

How to Use Family Meetings to Build a Closer Family

Does the idea of Family Meetings seem stilted and artificial to you? It certainly did to me, when I first heard about it. But once we tried them, we loved them. They create connection. They give you a way to work things out when everyone's calm. They help your kids learn to solve problems. They help kids feel like integral members of the family. They even help siblings work things out and appreciate each other. Introducing family meetings is the hard part; after that they're so rewarding they take on a life of their own. If you start family meetings during preschool, you'll have them later when you really need them.

How do you begin?

1. **Explain to your kids** that you have a fun idea to make it easier to work out problems that come up. Make sure you serve a delicious and festive snack, and keep it short and fun.
2. **Schedule it at the same time every week.** That way, even if you skip it, working it in the next week will be easy. At our house, Sunday evening at dinner is family meeting night, and we try not to schedule anything else.
3. **Create a ritual.** We start by holding hands, while one parent offers a blessing. Other families light candles, or have a special dessert.
4. **First on the agenda is everyone's favorite thing, Appreciations.** In no particular order, everyone offers appreciations.

"I appreciate that Daddy played catch with me."

"I appreciate that Eli helped me carry in the groceries."

"I appreciate that Mom helped me sew my costume for the school play."

"I appreciate that Sophia helped me build a fort."

The children love getting and giving appreciations, and doing this regularly is reason enough to have a family meeting. Often, it is all we do. It's important to begin this way to create a positive connection before you address any problems.

5. **Next, ask if anyone wants to bring up an issue.** Kids fighting, sharing household work, Dad working late a lot, how to plan the family trip coming up, kids dragging their feet on the bedtime routine -- all are fair game. The important thing about issues is to manage them so that no one is made wrong, and the focus is on brainstorming to find solutions that work for everyone. *"Hmm... sounds like that idea works for Jayden, but not Mom. Let's find something that works for everyone."* It's important to keep this section of the meeting short, so if you can't finish the topic and need to defer it, do so. Sometimes, to keep a child from getting defensive, it works best to refer an issue to "the parents' committee," but try not to undermine the process of the group.

6. **Finish with "Looking forward to's,"** in which each person describes something they are looking forward to in the coming week.

This is the time to focus on all the positive things going on in your family's life, though it often segues into "announcements."

7. **Announcements** at the very end are a good way to re-enter life as usual, to remind everyone of upcoming appointments, trips, and rides needed, and to keep the household running smoothly. But don't let this overwhelm all the good feelings you've created; defer logistical discussions that require real work.

8. **For the under five set, resist the impulse to do much business** at family meetings, you want them to be short and rewarding. For elementary schoolers, it helps to add an incentive for them to do the hard work of problem solving: a special dessert, a special game afterwards.

***Adapted from: <http://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/family-life/family-meetings>