by only having someone reading an agenda and someone else writing down any decisions made. Some families will want their meetings to be very casual and informal, with no strict format or roles.

Some children, particularly younger ones, really enjoy having a role in the meeting that makes them feel 'grown-up'. As children become confident and understand how your meetings work, with your support they can take on some other roles.

At the first meeting it is a good idea to start working out the rules that will help make your meetings work. Guidelines about turn taking, being respectful, and time limits for speaking, etc., can be put in place.

Meetings should not go for more than 30 minutes. Keep them even shorter for very young children. Most families prefer to have them weekly, but for some fortnightly meetings are best.

## **WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN AT A FAMILY MEETING**

You need to create your own ways of spending this time together, but here are some ideas of things you might include:

### **Opening / Closing Ritual**

Some families like to have a symbolic way of beginning or ending meetings. This could be something like lighting a candle, saying a prayer, or greeting one another in a special way.

### **Compliments**

Each family member talks about something positive they noticed happening in the family. This can start a habit of everyone looking for things that are going right rather than wrong with the family.

Compliments are a great way to start the meeting. This might feel artificial and forced at first, but once everyone becomes comfortable with this idea, compliments can be a very powerful way to create positive feelings in the family.

This is also a good opportunity to teach family members to accept compliments with a simple 'thank you'.

### **Jokes**

Just for fun, some families include a time to share jokes. Very young children particularly enjoy this idea.

### **Organisational Issues**

List on a calendar upcoming events, commitments, activities, homework that is due, etc. This activity can help the family manage all of its commitments more easily and with less stress.

### **Decisions**

Some families might discuss decisions to be made in areas such as meals for the week, chores to be done around the house, holiday destinations, what TV shows to watch, and more.

## Problem Solving

Everyone can be asked if they have noticed something that could be improved in the way the family is working. These might be around areas such as family co-operation, household jobs, respecting each other, computer /TV use, etc. Any issue at all. Some families use a white board or a book for family members to list before meetings, anything they would like to suggest for discussion. Try and make a limit of discussing one or two problems per meeting.

When a complaint, or a question, or a dispute comes up during the week, we always have the option of saying 'let's discuss that at our next family meeting'. This can give you some time to think about how best to handle an important issue. It can also stop a dispute from getting out of control and allows family members to discuss problems when they are calmer.

It is sometimes best not to make individual's problems a topic for discussion, as it can be embarrassing for them. For example, you might not make your adolescent son's rudeness towards you a topic for family discussion. This might best be talked about privately. However you could have a general discussion about how it would be best for everyone in the family to treat each other.

## Individual Problem Solving

Any family member who feels comfortable can bring up a personal problem e.g. being bullied at school. By doing this they can have the problem solving power and support of the whole family working for them.

## Fun Activities

It is very important to end family meetings in a positive way. A nice, simple, tasty dessert, a family game, or a DVD are all good ways to end this special time together. This is one essential ingredient of successful meetings.

You do not have to include all the ideas listed, but try to have the meeting at the same time each week. Try and use a format that you can keep to and that suits your family.

Families may record the ideas and problems discussed, as well as the compliments that were given to keep a record of the meeting. These notes can be kept in a workbook

## HOW ARE DECISIONS REACHED?

The meeting does not act like a court to find who is responsible for a problem. The focus should be on finding answers or solutions instead.

The first step after an issue is discussed is to allow everyone to brainstorm possible solutions. Brainstorming involves anyone and everyone being allowed to suggest ideas of all kinds. These are then discussed to sort out which options are practical and likely to be successful.

When it is time to make a decision about the best option there are two ways this can be done.

One is by a democratic vote where the decision that gets the most votes is selected. This is the simplest and quickest way of making a decision. The disadvantage of this approach is that those who lose the vote may be unhappy with the decision and not cooperate in carrying it out.

A better approach may be to try and reach agreement by consensus. This often takes more time but it can be a way of satisfying everyone.

## WHAT IS CONSENSUS?

Consensus requires the agreement of everyone to the solution to a problem. It takes time because the solution has to be discussed and changed until everyone is happy with it.

Once agreement is reached the solution can be tried out for a week until the next meeting and discussed again if needed.

If no consensus is reached at a meeting then there are a few options. It may mean that things stay as they are until the issue is thought about and discussed at the next meeting. Or perhaps the parents make a decision for the family until a consensus is reached at another time.

The strength of consensus is that it means there are no winners and losers on decisions. It also teaches young people to think about the needs of others and to develop the important skill of compromising.

Some parents feel more comfortable presenting a list of options to their children that they have agreed on before the meeting and allowing the family to decide which of these options is best.

Know that it is OK if no agreement is reached on an issue at first. This is a sign that people are really thinking and caring about what is happening in the family. The more discussion and time involved in reaching a decision, the more your children will have time to think and to consider the views of others.

## **WHY NOT GIVE IT A TRY?**

Done in the right spirit, family meetings will be a cherished memory of good times in the family and will enable your children to grow into more responsible and sensitive adults. Rituals such as family meetings give everyone an opportunity to feel a strong sense of belonging and love.

Now is the time to start planning your first meeting!