

10 Tips for Successful Family Meetings

Fact Sheet No. 10.249

Consumer Series | Family

by R.J. Fetsch and B. Jacobson*

Sadly, violence in Colorado and the United States usually is addressed after the fact: in courts, prisons, hospitals and morgues. The cost of our reactive approach is high. The United States has the highest rates of incarceration and youth violence in the world (13).

Many Coloradans believe that violence is inevitable. Colorado State University Cooperative Extension does not. We believe that violence is a serious but preventable public health issue.

By providing research-based anger and conflict management strategies where the seeds of violence first germinate – in our homes and in our families – we can reduce and prevent violence. We also believe that ongoing good communication between families can decrease violence and increase family satisfaction.

Research-Based Information

Given the moral crisis of our times, finding effective ways for parents to enhance moral reasoning in their children is a crucial task (12). Experiences that enhance moral reasoning include situations that encourage cognitive restructuring, role-taking opportunities, participation in groups that are perceived as fair or just, and exposure to views different from one's own (5, 12). As a young person grows both in awareness that others' viewpoints and feelings are different from one's own and in the capacity to see one's own behavior from others' perspectives, so, too, does the young person's moral development grow (6, 9, 12).

A review of four computer databases over the past 40 years (1967-2006) found 21 articles on family meetings or family councils. Four studies were found with

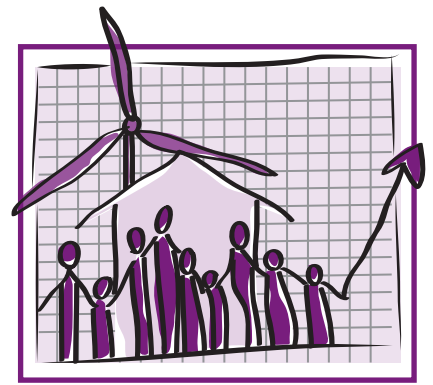
**R.J. Fetsch, Colorado State University Extension human development and family studies specialist and professor, human development and family studies; and B. Jacobson, retired Extension consumer and family education agent, Douglas County. 4/2007*

empirical evidence of positive family changes as a result of participating in parent training programs that included family meetings (12, 14). Parents who participated in a six-week two hours per week Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) program (2) reported their children's behavior improved significantly (14). One experimental-control group study with 110 African American families found that six two-hour sessions in the Strengthening Families program: For Parents and Youth 10 to 14 with family meetings showed positive results in child skills such as setting goals, managing stress, and effective communication with parents (11).

The changes in parents and adolescents were even more impressive in a study in which two groups met for 10 weekly, two-and-one-half-hour sessions and received training in conflict resolution and the use of family meetings (12). Families improved their effectiveness in collective decision making. The group that included both parents and adolescents showed greater improvements. Families became more democratic in the ways they established rules and resolved conflicts. They improved their communication, were more effective in solving problems, and increased their egalitarian family relationships. Finally, adolescents who participated in the training significantly improved their scores in moral reasoning, and the results continued for at least nine months afterward.

Is Your Family Ready for Meetings?

An excellent way for families to communicate is through regular family meetings. This 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



Quick Facts

- 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.
- Almost half of murder victims knew their assailants. Only 15 percent were murdered by strangers.
- People who experienced violent childhoods are more likely to become child and spouse abusers than those who experienced little or no violence as children.

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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 like that recommended here. Other families first need family or marriage therapy because their situations are too troubled to be worked out without professional assistance. To help assess whether your family is ready to try family meetings, answer the following questions:

1. Are we as parents committed to using words and communication to solve problems as a family?
2. Can we as a family discuss issues and differences without screaming, yelling and fighting?
3. Do we at least sometimes listen to and hear one another's viewpoints?

If you answered yes to most of these questions, then read on and try the steps below. Otherwise, ask your friends for the names of therapists who are effective at assisting families who have situations similar to yours. Look in the yellow pages of your telephone book under counselors and make an appointment to seek the professional assistance your family needs.

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 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.

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 don't 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. Intergenerational families sometimes 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.

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 believes in equal rights and democratic relationships. 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.

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. Some parents are just beginning to experiment with shifting from an authoritarian to an authoritative parenting style (1, 8). At first, they sometimes feel more comfortable limiting open discussion to smaller issues with less serious consequences. These parents are encouraged not to worry too much and let logical consequences of less serious actions speak for themselves. It is better for a child to learn from a \$5 mistake now than a \$1,000 mistake later.

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

"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, _____. We want to hear your opinion – it is important to us. Could you hold it until _____ is finished talking?"

5. Use I-messages and problem-solving steps.

For information about how to create I-messages, see fact sheet 10.236, *Dealing with Our Anger*. For problem-solving steps, see 10.238, *Dealing with Couples' Anger* (3, 4).

6. Summarize the discussion to keep the family on track and to focus the discussion on one issue at a time.

Summarize the current agreement as necessary. Look for nonverbal and verbal signs that a family member is uncomfortable with something.

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 — all 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.

Decision-making by consensus incorporates the major needs and wants of all. It allows effective communication, problem solving, anger and conflict management.

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, 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. Slagle (10) offers 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

"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)

event. Families that know how to adapt well to inevitable changes tend to have higher marital and family satisfaction levels.

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