

# Communication Through Family Meetings

*A Resource for Parents of Pre-teens and Adolescents*

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In some ways, the world is becoming less personal as we lose touch with our neighbors, move away from relatives, change jobs often, and interact more and more by computer and less and less in person.

These social changes make communication between family members even more important. As children mature, it's important to have trust and good communication in the family.

Family meetings can provide an opportunity to develop communication patterns that work.

## What is a family meeting?

A family meeting is a pre-arranged time when family members come together to talk about what's happening in their home and in their lives. It's structured to allow for interaction that otherwise might not occur.

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Family meetings generally last 30 to 45 minutes and occur weekly.

The goals of family meetings are to:

- share positive experiences
- learn more about each other
- discuss problems
- make an effort to resolve problems

The structure of a family meeting may help you achieve these goals better than the regular daily rush.

## Why are family meetings important?

It's important for family members to share feelings. Family bonds may be strengthened as a result of regular meetings. Setting aside time for family can be hard for both parents and children. Understanding the commitment level of others may help family members make it a priority.

Some families might choose to set aside time for just one member at a time to share something



important. In that way, each member may hear new things about the others.

## What are the results of meetings?

- Better communication between parents and teens
- Increase in time together and bonding
- Prevention of negative teen behavior related to problems such as substance abuse and teen sexuality
- Solving problems at home before they get worse
- An opportunity to plan fun activities



## Who should attend?

Ideally, all family members should attend, but you can have a family meeting with one parent and one child. No neighbors or friends should attend.

Your family may want to think about how it defines "family." Is it those who live together? Is it nuclear family members, some of whom do not live in the same household? Are grandparents included? Think about who your family is and what it means to have particular people present or not present.

## How should we introduce family meetings to our children?

Introduce the idea. Begin with an easy issue (e.g., timing of a birthday party). Tell which issues are and are not negotiable (e.g., whether friends may visit when no adult is home). Tell them the meetings can be used to get acquainted, make plans, raise concerns, and solve problems. Discuss and make copies of family meeting guidelines.

Plan to spend the first few meetings getting used to the idea. When family members are more comfortable, they may handle more difficult issues more easily.

## When should we hold meetings?

Meetings should be scheduled weekly at times convenient to all members. There can be some flexibility. Family members should be awake and relaxed. Avoid scheduling the meeting right before work, school, dinner, or bedtime.

## Where should we hold meetings?

Meet in a comfortable place where all can see each other. Be sure the television is off and the telephone will not disturb you.

## Guidelines for good listening

- Learn from the speaker
- Stay focused on the person's words
- Ask questions to keep the conversation moving
- Treat the speaker as you like to be treated
- Be sensitive to the speaker's emotions
- Do not give unsolicited advice
- Try to see things from the other person's view
- Think before you speak
- Visualize the story of the other person in your mind

## How should we conduct family meetings?

There are several rules to be used for family meetings. Your family also may add your own rules.

The main rules are what to do and what not to do for a successful meeting. See the do's and don'ts at right. Take notes at each meeting. Note any rule violations.

Devote at least half of the meeting to positive sharing, planning, and encouraging. The other half can be problem solving.

## How can we develop problem-solving skills?

Family meetings can be a time to solve problems. It's important to present information about the issue, to listen to information about the issue, to brainstorm and evaluate possible solutions, and to agree on one solution.

### Presenters/speakers

- Be brief
- Say something nice about the other person
- Recognize your own part in the process
- Use humor if appropriate
- Think of the future
- Be specific in stating your *simple goal*

## Family rules

### Do

- Take turns
- Listen
- Use humor
- Be friendly
- Be brief
- Paraphrase
- Respect others
- See others' views
- Stay on the topic
- Have parent(s) summarize discussion

### Do not

- Lecture
- Interpret meanings
- Lecture
- Put people down
- Violate the rules

### Receivers/hearers

- Listen actively
- Do not criticize
- Do not be defensive
- Be pleasant
- Listen for the positive
- Show respect
- Remember you care about the other person

To listen actively: stay focused and alert, and put energy into listening. Ask questions and paraphrase. Listen with care. Do not take over the story, give advice, or act impatient.

## Brainstorming solutions

Now the family works together to find a solution agreeable to everyone by brainstorming.

- Involve all, take turns
- Have five or more possible solutions
- Encourage creativity
- Record every suggestion
- Remain neutral
- Record rule violations

## Evaluating solutions

After completing the above, use the following guidelines to evaluate solutions.

- Let everyone look at the list of ideas
- Throw out any ideas the group agrees will not work
- Discuss and record the pros and cons of each solution
- Consider everyone's views
- Be brief

Now narrow down the list and think about combining ideas. If you cannot agree, return to brainstorming. If you still cannot agree, close the meeting and try later.

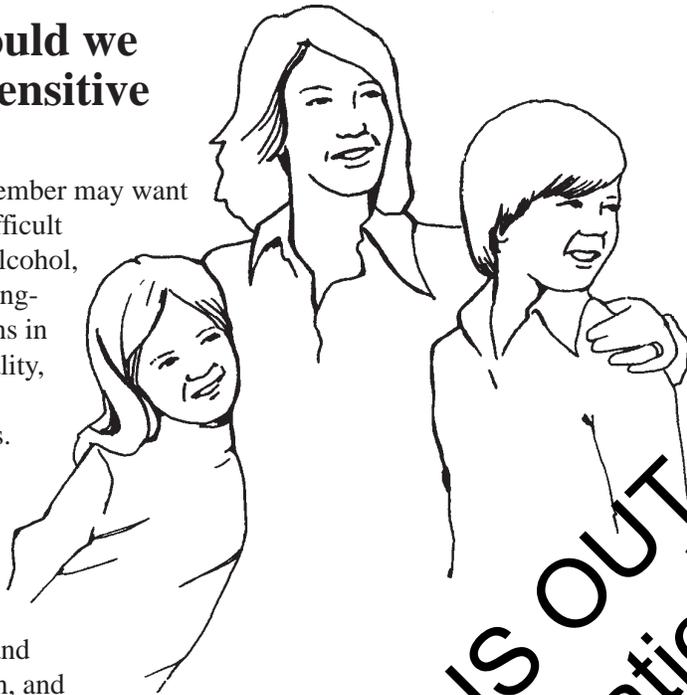


## How should we handle sensitive issues?

A family member may want to discuss a difficult issue such as alcohol, privacy, or changing expectations in curfews, sexuality, or household responsibilities.

- Decide in advance what the problem is, who to present to, and where, when, and how to introduce it
- Ask advice of others
- Practice what you'll say
- Take your time
- Be aware of the feelings and views of others

Introducing family meetings in your family may take time, energy, and dedication. Family time and positive communication are important. Give family meetings a try. We think you'll be pleased with the results.



home economics agent. Extension offices are listed under "County Governments" in your telephone directory.

### For further reading

- EC 1412, *Nontraditional Families*, 75¢
- EC 1406, *Talking with Children About AIDS*, 50¢
- EC 1272, *Building Community Support for Families of People with AIDS*, 50¢
- PNW 391, *Understanding the Grief of Children*, \$1.00
- EC 1375, *Planning in Advance for Health Care Decisions*, 50¢
- EC 1265, *Talking to Your Family and Doctor About Difficult Health Care Decisions*, 75¢

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### Other resources

In addition to this publication, Oregon State University Extension offers a 1-hour program titled "Family Communication Family Meetings." The program shows how to introduce family meetings to your family, what these meetings can accomplish, and specifics important to having successful meetings.

If you would like this program in your county, call your local Extension office and ask for the

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