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HUMAN RELATIONS

Family Councils: The Key Is Communication

Human Development and Family Studies Extension

What is a family council?

The family council is:

- A meeting of family members at a routine time and place.
- A time for family concerns to be discussed
- A chance for each family member to express thoughts or feelings
- A joint effort to make family decisions.

A family council deals with both positive and negative issues that affect the family. Some examples are:

Recognition of achievements

Family members' achievements and successes can be recognized in the family council.

Problem solving

Problems and solutions can be discussed in a clear and organized manner.

Planning and decision-making

All members of the family have a voice in family plans and decisions.

Family involvement

Family members can discuss what chores need to be done, who will do them, and how to share these responsibilities.

Why have a family council?

Because of today's busy lifestyles, it is hard for families to find time together. It is important, however, that each family member has a part in family decisions. A family council is a valuable tool for families. By coming together and keeping the lines of communication open, families can lead more satisfied lives. Family councils help children learn to voice opinions respectfully, be responsible, learn problem-solving skills, and make decisions cooperatively with others.

How the family council works

Set a regular meeting date and time. The council should meet regularly, for example, once a week, three times a month, or once every other week. Decide in advance how long it will last. Be sure to begin and end on time.

Attendance

All family members are invited, but not required, to attend the family council. Those who choose not to attend should know that family decisions that affect them will be made whether they are there or not.



Who is included?

Every person who lives in the household should be included, regardless of his or her age. Family councils are useful for all types of families — single-parent families, stepfamilies, families with foster children, etc.

Who should lead the meeting

Each meeting needs a chairperson and a note taker. These offices can be rotated so that each member has a chance to be chairperson and note taker.

Order

Organization is as important for a family council as it is for any other meeting. Have an agenda for the meeting and stick to it. You can post an “agenda sheet” on the refrigerator during the week before the meeting. Family members can add items to the agenda sheet to create the meeting’s agenda. Limiting the discussion to one or two topics works best. Beginning and ending on a positive note helps make the family council a positive experience for everyone.

Some ideas for beginning the family council are to have each person share a joke or cartoon, tell the best part of his or her day, or answer a fun question from a book such as *The Kids' Book of Questions*. At the end of the family council, have a special treat or do a favorite activity together as a family.

Procedures

Family councils function without a boss. Parents act as group leaders rather than bosses. The chairperson helps the family move through the agenda items and keeps the discussion on track. Although there is no boss, it is a good idea to have a few ground rules (for example, no interrupting others) that are agreed upon by all family members. At the first family council,

How to decide

Consensus vs. voting

The general rule for making decisions in the family council is to make decisions by consensus. Consensus means that everyone comes to an agreement on the decision. It is a decision that all family members feel good about. In contrast, when voting is used to make a decision, some family members may not agree with the decision. It may seem easier to vote on solutions than to work for consensus. However, family members who are outvoted may feel that they do not have a say in family decisions.

Weighing and evaluating the facts is sometimes all that is necessary to reach consensus. Other times it is harder to come to an agreement. Expect conflict and differences of opinion to arise during the problem-solving process. When people are allowed to freely express opinions, disagreement is likely to occur. However, considering everyone’s opinion is an important step in finding a solution everyone agrees with. The idea is not to begin with agreement, but to end with it. There are several things you can do if you’re having a hard time agreeing on a solution.

Brainstorming

One idea to try is brainstorming. For a few minutes, encourage everyone to suggest possible solutions and have one person write them down. Every idea should be written down, even if it seems like it won’t work. During this period no one should judge or evaluate anyone else’s ideas. When the brainstorming period is over, go down the list of ideas and talk about the pros and cons of each one. Brainstorming can lead to creative solutions that otherwise would not have been considered.

Trial solutions

Sometimes family members will be unsure whether a suggested idea will work. You can give the proposed idea a trial period. After the trial period is over, discuss in the family council whether the idea is working or not. If it doesn’t work, avoid saying, “I told you so” to the person who suggested it because that discourages people from expressing ideas.

Table the discussion

If you are unable to come to a consensus on a particular topic, decide to continue the discussion next time. Sometimes it is easier to find a solution when you have a little more time to think about the problem. Wait to start a new topic until the one being discussed is solved or saved for later. At the end of the meeting, summarize the decisions that were made.

family members can brainstorm a list of rules and decide which ones they want to be the ground rules.

Distractions should be minimized so

everyone can give full attention to the family council. Turn off the television and avoid answering the telephone, if possible. The council should be at

a time when members can express opinions without being interrupted or judged. All members should express themselves freely and help find solutions to problems. Some people may get emotional during council meetings. It is important to allow each family member to freely express both positive and negative emotions.

Communication skills for a successful family council

Using simple communication techniques can help family councils run more smoothly. One technique to try is active listening. This means restating what the other person is saying so you can make sure you understand what he or she means. For example, "It sounds like you're saying you don't think it's fair that your sister gets to stay up an hour later than you do." Try to really listen when the other person is talking, instead of thinking about what you are going to say in response.

A second technique is the use of "I-statements." This means focusing on your feelings about something you view as a problem. An I-statement has three parts: feeling, when, and because. For example, "I feel upset when you say you will be home at 11, but you don't come home until 12 because I worry about your safety."

A successful family council

Remember that a successful family council will take time and effort. Try to stick with it even if it seems difficult at first. Your family will begin to run more smoothly and effectively when everyone helps find solutions to problems and everyone's opinions are considered.

Involving children in the family council

Preschool children

Even very young children can participate in a family council. Some tips for involving preschool children in the family council:

- Keep it short. Preschool-age children have a short attention span. They shouldn't be expected to sit still and listen for more than a few minutes.
- Order the agenda so that the topics that are relevant to preschool children are discussed first. Have toys or crayons available for them to play with when they get restless. Allow them to leave early if necessary.
- Preschool children may be more engaged in a family council if they have a job to do. For example, a young child can be in charge of telling everyone it's time for the meeting, or passing out treats at the end of the meeting.
- Allow young children to express their thoughts. Listen to them respectfully without correcting them.
- Reinforce positive behavior. When your child is doing something you like, let them know, for example, "You are doing such a good job listening."

School-age and adolescent children

- Older children and adolescents may be resistant to family councils, especially if you are just starting to have them. Starting with shorter meetings may help. Stick to easy or positive issues for the first few meetings.
- Letting children know their presence and opinions are valued may also encourage them to participate.
- Don't force children to participate. Just let them know that decisions that may affect them will be made whether they are there or not.
- Older children are more likely to participate if they have a say in what topics are discussed.

Resources for more information

Books

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families. Stephen R. Covey (1998). St Martin's Press, Inc. Describes a set of tools for strengthening family relationships and solving family problems. Includes discussion of family councils, or family meetings.

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk. Adele Faber Elaine Mazlish (1999). Morrow, William, & Co. Gives practical advice for improving parent-child communication. Clearly written with lots of examples.

The Kids' Book of Questions. Gregory Stock (2004). Workman Publishing Company, Inc. A book of funny and interesting questions that stimulate creative thinking and are appropriate for children.

Web sites

MissouriFamilies

missourifamilies.org

Find answers to questions about parenting, child development and family relationships. Also has links to parenting workshops and other resources.

National Council on Family Relations, 3989 Central Ave., NE, #550, Minneapolis, MN 55421, 1-888-781-9331.

ncfr.org.

This organization of family researchers, educators and practitioners provides research and information about family relationships.

References

Vuchinich, S., & Angelelli, J. (1995). Family interaction during problem solving. In M. Fitzpatrick & A. Vangelisti (Eds.), *Explaining Family Interactions* (pp. 177-205). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Vuchinich, S., Angelelli, J., & Gatherum, A. (1996). Context and development in family problem solving with preadolescent children. *Child Development*, 67, 1276-1288.

Washington State University Cooperative Extension. *Family Meetings*.

For more information on this subject and many others, visit the MU Extension Publications Web site at:

muextension.missouri.edu/explore

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