



STRENGTHENING THE FAMILY WITH A FAMILY COUNCIL

By **Kent G. Hamdorf, Ph.D.**
*Extension Specialist
Human Relations and
Family Development*

Does your child have equal status with the adults in your family?

Do you assign chores and times to do them, or does your child help in the planning?

Do you try to make decisions about your child's recreational activities, times to study and what clothing to buy and wear?

Do you treat your child better, worse or about the same as you would treat your friend?

Do you want to create feelings of trust, competency and independence in your child?

If you answer any of the first four questions with a "no," and the last question with a "yes," you may want to explore the idea of holding a family council." It is fairly safe to say that people who live together will have conflicts of interest from time to time. The family council serves as a valuable place to discuss these differences.

What is a Family Council?

The family council can best be described by stating what it isn't. A family council is not:

- a discussion meeting around the dinner table.
- a discussion meeting while driving.
- a meeting called only when there is a problem within the family.

The family council is:

- a meeting of everyone in the family at a designated time and place.
- a meeting which has a chairperson and a secretary; each family member takes a turn as chairperson (only those family members who can read and write take turns being secretary).
- a meeting which has fixed rules of procedures.

The dictionary defines a council as "an assembly of persons called together for consultation, deliberation or discussion" or "a body of people elected or appointed to serve in an administrative, legislative or advisory capacity."

Applying this definition to the term family council," the definition could read, "a group of people who live together, whether or not they are related by blood or marriage. The group shall have regularly scheduled meetings and operate

under rules agreed on in advance. The meeting shall be an open forum at which time all family members can speak without interruption, with freedom of expression, without fear of consequences, and without regard for age or status. Its deliberations result in decision only when all members present come to a common understanding" (Dreikurs, Gould, Corsini, 1974).

Why Should "Our" Family Have a Family Council?

In many families, members are on the verge of declaring war against one another. Negative feelings are so strongly felt by some of the individuals involved that many members develop alliances with other family members in order to get their own way. Usually each person will see only one viewpoint as correct. Such families might ask, "What's in it for us?" There are many positive benefits that occur where a family uses a family council. For example:

Happiness. Everyone wants to be happy. In daily life, tempers flare, parent and child shout back at each other, and so on. Everyone needs respect, but sometimes it is difficult to give it to others. For example a parent expects the child to respect the parent and other elders, but doesn't realize that the child is equally worthy of respect. When a parent shows respect to the child there is harmony and, from that, happiness.

Efficiency. A positive outcome of the family council is that family business can be done more quickly, simply and efficiently. Every family has many tasks and rules to observe both for daily living and for long range goals. A primary function of the family council is for all family members to discuss who is responsible for specific tasks in the home and how the tasks are to be distributed. The goal is more equality in responsibility and the assignment of tasks appropriate for people involved.

When the family council functions well, work gets done without nagging and family members can enjoy each other. Talk between family members is pleasant and complimentary. Probably the biggest payoff is the family cooperates in the job of keeping the home running smoothly.

Communication. Much useless talk disappears when a family council is functioning well. Useless talk such as nagging, complaining, scolding, screaming and threatening are not needed because each family member is aware of what will happen if everyone does not perform agreed-upon tasks. Instead, there is friendly conversation and willingness to share ideas or discuss problem situations.

Less Need for Punishment. As family members become more and more adept at using the family council, the need for punishing or disciplining the child lessens because:

1. The child discovers misbehavior is not necessary in order to get the parent's attention.

2. Family members are more trusting and cooperative.

An accurate way to rate the success of the family council is to ask, "Did I decide?" If "I" decided, chances are it is likely that one or both parents pushed through a decision without general agreement from all members. On the other hand if, in the family council, "it was decided," chances are that all family members joined in reaching agreement.

What is the Purpose of the Family Council?

The family council is a way for family members to discuss anything of common concern and importance to each family member and to the family as a group. It is a way for family members to enjoy one another, as well as a way to achieve mutual equality and respect among all family members. The family council helps each member feel involved in the family. Most important, it creates the feeling that each person's opinion is valuable and necessary in order for the family to function smoothly.

What are Family Council Concerns?

Typically a family council meeting is concerned with all of the relationships and business affecting the family. Some of the concerns a family council may include are:

1. **Information.** Family council meetings are a time when members can discuss coming events, plans for fun or work, changes in living arrangements, vacation, planned visits and progress, and achievement by individual family members.

2. **Problem Solving.** The family council provides a chance to discuss and review individual and family problems in a setting less crisis-oriented. It allows for freedom of discussing problems in a sensible and thought-provoking manner, at the same time allowing family members to be creative thinkers in problem solving. Family members have an opportunity to become more aware of how others feel about the issue being discussed. Problems are solved through discussion which enables each member to listen, talk, think and finally to reach agreement with each other. Problems are not solved by arguing, nagging or condemning one another.

3. **Planning and Decision Making.** The old cliché, "a person learns best by experience," applies to the family council. The parent who allows the child to participate in decision-making soon learns the child will cooperate more readily. Discussion can be time-consuming, but the decisions reached will be more acceptable to all family members.

4. **Family Involvement.** In every family there are certain daily, monthly, seasonal and yearly tasks to be performed in order for the family to run smoothly. Frequently these tasks are performed by only one or two family members. For example the "super mother" often takes on all the responsibilities of cleaning, cooking and sewing, and deprives the other family members of learning new skills. At the same time "Super Mom" feels that she is doing it all, and no one cares about how hard she works. Through a family council, family members can discuss what tasks need to be done, who will and how to do them, how to share responsibilities, make decisions and cooperate in carrying out the tasks.

5. **Sound Off and Airing of Concerns.** Family life can produce anxiety, tension and disagreement. At a family council, each family member can discuss what is dissatisfying within the family, and make known desired changes. This can eliminate bickering back and forth in the family. When complaints do arise during the week, they can be deferred for discussion at the next family council, or if the situation is serious enough, an emergency family council can be called.

6. **A Social Learning Experience.** Through the interactions of family members, a child develops opinions of self and social relationships. The family council is a good means for developing independent persons who care and are concerned about others. The family council provides the child with a learning environment for developing social interest, cooperation and the capacity to give and take in an orderly way.

How Do Families Start Family Councils?

Probably most important when starting a family council is "openness." Think, "How can we, as a family, go about this together?" rather than, "Now you've all come to the meeting I planned!" Following are some key points to starting a family council:

1. **Set date and time of meeting.** The family council should meet periodically, perhaps once a week or three times each month. A time should be found when all family members can be present. It is important that a family council meeting be held on a planned basis, not just whenever someone wants to call a meeting or when things seem to be going wrong. If a family council is called only when things go wrong, too much negativism enters in and is destructive to the purpose and intent of the council.



2. Attendance. All family members are **invited, not required**, to attend the family council. Any member may choose not to attend or to leave the meeting. However, those not attending should know that family decisions will be made regardless of the number of family members present. This should not be given as a threat, but rather as a natural and logical consequence of a given happening.

At the first meeting each member will probably want to know, "What's in it for me?" "What kinds of decisions will be made?" "What will happen if I don't attend?" Given these questions and the background of material you have, you'll be able to handle your family council meeting successfully.

3. Who is included? Everyone who lives in the household should be included and on an equal basis. As a rule of thumb, a child who can use words is able to participate effectively in the family council. What about an elderly person or some non-family member living in the household? This person, too, should be included in and listened to in the family council.

4. Who should preside and who should take notes? Each meeting needs a chairperson and a secretary. These offices are usually held by a parent until all family members feel at ease with the family council. Then offices can be rotated so each family member has a chance to be chairperson.

5. Order. Order is as important to a family council as it is in any other meeting. If anyone misbehaves to such a degree as to make meetings unpleasant, or if anyone becomes sufficiently annoyed, that person can leave. Remember, the purpose of the family council is to discuss concerns in a sensible and clear manner. If a member disturbs the meeting, the chairperson has the responsibility to ask that person to behave; if that person does not behave, then anyone annoyed can leave. It is very important to point out here that a member cannot be expelled from a meeting because of unpleasant behavior.

6. Procedures. The family council should be considered an open forum with complete freedom of expression. Any family member is allowed to express an opinion, and no one can quiet the person who has the floor. It is important for family members to help that person clarify situations. Every member should have a turn. A family member who wishes to speak is to be acknowledged by the chairperson. A person should be especially aware not to interrupt, correct, criticize or expand on a child's comments.

The family council is not a time to preach, scold or otherwise dominate the meeting. It is a meeting where one can express opinions on an equal basis with everyone else.

7. Issues. The family council should be open for grievances, issues, problems and any matters of common concern that affect the family. The family council should not be used for family members to settle personal quarrels. The general rule to follow is that any member except the chairperson may bring up a subject to discuss. Other members may object if they feel the subject doesn't affect the whole family. The chairperson rules on whether or not this is admissible for discussion.

8. How to Decide. The general rule of thumb for making decisions in the family council is consensus. Issues should be discussed to reach a consensus in the same manner that labor and management negotiate their contracts. If unanimity is not possible, the issue should be tabled until the following meeting.

General Rules for a Family Council

The family member who is interested in developing democratic relationships and who is best able to demonstrate patience and empathy when things do not go as planned should conduct the first meeting. This family member should be able to see others' points of view and to help in reaching agreements. The chairperson's duties involve:

- beginning and closing the family council meeting on time. (Maximum length for a family council meeting, one hour.)
- deciding who has the floor.
- keeping order so everyone can be heard.
- encouraging each person to speak.
- helping the group focus on the topic and the issue, not permitting the topic to be changed until full discussion and some resolution of the issue is made.



Rules for the family council should be kept simple. If family members keep in mind that a purpose of the family council is to expedite communications between members and not to teach how to run a meeting, the family council concept will flourish. In order to help in establishing a family council, the following guidelines may be useful:

1. A family member is allowed the floor by being recognized by the chairperson.
2. A person who has the floor cannot be interrupted by other family members.
3. Members of the family should restate what was presented by a speaker. (This helps to improve responsive listening skills.)
4. The person who has the floor is asked to comment on the points or issue being discussed. It should be understood that new topics are not to be started unless the concern being discussed is resolved.
5. Family decisions can be made that influence other family members who are absent. However, these decisions should not be a plot to punish those not attending.
6. An emergency or cancellation of a family council meeting requires the unanimous decision of all family members.
7. There should be no attempt to pressure, impose or bribe one person's ideas onto another person.

Dad suggested that each one of us should be ready to give their ideas for our Spring vacation at our next family Council.

The Council also decided to change some of the assignments between David and Rebecca and Rebecca and Tommy will be the given other responsibilities.

Next time is the first day of the year we get together.

5. At the agreed-on time, the family council meets; anyone not showing up should not be reminded of the meeting.

6. The first meeting should address itself to such organizational details as who should be secretary, and chairperson; how often to meet; how long meetings should last; and what kinds of things should be discussed. A parent should feel free to give some opinion about procedures, but the ultimate decision should be based on consensus.

Other points to ponder:

1. How should absences be handled?
2. How long should discussions be held?
3. What if a decision is absolutely unacceptable to a member?
4. Should parents make decisions that could possibly wait until the next family council?

A good way to end a family council meeting is with some family fun, perhaps with a special treat served afterward.

8. Minutes should be kept and posted in several places around the home.

Remember, the interaction of family members change over time, so may rules or guidelines that govern the family council. All rules or guidelines need to be examined and re-evaluated from time to time.

The following is an example of how the Ross family members used their family council. The purpose of this meeting was the distribution of household tasks and chores. John, the oldest son, was the chairperson. He asked for various ways to handle this concern. Susan, the middle daughter, suggested that each person prepare a list of all the tasks and chores that needed to be done. Once the list was prepared, each family member then could select specific tasks in order to contribute to the welfare of the family.

Mother asked, "What about the unpleasant tasks like carrying out the garbage?" They all thought for awhile. Finally Joe, the youngest son, said, "Maybe on those unpleasant tasks we could all take turns." That seemed agreeable to all. Each member of the family then made up a list of things which would contribute to the welfare of the household. Once this was done each person agreed to be responsible for specific tasks and chores. Each member told how those tasks would be carried out. Consequences of not completing the task were discussed last.

In this family, both children and parents participated in deciding on a fair way to distribute household tasks and chores. Each person felt a need to fulfill agreed-on tasks, chosen freely without nagging, yelling or screaming. A spirit of good will and a feeling of equality existed in this family and carried over into the family council and into everyday life.

Getting Off to a Good Start

1. A parent should make sure each family member agrees with and understands the concepts of the family council.
2. A parent should inform everyone of intentions to start a family council and invite others to join.
3. A parent must realize that self-interest presents the greatest hazard to the family council because the parent may attempt to use it for personal purposes.
4. The date and time should be established for the first meeting.

Hazards to Consider in a Family Council

The family council does have some hazards, for example:

- a dominating father or mother.
- a parent who complains too much during sessions and uses the family council to manipulate children.



- a meeting that does not begin on time.
- a parent who avoids attendance.
- a parent who makes decisions that should be made at the family council.
- decisions that are not upheld.
- sessions that are cancelled because there's "nothing to bring up."
- persons who become discouraged when consensus is not reached immediately.

The family council has tremendous potential for improving family relationships. It requires time, effort, involvement and a personal commitment by all members, but the rewards are far-reaching.



PEP Points to Ponder

THE FAMILY COUNCIL

1. The family council is a regularly scheduled meeting held with all family members who want to take part. Its purpose is to discuss ideas and concerns, and to plan family work and fun.
2. The family council provides a place to:
 - share information
 - solve problems
 - plan and make decisions.
 - involve family members and bring about family togetherness.
 - air concerns and complaints.
 - learn how to interact in groups.
3. The roles of chairperson and secretary should be rotated.
4. Parents should model the communication skills of responsive listening, responsive-I-messages, conflict resolution.
5. All family members participate as equals.
6. The family council is to resolve problems and/or concerns, it is not a gripe session.
7. Focus should be on what the group can do rather than on what one individual can do.
8. The family council should start on time and end on time.
9. Each family council meeting should include:
 - reading minutes from the previous meeting.
 - discussing any unresolved issues and/or problems carried over from the last meeting.
 - evaluating any changes needed in the decisions made from the previous week's decisions.
 - bringing up new business.
 - summarizing points and clarifying comments made during this meeting.
 - planning for family fun.
10. Parents should refuse to make decisions for the family that can be settled at the family council.

Probably the most important advice ever given to a parent is to establish a family council. However, before starting a council, one should really understand the procedures and hazards. To succeed, the family council must operate in a democratic spirit.

Finally, don't allow yourself as a parent to be sabotaged by your child to give up the idea of a family council. The family council represents something new to the child—a change in the game plan which may not be liked. There may be a desire to return to the rules of how to play the game before the family council was instituted. If you believe in the family council idea, stick with it; others will suddenly realize that this is the real way of participating in family decisions.

Resources

1. Barber, Kenneth E. *The Family Council*. Washington: State Extension Service PNW Bulletin 127, 1972.
2. Dinkmeyer, Don and McKay, Gary D. *Raising A Responsible Child*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973.
3. Dreikurs, Rudolf, Gould, Shirley and Corsini, Raymond. *The Family Council*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1974.



To Think About and To Talk About— For Discussion

1. What is the author's definition of the Family Council?
2. Why is the Family Council important to family members?
3. What is the purpose of the Family Council?
4. Why is it important to hold regularly scheduled family council meetings?

5. What concerns may be discussed at the Family Council?
6. How does one go about setting up a family council?
7. What topics and/or concerns can be discussed at the Family Council?
8. How does one establish a Family Council if the spouse is uninterested?
9. Who can lead a family council and what leadership skills are necessary for good Family Council meetings?
10. What are some things to keep in mind when establishing a Family Council?
11. What are some common mistakes or hazards to be aware of in the Family Council meeting?
12. How does a Family Council meeting get off to a good start?

Exercise—Parent-Child Situation

Mr. and Mrs. Smith have four children: Wayne, 12; Judy, 11; Rita, 8; and Bill, 5. The family has decided to use the family council to plan what to do for vacation.

Wayne and Judy have decided they want to go to a place that offers swimming and fishing, but Rita wants to go some place that has a lot of crafts. Mother and Dad would prefer to go somewhere that offers golf and tennis. To date, they have not come to a decision.

Answer the following questions in relation to what you have read about the family council.

1. What guidelines would you recommend in order for the Smith family to have a good experience with their first meeting?
2. How would you go about resolving the problem of a family vacation?
3. Do you foresee any problems in using the family council for the first time in planning a family vacation?

At-Home Activity

Plan and conduct a family council at home this week.

MY BLUEPRINT FOR IMPROVING MY PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

1. In my parent-child relationship I am specifically concerned that

2. My usual response to this specific parent-child relationship concern includes one or more of the following

(Place a check mark beside the concern(s) you consider most unacceptable.)

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talking Lecturing | <input type="checkbox"/> Getting Angry | <input type="checkbox"/> Threatening Yelling
Warning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stating Nagging | <input type="checkbox"/> Analyzing | <input type="checkbox"/> Criticizing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Giving Orders Commands | <input type="checkbox"/> Punishing Removing
Privileges Shaming | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |

3. I believe that during the past week in my own parent-child relationship I

	More	Less	About the Same		More	Less	About the Same
Acted More Calmly				Used Natural and Logical Consequences			
Acted Instead of Reacted				Stimulated Independence			
Listened				Used Rational Thinking			
Acted Firmly and Kindly				Stimulated Responsible Decision Making			
Encouraged Rather than Discouraged				Enjoyed My Parent-Child Relationship			
Communicated Love and Mutual Respect				Took Time For Myself			
Withdrew From Conflict That Didn't Involve Me							

4. The Atmosphere in our family has changed to one of

	More	Less	About the Same		More	Less	About the Same
Friendliness				Self-Discipline			
Cooperation				Planning and Working Together			
Mutual Respect				Fun With Family Members			
Understanding				Distrust			
Tension and Strife				Confusion			
Involvement							

5. This week I learned

6. I plan to change my parent-child behavior by

All educational programs and activities conducted by the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service are available to all potential clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, national origin, sex, or religious affiliation.

10/79-5M

Issued in furtherance of cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Roy M. Kottman, Director of the Cooperative Extension Service, The Ohio State University.