

The

FAMILY COUNCIL

... kids can confer

by

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The Family Council

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Are your children part of the family?

What a *silly* question!

And yet, do we always treat them as first-class family members?

Do you assign your children chores and then tell them how to do the jobs?

Do you sometimes fail to consult the youngsters when deciding where to go on a family outing?

Do you run your children's parties for them?

Do you buy things for your kids without having them in on the selection?

Do you buy things for the home without a word to junior or sister?

Do you ask Hobart to do little jobs on the spur of the moment when he is busy with his own interests?

What parent doesn't?

If we are honest with ourselves we would certainly answer "yes" to some of these questions, and we should. There are times when we, as parents, must make decisions without the help of our children. *But let's not leave Hobart out in the cold.* If we must answer "yes" to most of the above questions most of the time, it might be worth while to ask ourselves just what we mean when we refer to children as being *a part of the family*. It means more than just living at home. It should include giving them a voice in family affairs rather than giving them the feeling that they are left out in the making of family decisions.



Teen-agers comment

In a family relations class,* students were asked what features in family living had made their family life happy. One girl made the following remark:

I think a very important detail that makes a family a united and happy one is the fact that each member of the family is respected and taken for his worth. In our family, each member is respected by the other members and we all have an equal voice in the forming of our family policies. We all try to be fair and look at both sides in all questions. This way each member feels a part, and no one feels dictated to or treated unfairly.

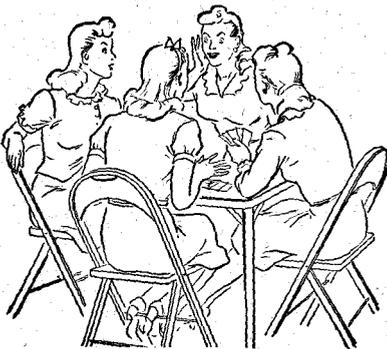
Children resent exploitation

Children need the feeling that we parents think of them as human beings with *some* rights along with the expectations that we have of them. Many of us ask our children to do chores that we ourselves don't like to do. If we don't like to do them, we can hardly expect our youngsters to show any great eagerness for such jobs. Of course, all parents are bound to do a little of this from time to time and it is not going to do any great harm. But, let's not overdo it.



Children need consideration

It pays off when we give consideration to the feelings of young people. If a mother had her friends over for a bridge game, how eager would she be to hear her husband call, "Stop your card game and come help me with the chores, dear!" Children feel the same way about being called away from their friends when they are engaged in some activity. This is particularly true of adolescents who appreciate being treated "grown-up" in front of their age-mates.



* Taught by Lester A. Kirkendall, Associate Professor of Family Life at Oregon State College.

Responsibility

This is not to say that children should not have responsibilities around the home. It is *very* important that they learn to do their part, but along with these responsibilities should go certain benefits. It is wise to let youngsters have some choice in the job or jobs that they should do and then allow them to do such tasks at their own convenience. Then they know *ahead of time* what they must do and so can plan their time accordingly. If a job is not done, a parent may need to step in occasionally to see that the youngster does it. This approach helps the children to understand the importance of planning and finishing jobs.

Another student from the family life class remarked how important responsibilities around the home had been to him:

A feature which has made for a happy home life is the realization that we all had a responsible part in the family unit. There were tasks that we all had to do—tasks which were not allotted to a certain person but which had to be worked out in the unit. It was a disciplined unit, and out of it came a pride in the accomplishments of the family because we all knew that each had had some small part in them. Along with this came a sense of the family's interest in me and trust that I could be depended upon. I knew that whatever the case was they would be interested and would trust my decisions.

A voice in decisions

Let's take a problem. Most parents of teen-agers go 'round and 'round over the question of how *late* they may stay out. When a certain time limit is suggested to them, no matter how fair it may be, they seem to resent it. A better angle is to ask them what time *they* feel they should be home. When this approach is used, parents are often surprised to find that kids are "harder" on themselves than they, the parents, would have been. Anyone would be rash to guarantee this, but then, parents have the last word in case the request is to return at 3 a.m.

Children want rules, but they want a voice in making them.

Youngsters want to have rules for regulation of some sort seems to give them a feeling that their parents love them as well as a sense of security. In a recent study,* one teen-ager remarked that she guessed her parents didn't care anything about her because she could stay out as late as she wanted while all the rest of the girls had to be in at a certain time. Even though teen-agers often rebel at

* "Attitudes of Some Adolescent Girls Toward Their Parents," HE 4-475, (a study of 252 4-H girls) by Thomas Poffenberger, Oregon State College Extension Service.

parental concern this remark illustrates their need to feel that their parents have a vital interest in their welfare.

In regard to the feeling of security that rules give youngsters, one authority likened it to driving a car across the Golden Gate bridge. Most of us feel pretty safe in driving across the bridge, but if there were no guard rails, we would feel mighty uncomfortable! Yet time after time we drive across without ever using the rails to stay on the bridge—it just gives us a very comfortable feeling to know they are there! Youngsters feel much the same way about rules. Even if they don't bump into them, they like to know they are there and they like to have a voice in making the rule in the first place.

Easier on parents



Let's take another example. Teen-agers want many things that are out of the financial reach of the family. However, because of their social need to be accepted by their age-mates, it is important to them to have the same things that their friends have—regardless of cost. When Mary Jane comes in and requests the latest clothes fad, she can't understand why she can't have it just

because mother says, "There isn't enough money to buy it." She sees money going out for all kinds of things and thinks there must be enough for something that is so important to her. However, if the girl has a chance to sit around the family table and discuss finances, she will get a different picture. Father states the amount of money available for the month. So much must go for rent, so much to pay off the family car, so much for food, etc., and there are a few dollars left over. How shall they be spent? Hobart needs a new pair of shoes, and Mary Jane needs the latest fad. If this approach is used, her parents may well hear her say, "Brother needs the new shoes more than I need anything right now." She understands why she cannot have it this month and then can be casual about her altruism to her friends. At the same time, she is learning the many different places where money must go in running a household.

In business, too

More and more industries are becoming aware of the importance of consulting employees on matters which concern them. They are also recognizing the benefits to be gained by making employees feel that they are a part of the company. Workers who receive stock or other interests in a corporation feel that the business is theirs as well as the management's. The results in increased productivity are great! This principle is certainly worth applying in our own families. By considering our children as individuals who can help and letting them have a voice in family affairs, we will be making family life more enjoyable for all, and we will be doing a better job of preparing our youngsters for their own family life later on.



Training in family finance



Many young married couples have quite a shock when they are first confronted with money problems. They seem to have no idea what it costs to run a household and raise a family. As a result, they often get themselves into a lot of financial hot water in the early years of marriage. Such young people can hardly be expected to know much about family finance since they had little or no opportunity to learn about handling money

as they were growing up in their own families.

Those who have had a "say" in family finances, such as the college student quoted below, will be in a better position to make sound decisions in the future.

Financial difficulties were discussed with us when we were old enough to realize their importance. Just last Thanksgiving vacation, my father asked me if I thought he should sell our store. He then presented the facts and figures of the business and the price offered him. After a couple of days of thought I gave him my opinion.

The best way to teach youngsters about finances is to let them take part in the actual handling of family business. Some fathers don't "warm" to such an idea. A usual comment is, "If I told Hobart how much I made, it would be all over town in half an hour!" However, this is not likely to occur if Papa makes no great to-do



**IT CAN'T
BE DONE!**

about the amount of his income. In fact, if the youngster is made to feel that he is a real part of the family, he can be counted on to guard *any* family secret.

Some fathers also think they would lose respect if their income were known because the family believes it is greater than it really is. If that is the way father wants it he is asking for trouble! The family is bound to make more requests for money than "Pop" can fill. And, if he thinks he is getting respect by putting up a false front, he is pretty wrong!

Parental understanding

Many research studies have clearly demonstrated that children do not evaluate their parents' worth in terms of how much money they have, but rather in terms of their understanding and closeness to them.

In the author's study previously mentioned, over 50 per cent of the 252 girls reported that the one thing they needed most from their parents was, "guidance, understanding, and help with problems." Some of the comments individuals made regarding their needs were:

Being able to talk to them (parents) without being embarrassed.
Guidance through life so that when the time comes I'll be able to face decisions with confidence.

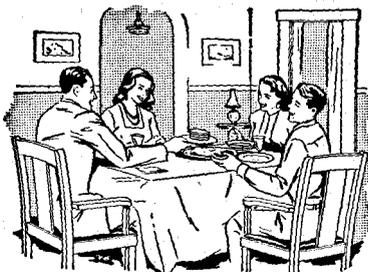
Understanding and listening to your problems even if they aren't important to them.

Consideration and to let me make my own decisions and have certain responsibilities at home instead of just being expected to do the right thing at the right time.

The Purdue Public Opinion Panel* questioned thousands of school youths regarding their feelings on various problems. Only one per cent checked the statement, "I'm ashamed of my father's job," while the statement receiving the largest percentage of checks (21%) was, "I can't discuss personal things with my parents."

A Family Council

If we want to give a name to a family discussion group, we might call it a Family Council. This may sound a bit formal, but it need not be so at all. In fact, some of the most productive discussions can take place during a meal. The important thing is that such get-togethers occur whenever anything comes up that affects family members.



It should include such topics as where to go on vacation or plans for a family picnic as well as family finances.

A family council should include every member of the family who is old enough to express an opinion on the subject being discussed. Three-year-old Hobart may well have an opinion on whether to go to the zoo or to the park on the family outing but could throw little light on whether or not the family homestead should be sold. Therefore, it would be logical to include him in the first discussion but rather illogical to include him in the second.

The Family Council at work

Here are some more comments made by teen-age college students looking back on their family life. They seem to be pretty well sold on the idea of the family council.

Another thing that tended to bring our family close together was the fact that we did things together. Even now that I am older, I still have the desire to do things with my parents. When we go on a trip, we go together. Also when we work, we work together. This has tended to develop from a pleasant attitude toward each other in all things we do and say. Even though one of us may want to go somewhere else, we have a very effective way of choosing where to go. We all put down on a slip

* "S.R.A. Youth Inventory" (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1949).

of paper where we want to go and what we want to do. Then the youngest one puts all the slips in a hat and then draws one out. Whatever it says is what we do on our vacation or trip. In this way by the law of averages, in the end we all get to do something each one wants to do.

Another thing that made my family life happy was the ability of all persons to discuss what each had done that day. This gave the other members of the family a chance to assist and advise. This was particularly good in my case as I was the youngest and thereby the least experienced. This discussion was usually carried on in the evening at the dinner table. One big advantage to this discussion was that, even though the person discussing his problem could not work out a solution, he had the feeling that he was not shouldering it alone.

As far back as I can remember, no important decisions were made in the family without each member hearing about it and offering his or her opinions. One example of this is when we sold our place, we all got to put our own opinions in on what we would keep and what we would bring with us. On our trip out here, whenever we decided to do something such as visiting relatives or even going to a show, the decision was made by all of us and not one. One of the reasons this worked is we had all learned to "give in" part of the time. If things were done the way I wanted one time, I knew that I should be willing to do what someone else wanted the next time.

When a family problem arises, we discuss it together, working it out for satisfactory results for each member of the family. In this way no one can hold a grudge for something which happened within our family.

Freedom of expression

The most important aspect of a family council is frankness. Children need the feeling that they can speak their own minds, otherwise the council does not serve its purpose. Parents need to encourage such frankness by being frank themselves and by trying to understand their youngsters' point even if they take a dim view of the idea. Of course, when children are young, it is necessary for parents to take most of the responsibility for decisions, but as kids grow older, it is important that parents begin to withdraw and give them more and more voice in the decisions to be made. Remember, that in a short time they will have to be making lots of decisions—and most of them without help from parents! There is no better way to prepare them to handle problems as adults than to give them *ever increasing experience* in handling problems as they are growing older.

A guiding hand

This does not mean that children should be allowed to over-rule the parents in every decision and get anything they want. Often their level of experience will lead to poor conclusions and parents must use veto powers. But it is sometimes surprising how clearly youngsters can reason when given the chance! Occasionally, when kids make plans that parents do not think are too wise, if it is not too important an issue, it may be well to let them have their way. If their plans are really unsound, they will find out their mistake soon enough, and that is a most effective way to learn. If children can learn by making mistakes on small matters they will be better prepared to make sound decisions later on.



Points for parents

Giving our children a real part in the family "pays off" in many ways.

- ▶ It gives them the feeling that "this is my family" and makes them more willing to take responsibility in it.
- ▶ It reduces general complaining since they feel they have been consulted about an issue.
- ▶ It gives them the feeling that their parents are considering them as individuals rather than something to be exploited.
- ▶ It gives them valuable experience in learning to make decisions, in taking responsibility, and in learning to handle family finances.
- ▶ It gives them experience in the democratic way of life.