

THE FAMILY MEETING – BUILDING LEADERS AND INVITING COOPERATION

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It's Sunday evening, and everyone in the family gathers in the living room for the weekly family meeting. Thomas, age 12, is leading this week's meeting, and calls the meeting "to order". His sister, Emma, age 9, then starts by thanking him for his help on her math homework, and his mother, Anne, compliments Emma on her resilience in overcoming a difficult social situation at school, and Thomas thanks both of them for their patience with him when he was frustrated at being cut from the baseball team. Thomas then asks about a problem that was solved the previous week. The family was having trouble with their morning routine, causing Mom to be late for work. Anne, Emma and Thomas had decided to make lunches the night before to take the pressure off in the morning. The solution seems to be working, so they move on. Now, Emma brings up a problem to discuss. She is feeling left out when Thomas has friends over, and Thomas is feeling like he wants privacy with his friends. After some discussion, seeking understanding, they decide that mom and Emma will spend special time together when Thomas has a friend over, or Emma will also invite a friend over at the same time.

The *Family* is a time where families come together to help each other solve problems. Many families come together to discuss issues when they arise. However, most of these meetings are parent generated, meaning that the adult usually chooses the topics and uses the meeting to discuss and teach children about these topics. The *Family Meeting* is designed to be family generated, meaning that anyone in the family may bring up a concern to be discussed.

The main objectives of a family meeting are to help children feel connected and capable through collaborative problem solving. Both children and parents create the agenda by recording their problems, in date order, as they arise. The agenda is kept in a place where everyone can access it. During the family meeting, the children discuss the problems openly and brainstorm solutions for the problem. Through this process students learn from the inside out.

The Latin root of the word education is *educare*, which means to "to draw forth." When adults "teach" by "drawing forth," students feel capable, belonging and significance, and more motivated to follow the solutions they help create. The *Class Meeting* is a safe place to solve problems because the focus of the meeting is on taking responsibility and solving problems: children are never in trouble. The focus is always on solutions—not punishment (poorly disguised as consequences).

Family Meetings help children develop many of the leadership skills discussed in this month's lead article, "The Secret Sauce for Leadership Effectiveness". Here are some:

- Insight into themselves through exposure to others
- Mutual respect
- Development of an authentic sense of self
- Understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses
- Acceptance of others
- Listening skills, awareness of their impact on others, problem solving skills,
- Ability to find or make meaning out of situations
- Analyzing problems and solutions
- Understanding and respecting the views of others

- Cooperation, accountability
- Social interest
- Mistakes are an opportunity to learn
- Ability to share emotions, thoughts and feelings respectfully
- Development of moral judgment

Family Meetings are also an incredible opportunity for parents avoid power struggles and develop a sense of cooperation within the family. Children, like adults, are more likely to follow through with agreements if they were involved in the analysis and solving of a problem. When children and teens participate in family meetings they also begin to naturally share responsibility for problems, which is a surprising and exciting development for parents. And, one of the most significant benefits of *Family Meetings* is that they open up a direct line of communication, which is a concern for most parents as their children get older.

Here's how they work. Once per week, at a pre-designated time, the family comes together for the *Family Meeting*. The meeting begins with taking time to genuinely honor and appreciate one another (something none of us do enough of!). This part of the meeting is aptly called, "Compliments and Appreciations." Then the family simply checks back to see if the solutions to previously discussed problems are working. If they are not, then they can go back on the agenda to revisit. After this check in, the next agenda item is discussed. Agenda items are chosen first come-first serve, so as not to make a judgment on the importance of anyone's problems. If there is a pressing problem, the family can always add another meeting during the week to discuss it. The person with the problem on the agenda expresses their concern, and then the family takes time to discuss it (at first without fixing), and then brainstorms solutions. If the solution is for the whole family, it is wise to use consensus when choosing a solution so that everyone is bought in. Finally, the meeting is wrapped up on a positive note. Often families have desert or a treat, pass out allowances, and make plans for the weekend or an upcoming vacation.

Family Meeting Format

1. Compliments and appreciations
2. Follow up on prior solutions
3. Agenda items
 - a. Share feelings while others listen
 - b. Discuss without fixing
 - c. Ask for problem-solving help
4. Positive wrap up (desert, weekend plans, vacation planning, etc.)

One of my favorite parts of family meetings as a parent has been to discover that our children are often concerned about the same things the adults are. They do want cooperative relationships and to contribute and take responsibility. When given the chance, children can be incredibly creative, capable and cooperative. And, given the right environment, we can model and build leadership skills that our children will have for a lifetime!