

# 10 Tips for Successful Family Meetings

Fact Sheet No. 10.249

Consumer Series | Family

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Family meetings are a structured discussion that can help family anger decrease. Families can use these discussions to resolve specific conflicts that might have just been argued about in the past. Families might use these meetings to discuss issues such as, house rules, vacation plans, sibling rivalry, changes in the family structure, etc. Specific guidelines to see if it is safe for your family to conduct a family meeting are listed. One key indicator of determining family safety is the way couples handle conflict.

Arguments between couples can be classified into three different types. The first type is non-violent in which couples may or may not yell at each other and may resort to name-calling, criticism, defensiveness, and/or contempt. However, throughout the argument both partners feel physically and emotionally safe. A second type of arguing is called common couples' violence. In this type of arguing, one or both partners might yell; use name-calling, criticism, defensiveness, and contempt; might also push, shove, and/or hit each other; and might throw objects in general or at each other. In this second type, both partners still feel physically and emotionally safe during the argument. In these first two types of arguments, both partners feel as though they have relatively equal power in the relationship. Lastly, there are couples whose arguments classify as intimate partner violence. Typically, this is where one partner is trying to intimidate, hurt, scare, harass, and/or manipulate the other partner. This third type of arguing is where one partner holds more power in

the relationship and may physically and/or financially isolate and/or physically, emotionally, and/or mentally hurt the other partner and any children or animals in the household.

By providing research-based anger and conflict management strategies in our homes and in our families, we can reduce and prevent arguments and violence. We also believe that ongoing good communication between families can decrease arguments and violence and increase family satisfaction. A review of four computer databases over the past 40 years (1973-2013) found 31 articles on family meetings or family councils. These articles suggest that there are many positive benefits to family meetings, such as enhancing moral reasoning in youth, increased positive youth behavior, and increased effective family decision making. If you find that these tips do not work for your relationship and/or family, please seek support from a trusted friend or relative, therapist, counselor, and/or spiritual leader.

## Is Your Family Ready for Meetings?

An excellent way for families to communicate is through regular family meetings. This communication strategy can enhance moral reasoning and manage anger long before it turns into violence. Regular family meetings can promote family harmony by providing a safe time and place for making decisions, recognizing good things happening in the family, setting up rules, distributing chores fairly, settling conflicts, and pointing out individual strengths.

Some families are ready for self-directed enrichment and problem solving and other families may first want to utilize family or marriage therapy in order to decrease arguments or violence in the household. To



## Quick Facts

- Most families argue and some families have arguments where pushing, slapping, hitting, etc. are involved. No matter what, all families can learn different strategies to discuss difficult issues.
- People are more likely to suffer violence and neglect from those closest to them than from strangers.
- Three female partners, three children, and two male partners are killed by family members every day in the United States.
- Adults who experienced violent childhoods are more likely to abuse children and romantic partners than those who experienced little or no violence as children.

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help assess whether your family is ready to try family meetings, answer the following questions:

1. Is the parent, or parents, who live in the household committed to using words and communication to solve problems as a family instead of violence?
2. In a two-parent family, do both parents feel as though they share relatively equal power in their couple's relationship (e.g. both partners feel as though they have an equal say in decision making; that your partner takes your opinion into account when making decisions, etc.)?
3. In a step-family, do all members of the family feel that issues and differences can be discussed without putting down members of the biological or step-family who might not be present at the meeting?
4. In families where there are children, do all members of the family feel that issues and differences can be discussed without screaming, yelling and/or fighting?
5. Do all members of the family listen to and hear one another's viewpoints (at least sometimes) even when the viewpoints are different than those personally held?
6. Do all family members feel that their opinions are valued and feel safe emotionally, physically, and mentally within the family?
7. Does the parent, or parents, in the family feel that they have an authoritative parenting style where they are able to listen to and show love toward her/his/their children but also set firm consequences and boundaries?

If you answered yes to all of these questions relevant to your family, then read on and try the steps below. If you answered no to any or all of the questions or if you answered yes to the relevant questions but still feel as though your family would like more assistance, please seek the guidance of a trusted therapist, counselor, or spiritual leader. Often you can find trusted therapeutic sources through friends, the internet, or a phone book.

If a formal family meeting does not seem workable in your family at the present time, work toward this end by planning to eat meals together. Use this time to share the day's happenings and celebrate successes of family members. Involve the whole family in planning, rather than having just parents. Your family could also use this time to plan for holidays, vacations and weekend outings.

When a controversy develops with another family member, have a discussion. Use good problem-solving skills. Identify the specific problem you want to solve and talk about the possible ways to solve it. Talk about the pros and cons of each solution and come to an agreement about the best one. When this way of problem solving feels comfortable, gradually involve other family members. Compliment children when you hear them solving their problems using the skills you have taught them. Do not feel discouraged if one week your family is able to make progress towards having family meetings and then the next week they do not – working towards having a family meeting can be a slow process as arguing often becomes a habit within families.

## Planning Family Meetings

When your family is ready, begin planning formal meetings. Set aside time to be together and to look at your lives and what works and what does not. Begin with an attitude of openness and acceptance rather than one of dominance or control. Be flexible. The meeting place and length can vary. At first, plan fun activities that involve everybody: "Let's have a family meeting soon to talk about your birthday. Is Sunday after supper a good time for you?"

Set a date and time when **all** family members can be there. An elderly family member living in the home may also be invited. Invite everybody but do not require them to be present. The consequence of not being present is that their views will be missing as the family makes decisions that may affect them.

As soon as children can use words, they can participate. Especially with young children (ages 2 to 6), keep the family meeting as short as 10 to 20 minutes, gradually increasing the time. With older children, decide ahead how much time to allow.

Many families find it valuable to schedule meetings for the same time and place every week or every other week. Design the meetings to fit the family. Some families find monthly meetings better.

The length is determined by the topics to be discussed. By holding family meetings regularly, it is easier to keep them balanced to both celebrate happy times and solve family problems. Discussing one or two problems per meeting usually is a good limit.

## Tips for Successful Family Meetings

The purpose of a family meeting is to foster open communication among family members. It is a safe place where everyone is free to say what they think and feel as they cooperate to make decisions and solve problems. A structured meeting helps this to happen when a family is ready for it.

### 1. Meet at a regularly scheduled time.

Begin and end on time. Guard meeting times and encourage high commitment by keeping them a high priority. Sometimes discussions can run over-time so one parent should appoint themselves the time-keeper. At 10 minutes before the meeting is over, the time-keeper parent should see if family members believe the discussion will be resolved in 10 minutes or if they want to extend the meeting time or schedule a new meeting to continue the discussion.

### 2. Rotate meeting responsibilities (e.g., leader, secretary and timekeeper).

Treating everybody as equals provides all family members with practice at problem solving. Encourage all to be good listeners. The original leader should be an adult family member who can be a role model of positive/open communication and listening skills and mediation skills. The leader starts and ends the meeting on time and helps the family develop the rules to follow. One example of a rule is: Only one person speaks at a time; the rest listen well enough so they can repeat back to the speaker's satisfaction what he or she said and feels. The leader makes sure all points of view are heard.

The leader also keeps the communication focused on one topic at a time and ends the meeting on time. At the

end of the meeting, the family decides who will be the leader, secretary and timekeeper next time. Some families choose to have a secretary who keeps minutes of decisions and agreements. The secretary also can record activities and deadlines on a calendar for all to see. The next meeting can begin with a re-cap by the secretary. The minutes can be a family journal that is kept to look back on in later years. The roles of leader and secretary can be rotated among the adults until everyone feels at ease with how to conduct an effective family meeting. Then these roles can be rotated among younger children as well. Youth may need assistance with their role as leader and parents will want to negotiate how to provide assistance without overtaking the leader role.

Some families may decide that rotating roles (especially for youth younger than 7 years) may not be effective and that certain roles might not be necessary whereas other roles (such as, referee, co-leader, rule-maintainer, etc.) might be more needed. Parents may want to try co-leading with any youth who do not believe he/she is ready to be a leader. Trying anything new is going to take getting used to, so try one style of family meetings for a few weeks and then make changes to the style to best fit your family.

### **3. Encourage all family members to participate.**

In a safe environment, family members can express their opinions without punishment or retaliation. Show lots of love (parents may need to role-model this during difficult discussions).

### **4. Discuss one topic and solve one problem at a time.**

The family may want to start by everyone sharing some of their major grievances and also some positive moments within the family. The topic(s) of discussion in the family meeting should be something that affects the whole family. For instance, if the issue just affects the parents or two of the siblings, then this should not be discussed at the family meeting.

The leader might start the discussion with, "The problem we want to solve today is .... I suggest we devote ... minutes to this issue. Is this agreeable?" Later the family can renegotiate more time if necessary. As the leader notices the discussion moving off track, he or she might say: "That sounds

like an issue we may want to discuss at another time. But for now the issue we're here to discuss is ...." As the leader notices someone interrupting the speaker, he or she might say: "Excuse me, [name]. We want to hear your opinion because it is important to us. Could you hold it until [name] is finished talking?" This type of leadership may be difficult for children, so a parent may need to step in to foster the child's leadership capabilities. Some children may be able to better voice their concerns through writing, drawing, and role playing. It is important in these meetings to utilize strengths of each family member to help discuss and resolve the issue.

One or both parents may want to summarize the discussion to keep the family on track when the focus moves to another unresolved issue. Parents will want to look for nonverbal and verbal signs that a family member is uncomfortable with something. If one or more family members are uncomfortable, then a parent may want to call a time-out to the meeting and check in with each family member.

### **5. Use I-messages.**

Often when we are upset we start sentences with "You are so...." or "You do this all the time and it makes me mad" or a similar version. When the person we are talking to hears this, they immediately go on the defense. However, when you are sharing this information often you are trying to voice a concern or emotion. Try starting sentences with "I feel sad when..." or "I get upset when..." This helps the other family members understand how you feel and what you want changed without feeling personally attacked.

### **6. Use problem-solving steps.**

For problem-solving steps, see fact sheet 10.238 [\*Dealing with Couples' Anger\*](#).

### **7. Make decisions by consensus.**

Consensus is defined as communicating, problem-solving and negotiating on major issues until no family member has any major objections to the decision; or when all members can live with it. Autocratic decision-making allows one person to decide. Democratic decision-making allows the majority to decide. Neither works well in families where people live, work and play side by side. Those family members who do not feel heard may sabotage decisions made this way.

"Buddha likened anger ... to reaching into a fire to pick up a burning ember in our bare hands with the intention of throwing it at someone. Before the injury is done to another, it is done to ourselves." – (L. Kohlberg, L., *Stages in the development of moral thought and action*. p. 60)

Decision-making by consensus incorporates the major needs and wants of all. It allows effective communication, problem solving, anger and conflict management. The decision choices need to be something that all family members can live with emotionally, financially, physically, and mentally.

### **8. Once it appears that you have an agreement, make sure you have reached consensus.**

"What I'm hearing us say we can all agree to do is ...." Does anyone have any major objections?" If someone does have a problem, talk and negotiate some more.

### **9. If things get "too hot to handle," anyone can call for a break.**

Take a break for perhaps 15 minutes, or whatever time is needed, before meeting again.

### **10. End with something that is fun and that affirms family members.**

Enjoy a family tradition, a bowl of popcorn and a good television program, or a game that everybody enjoys.

## **Evaluate and Adjust**

Remember, just as family members grow and change over time, so, too, do rules for family meetings.

If children want to do something that seems like a mistake, discuss it rather than lay down the law or forbid it. Raise some of the issues or consequences they may have overlooked. If the matter is not too serious, it might be a good learning experience for them to deal with these consequences, especially if parents can teach in a coaching rather than a blaming manner. Children are more apt to learn to make good decisions if they have full knowledge ahead of time and then assume responsibility for decisions, both good and bad.

To evaluate your family's progress, assess how well the children take responsibility for problem solving. Do any family members feel closer to each other? Is the trust level increasing? Noticing small positive changes is a good way to encourage continued progress. In the reference section, please note that the Slagle and the Faber and Mazlish papers offer additional practical ideas for conducting effective family meetings.

If your family just cannot seem to find a time when everybody can get together and talk, adapt the steps in this fact sheet. Consider alternatives. Perhaps you can touch base with your spouse and children individually on how they are doing, which decisions need to be made alone, and which need to be made together. Stopping periodically to discuss decisions that relate to all family members, scribbling dates on the calendar, and talking on the run may be the best you can do under the circumstances.

The key to successful family meetings is to be flexible. Use what works to help your family ride the ups and downs of family living and to bounce back after a stressful event. Families that know how to adapt well to inevitable changes tend to have higher marital and family satisfaction levels.

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