

Family Meetings

In this document, you will see my summary of how a Family Meeting is structured, a guideline by **D. Dinkmeyer, Jr.**, and a more in-depth guideline by **Dr. J. Nelsen**.

The family meetings can have bumpy starts, but don't give up. It's worth the effort.

Family meetings should be held once a week at least.

Meet at a table, couch, or on the floor; just note that you will need to take minutes of the meeting. Plan 15-40 minutes for the meeting; however, 15 minutes is enough for your first meetings.

1. Start with compliments. Everyone gives one compliment to each member of the family, including themselves.

2. Go to the planning part of the meeting. It's where you get to review the upcoming week's activities. It's also a time to plan meals and menus and arrange or acknowledge special celebrations that may be forthcoming and require a little extra creativity. In a meeting, you can also plan future vacations, weekend trips, or other fun activities.

There are many different democratic countries, and each one has different rules. Decide upon your democratic rules before starting your first family meeting. You will need to know how you want to proceed with the decision-making, such as:

- *when and where do the meetings take place?*
- *will you throw a coin to decide?*
- *are all putting in their voting?*
- *in which order will the family members make decisions, and suggestions, take minutes, and who will lead the meetings?*
- *where and when can the family members add their topics about problem-solving to the agenda?*

3. Continue with discussing problems/finding solutions such as:

- **what solution is there for avoiding a poorly filled dishwasher**
- **what can be done, so the older one isn't disturbed by the little ones during homework time.**
- **why weren't the screen time rules not kept, and what is the solution for better time management?**
- **what routine could remove the fights about cleaning the kitchen?**

It's important to let the children lead as part of the conversation because they must have the ownership and the buy-in on the planning and problem-solving as well.

Enable brainstorming, let the ideas fly, and then make a decision.

4. End the meeting with a fun game, such as:

- a board game
- seek and hide
- online family yoga class or dance class
- create a family video with a fun script you create with the children
- hide stuffed animals in the house, turn off the lights and go on a safari to find them, with each having a flashlight
- treasure hunt in the garden
- ball games outside

Plan about 20 minutes for the game; that should be great fun and help connect.

If it doesn't turn out so well and in the way you expected, it's ok. It's essential to focus on the small steps, connection, and learning experiences.

You can be honest with your children and tell them that you are learning to lead the meetings and that it will take a few turns until you are better at it.

With time, the family meeting will become a normal family event, but from the beginning, the child's idea to belong and have significance will grow, even if you don't see it right away.

Guidelines for Family Meetings

By Don Dinkmeyer, Jr.

Getting into the habit of family meetings takes time. Making the meetings work takes effort. Here are some ideas to help you.

Meet at a regular time. A regular time might be once a week. Plan to have the meeting last from twenty minutes to an hour.

Make a list of topics. Some people call this list of topics an agenda. Post it on the refrigerator. Then people can add to it during the days before the meeting. This helps you deal with the things that are important to each person in the family.

Plan the time. At first, you will need to be in charge of this. Look at the meeting list. Decide how much time makes sense for each item on the list. Stick to the time limits.

Take turns being the leader. The leader reads the meeting list and keeps things on track. Still, letting each person in the family have a chance to lead is important. Younger children will need help to do this. That's okay.

Take notes. Write down the agreements and plans made in the meeting. These written notes are the minutes. Take turns doing the job of note-taking. Find a place to post the notes so everyone can read them. Some families put them on the refrigerator near the next meeting's agenda. Ask teens and older children to read the notes to younger children who don't read yet.

Let everyone take part. When talking about something on the list, let the young people in the family speak first. This helps them feel responsible.

- If someone hasn't talked, ask, "What do you think?"
- If someone talks too much, stay respectful. You could say, "It sounds like this is important to you. We need to hear how everybody else feels about it."
- If someone is not showing respect, use an I-message: "When I hear name-calling, I get concerned that we won't be able to cooperate."

Limit complaining. Lots of complaining can turn meetings into gripe sessions. This won't solve problems. It won't help families enjoy each other. If complaining is a problem, ask, "What can we do about it? How can we solve the problem?" Remember to listen for feelings and to share yours. When problems arise, explore alternatives.

Cooperate to choose chores. To start, you might want to volunteer for a chore no one likes. You might say: "I'll clean the cat box or the bathroom. Which should I do?" As time goes on, expect others to do some of the unpleasant chores too. Some families take turns doing different chores. Others use a job jar.

Do what you agree to do. Stick to agreements until the next meeting. If people want to change the agreement, they can do it then. Children, teenagers, and parents are expected to do what they agree to do.

What if you forget and break an agreement? What if one day you don't have time to do something you agreed to? Tell your family you are sorry. Say you will work to do a better job. A teenager might sometimes forget or not have time too. No one is perfect.

If broken agreements continue, make a "work before fun" rule: Before people do fun activities, their chores need to be done. The rule applies to parents as well as teens and younger children.

Take time for fun. Meetings are a good way to solve problems and choose chores. But that's not all they are for. To add fun to meetings, talk about good things. Thank each person for some help given during the week. Ask each person to do the same. Ask people to talk about what is good for them right now. This sets a positive tone. It also teaches your children to encourage other people - and themselves.

At the meeting, plan together to do something you all enjoy. You might plan to make home-made pizzas together on Sunday night. Maybe you'll plan to watch a football game together on TV. Some families spend time having fun together right after the meeting. Respect people's busy schedules, though. Teenagers may have other plans for after the meeting.

Guidelines for Family Meetings

By Dr. J. Nelsen

It is difficult for me to choose a favorite Positive Discipline parenting tool, but family meetings are at the top. Children learn so much during family meetings, such as listening, respecting differences, verbalizing appreciation, problem-solving, focusing on solutions, and experiencing that mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn. I have a much longer list, but you get the idea. Family meetings also create a family tradition and will create many memories.

One of my favorite stories is about a time my teenagers started complaining about family meetings and saying that they were stupid and lame. My children loved family meetings when they were four to twelve or so. Then they started complaining, as typical teens do. I asked them to humor me, and that we could shorten the time from 30 minutes to 15.

One day Mary, one of the complainers, spent the night at a friend's house. The next day she announced, "That family is so screwed up. They should be having family meetings." When Mary went off to college, she initiated regular "family meetings" with her roommates and said they would not have survived without them.

Why are family meetings so difficult?

Since family meetings are so important, why do so many families avoid taking the time to implement them? And, when they do, why do they have so many challenges?

One parent wrote about her frustrations with trying to implement family meetings sharing that her eight-year-old son constantly displayed his new talent for burping during the meetings, and her five-year-old freaks out when anyone brainstorms a suggestion she doesn't like.

Part of the problems could be that parents don't take enough time for training. They may expect their children to have all the necessary skills for family meetings. When you think about it, this makes as much sense as expecting children to have the vocabulary of a college student the first year they start speaking.

Children under the age of four may not be developmentally ready to learn the skills for family meetings. If they are interrupting during family meetings (instead of being willing to play quietly), wait until they are asleep to have your family meeting with older children. These first few meetings should take about 15 minutes.

10 STEPS FOR EFFECTIVE FAMILY MEETINGS

1. **Introduction.** “We will read these steps until we all know them. Who would like to start with number two?” (If children are old enough, they can take turns reading the steps.)
2. **Compliments or Appreciations.** “Each of us will share one thing we appreciate about each member of the family. I will start. I would like to compliment _____ for _____.” Give each family member a compliment, and then have everyone else do the same.
3. **Family Meeting Agenda.** “The agenda will be placed on the refrigerator so everyone can write down problems during the week. You’ll notice that leaving dishes in the sink is on the agenda for us to practice problem solving.”
4. **Talking Stick.** “This item will be passed around to help everyone remember that only one person can talk at a time, and that every- one gets a turn.”
5. **Brainstorming.** “Brainstorming means thinking of as many solutions as we can. While brainstorming, all ideas are okay (even funny ideas) without discussion.”
6. **Focus on Solutions.** “Let’s practice with the problem on the agenda. Who would like to be our scribe and write down every suggestion?” (If your children aren’t old enough, you can take this job.)
7. **Encourage the kids to go first.** “Who would like to start with some wild and crazy ideas?” (If no one speaks up, you might need to get them started with some wild ideas and some practical ones by saying, “What about throwing dirty dishes in the garbage? What if each of us takes one day of the week?” But first allow for silence.) If someone objects to an idea, say, “For now we are just brainstorming for solutions. All ideas will be written down.”
8. **Use the 3 R’s and an H to assess proposed solutions.** Encouraging solutions must be (1) related, (2) reasonable, (3) respectful, and (4) helpful. “Who can see any solutions we need to eliminate because they are not related, reasonable, respectful, or helpful? Our scribe can cross them off after we discuss why.”
9. **Choosing the Solution.** “Do we want to narrow the ideas down to one solution or try more than one? We can evaluate how the solution or solutions worked during our next meeting, in one week.”
10. **Fun Activity.** “We will take turns choosing an activity for the end of each family meeting. For tonight I’ve chosen charades. Who will volunteer to decide the fun activity for next week?”

A Family Meeting Training Plan

Week One: The Agenda

Introduce the five components of family meetings. Let your family know you will be spending as many weeks as it takes to learn each component.

- 1.) The Agenda
- 2.) Compliments
- 3.) Brainstorming for Solutions

4.) A family fun activity such as a game, cooking, or popcorn and a movie.

5.) Calendar for family fun event

The first week you can spend more time on the Agenda. Let your kids know this is where they can write problems. (Younger children can ask parents to write on the agenda for them.) Ask if anyone can think of any problems they would like help with. If they can't think of anything you could say, "What about _____ (whatever problem you have noticed during the day between or with the kids). You could then say, "I would like to add burping." Let them know that the agenda will be put on the fridge and anyone can add anything they want during the week. You won't try to solve any of the problems until after the kids learn about brainstorming. Let your kids know that next week, they'll learn about compliments so they might want to be thinking of what they appreciate about everyone in the family so they'll be ready. Then put the agenda on the fridge and end the meeting.

During the week, when you notice the kids having a problem you might say, "That sounds like a good one to add to the agenda." Don't insist. Just notice if they do or not. If you see kids fighting you might say, "Would one of you like to put this on the agenda?" They may or they may not. You are just making a suggestion that increases awareness of the agenda. When you have a problem, such as kids not picking up their toys, you could say, "This is a problem. Would you like to put it on the agenda, or should I?" If they don't, you can.

Week Two: Compliments

Bring the agenda to the family meeting and say something such as, "We have quite a few things on our agenda (even if you are the one who has put most of them on there). It will be interesting to see how we solve these problems after we learn about brainstorming. Tonight we are going to do compliments. Who knows what a compliment is?"

If your kids don't come up with any of the following you can teach the following:

- 1.) Thank you for something someone has done for you.
- 2.) "Atta boy," or "atta girl" (acknowledgment of something someone has accomplished.)
- 3.) Appreciation for something you like about a family member.

During compliments you can go around the circle and allow everyone to give a thank you for _____, an atta boy/girl for _____, or an appreciation for _____. If they struggle with this, say, "We'll practice again next week." If everyone does well, say, "Next week we'll learn about brainstorming."

During the week, when you see something "good," you can comment, "That would make a good compliment during our next family meeting." Don't write it down or tell them to remember. You are just creating awareness. Continue to make suggestions when you see something that could go on the agenda—and/or add things yourself.

Week Three: Brainstorming

Move on to brainstorming only when your kids are doing well (not perfect) putting things on the agenda and giving and receiving compliments.

Bring the agenda. Comment on how much is on it and that you can't wait to talk about brainstorming. Then do compliments. If they are proficient, go on to teach about brainstorming.

Brainstorming is when we think of as many ideas as we can to solve a problem. They can be practical or wild and crazy. After we have had fun brainstorming (with no discussion), we will choose one solution that we all agree on and try it for a week.

Choose a problem from the agenda and practice brainstorming. Be sure to teach about the wild and crazy part by suggesting some ridiculous suggestions at first such as, No talking for a full day. Everyone will just burp.

If someone starts complaining about an idea, remind the kids, "During brainstorming any idea is okay. When we are finished brainstorming we can discuss some of the ideas before choosing one that works for everyone."

You might want to introduce a timer and set it for two minutes and challenge the family to see how many ideas they can think of in two minutes. This may help them stick to brainstorming for ideas instead of getting off-track into discussions.

After brainstorming say, "Now let's look at our list and cross out anything that isn't practical, respectful, or helpful." From what is left, choose one that everyone can agree to. If everyone can't agree say, "Okay. We are doing great at learning this process. Let's table this item and try again next week to see if we can find something we can all agree on."

Family Fun Activity and Calendar for Family Fun Events

These two components can be added anytime after your family is doing well with the agenda and compliments. You may want to add one or both the same week that you add brainstorming. Or you may want to use the family fun activity to brainstorm for a list of things kids would like to do at the end of the family meeting.

The calendar for family fun events means taking the time to make sure things you would like to do as a family get put on the calendar.

As you read all of this I hope you understand that the process is even more important than an immediate result. You are teaching skills that can last a lifetime. You are being patient. You are being respectful and encouraging. Whenever something doesn't go well, you may want to stop and say, We'll try again next time.

Progress, Not Perfection

Several years ago some Adlerians recorded a bunch of family meetings in different families. For two years they looked for the perfect family meeting. Finally they gave up because they

couldn't find a perfect family meeting. However, they were delighted with the positive results in families (more effective communication, focusing on solutions, having more fun together) even though their meetings were not perfect.

Keeping in mind that mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn, the biggest mistake parents made that kept the meetings from coming closer to perfection was talking too much. Children are not thrilled about family meetings that provide another platform for parents to lecture. Parents need to talk less and listen more. Yes, I know how difficult this is—I'm still working on it. Somehow we parents think we aren't doing our jobs unless we are talking, talking, talking.

It is most effective to have family meetings once a week and to stick to the allotted time of 15 to 30 minutes—even if everything on the agenda has not been covered. This will help your children learn "delayed gratification." Also, it gives them time to absorb what was discussed during the meeting, to try the agreed upon solution, and to practice working things out for themselves in between meetings.