

# FAMILY MEETINGS

From: *Positive Discipline Workbook: A Resource Guide for Parenting Classes and Discussion Groups* by Jody McVittie and Barbara Kinney

Family Meetings are a valuable way for family members to learn and practice treating each other with respect. They are structured opportunities for family communication, planning and problem solving. They are usually a time to sit and share together. When you first start family meetings start them with one purpose: *to learn how to have family meetings*. If parents try to teach family meetings AND try to get problems solved right away, kids will see family meetings as just another way their parents have of manipulating them. You've waited a long time to solve these problems. You need to wait a few more weeks until your family learns how to do family meetings

**Why:** Family meetings provide an opportunity to share appreciations, to plan fun activities, to teach and develop the skills for problem solving and have fun together.

**Who:** Encourage every person who is living in your home to join the meeting. If you have a grandparent, an aunt or even a boarder in your home, invite them to join you. Young children (4 and younger) will not have the attention span to participate for much of the meeting. They may enjoy giving and receiving compliments but then quickly get bored. Have a quiet activity for them either at or near the table. (Rolling cars through play dough, a puzzle, etc.)

There are some important jobs during the meeting. The job of chairperson and the job of recorder (the person who keeps the notes on the meeting) should be rotated. Kids can and should take all the jobs in their turn. A four-year-old can be a good chairperson sitting on a parent's lap (getting hints whispered in his or her ear.) Recorders must be able to write. Some families also have a snack person, a person to arrange the chairs etc.

**Where:** Family meetings work best around a table. After dinner is a good time but it is easier if the plates are cleared off. Sometimes a "finger food" dessert or snack can be served.

**When:** It does work best to set aside an identified time each week for the meeting. Each family needs to adapt this according to their schedule. When you have busy teens in your home you will find that flexibility is important.

**How:** When first starting family meetings, ONLY do compliments and planning fun activities for 3-4 weeks. Then add problem solving but do not put any "parent problems" on the agenda for another 3-4 weeks. You have had these problems for a long time. If you rush things by putting your problems on the agenda right away, kids (especially older kids) will feel that the whole process is another manipulation tool. It is too valuable a process to be misperceived like that. Please be patient.

## The Agenda

The agenda usually starts as a piece of paper entitled "family meeting" which is put in a prominent place in the house where everyone has access. Many families use a magnet to attach them to the refrigerator. During the week family members can put "improvements" on the agenda. See below.

## Compliments

Start each family meeting with each person complimenting or expressing an appreciation for each family member (including themselves). Starting with compliments is essential. It sets a positive tone for the meeting and helps everyone remember the good things about the week. A compliment or an appreciation is a simple statement like: "I would like to compliment Sara for helping me with my homework yesterday." Or "Thank you for going on a bike ride with me." The appropriate response to a compliment is a "Thank you." (Or "You're welcome" if the appreciation was delivered in the form of a thank you.) Giving compliments may not come naturally at first so parents may need to teach and model compliments.

Hints on compliments:

- If the family cannot make it through a round of compliments (it may have been a rough day) you will not be able to problem solve. It is better to stop and reschedule the meeting.
- If someone cannot think of a compliment for another family member encourage him or her to ask the family member what he or she would like to be complimented for.
- If a parent (or other family member) senses that a compliment is a jab disguised as a compliment it can be helpful to ask the child receiving the compliment if the compliment felt like a real compliment. If it didn't, ask the complimenter to try again.

## A review of previous solutions

Before starting problem solving it is helpful to check in on solutions from the previous week. If the problem needs to be solved again, it can be put on the agenda for later in the meeting. It is satisfying to review "old" solutions and to recognize that they are working. It is a great skill to learn that not all solutions work and that trying to solve the problem again can be very effective.

## Problems/Improvements

It is helpful to list "problems" on the agenda as improvements. An improvement is a positively framed problem. For example instead of writing "Too many wet towels on the bathroom floor." The improvement would read "Wet towels hung up." The only problems that are addressed at the meeting are those that are already on the agenda when the meeting starts. (Parents...this means even you cannot add problems /improvements at the meeting. You have to wait until the next week.) Some families find that it is helpful to make a rule that problems listed the day of the meeting are deferred for a week too. Many problems are handled more effectively after everyone is cooled off.

When a problem/improvement is addressed at the meeting, the person who put the problem on the agenda is given time to describe the problems and what improvement he or she would like. Family members then offer suggestions (which are written down on the agenda, or the back of the agenda). A solution is chosen to try for one week. Sometimes it is most appropriate for the family to come to consensus around the solution. Sometimes it is appropriate for the person who put the needed improvement on the agenda to choose the solution. The family will know what seems to be the fairest way to choose the solution.

Using the agenda lets all family members know that there is a way to solve problems. It helps everyone know there is a place to be heard and a place to contribute. It also helps diffuse problems that occur in the middle of the week. When a child brings a problem to a parent, the parent can suggest that the child put the problem on the family meeting agenda. (Often by the time of the meeting the problem either has disappeared or is solved.)

## Planning

Families use family meetings to review the week's upcoming activities (this increases in importance as children grow and have more activities), to plan meals and menus, to arrange and acknowledge special celebrations, and to plan vacations. It is VERY important to make time to play together. This can be right after the family meeting (a game, a round of the "best jokes of the week," a video, a trip to the ice cream store a special snack) or it can be planned as a fun activity for during the week.

A word on young children (under 4): It is hard for children less than 4 to participate fully in family meetings. If you only have children under four have family meetings anyway. Start by having the adults compliment every family member (including themselves). Invite the child(ren) to give compliments if they would like. Then proceed with planning a fun activity (or problem solving if you have done this for awhile). Invite the younger kids to participate as they are willing or able. It is certainly ok to have another activity for them to do at the table that does not require your attention. (Play dough, puzzle, crayons etc). Keep the meetings short so that it is reasonable to ask for the kid to "do their thing" during the meeting.

### **Hints:**

- \* Do short family meetings (just compliments and planning a fun activity) for several weeks before introducing problem solving.
- \* Have ONLY kid problems on the agenda for several more weeks before parents add their problems.

## **Family Meetings – Getting Started**

When you begin family meetings:

Week 1	Compliments Plan something fun
Week 2	Compliments Introduce Agenda Plan something Fun
Week 3-5	Compliments Problem Solving Agenda Items ***ONLY KIDS PUT ITEMS ON AGENDA Record solutions on the back of the agenda or a separate sheet so they can be saved. Plan Something Fun
Week 6---	Compliments Old Business – Review any old solutions and see how they are working Problem Solving Agenda Items **PARENTS & KIDS PUT ITEMS ON AGENDA

Save your old agendas somewhere in a notebook or folder so that you have them to look back on if a solution is no longer "working". It will also be interesting to have as a reminder of how your family communication is building.

## Do's and Don'ts for Successful Family Meetings

by Jane Nelsen

### DO:

1. Remember the long-range purpose: To teach valuable life skills.
2. Post an agenda where family members can write their concerns or problems.
3. Start with compliments to set the tone by verbalizing positive things about each other.
4. Brainstorm for solutions to problems. Choose one suggestion (by consensus) that is practical and respectful and try it for a week. Focus on solutions, not blame
5. Calendar a family fun activity for later in the week – and all sports and other activities (including a chauffeur schedule).
6. Keep family meetings short 10 to 30 minutes, depending on the ages of your children. End with a family fun activity, game, or dessert.

### DON'T

1. Use family meetings as a platform for lectures and parental control.
2. Allow children to dominate and control. (Mutual respect is the key.)
3. Skip weekly family meetings. (They should be the most important date on your calendar.)
4. Forget that mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn.
5. Forget that learning skills takes time. Even solutions that don't work provide an opportunity to learn and try again—always focusing on respect and solutions.
6. Expect children under the age of four to participate in the process. (If younger children are too distracting, wait until they are in bed.)

# Four Steps for Winning Cooperation for children under 10

(adapted from *Positive Discipline* by Jane Nelsen)

1. *Get into the child's world.* Express understanding for your child's feelings. Make a guess about the child's perception of what happened. Then listen deeply to what your child has to say.
2. *Show understanding.* One way to show understanding is to share a time from your childhood or now when you have felt or behaved the same way.
3. *Share your feelings and concerns about the present situation.* When the first two steps have been done in a sincere and friendly manner, our child will be ready to listen to you.
4. *Find a solution together.* Ask your child if he/she would be willing to work on a solution with you. First ask your child for ideas. Then offer your suggestions. Next, work together on an agreement.

## Joint Problem-Solving Steps

Adapted from *Teaching Parenting the Positive Discipline Way* by Lynn Lott & Jane Nelsen

1. State an observation using "I notice we have a problem with fill in the problem here. Would you be willing to work together to find another way to deal with this that we can both live with?" (It is respectful to the other person to ask permission).
2. Ask your teen what his/her view of the problem is and how he/she feels. Listen deeply without arguing or interrupting. Then validate what you hear by feeding back what he/she says using "You feel \_\_\_ because \_\_\_ and you wish \_\_\_." The ask: "is there anything else?" and keep listening until the teen has finished.
3. Ask your teen if he or she is willing to hear what your issues are. (You can let your teen know that it's okay if you both see things differently. The idea is just to understand each other). Stat your feelings and issues using "I feel \_\_\_ about \_\_\_ because \_\_\_." (It is important to stick to your issue and not get into blame). Ask your teen to feed back what he/she heard were your feelings and issues.
4. Give appreciation for being heard
5. Brainstorming: Ask your teen first, "What ideas do you have for a solution?" If the teen has none, brainstorm alternatives together. (It helps the brainstorming process sif you come up with some wild and crazy ideas).
6. Choose an alternative that you can all live with for a short time (one day, one week, etc.).
7. Agree on a date to review how the plan is working
8. Give thank yous.

# Making an Agreement and Follow Through

Source: *Teaching Parenting the Positive Discipline Way* by Lynn Lott & Jane Nelsen

## The Steps of Making an Agreement:

1. Have a friendly discussion with the other person to gather information about what is happening regarding the problem. (Listen and be mutually respectful.)
2. Brainstorm for possible solutions and chose one that both of agree to. This may take some negotiating because your favorite solution may be different from the other person's favorite. (Notice that there is no threat or "consequence" here; that undermines the power of any agreement.)
3. Agree on a specific time deadline (to the minute).
4. At the deadline, you simply follow through on the agreement by firmly and respectfully requesting the other person to keep the agreement until it is done.

## Four Hints for Effective Follow Through

1. Keep comments simple and concise. ("I notice you didn't \_\_\_\_\_. Would you please do that now?")
2. In response to objections ask, "What was our agreement?"
3. In response to further objections, shut your mouth and use non verbal communication (point to your watch; smile knowingly; give a hug and point to your watch again).
4. When the other person concedes to keep to the agreement (sometimes obviously annoyed) say, "Thank you for keeping our agreement."

## Four Traps that Defeat Follow Through

1. Wanting other people to have the same priorities as you do.
2. Getting into judgments and criticism rather than sticking to the issue.
3. Not getting specific agreements in advance that include a specific time deadline.
4. Not maintaining dignity and respect for the other person and yourself.

## **Enabling or Empowering?**

Adapted from *Teaching Parenting the Positive Discipline Way* by Lynn Lott & Jane Nelsen

For our purposes we will use the following definitions.

**Enabling:** *Getting between young people and life experiences to minimize the consequences of their actions.*

Examples include:

- Doing too much for them
- Giving them too much
- Overprotecting or rescuing
- Lying for them
- Punishing or controlling
- Living in denial
- Fixing
- Bailing them out

**Empowering:** *Turning control over to young people as soon as possible so they have power over their own lives.*

Examples include:

- Listening and giving emotional support and validation without fixing or discounting
- Teaching life skills
- Working on agreements through family meetings or the joint problem solving process
- Letting go (without abandoning)
- Deciding what you will do with dignity and respect
- Sharing what you think, how you feel and what you want (without lecturing, moralizing, insisting on an agreement or demanding that anyone give you what you want)
- Sticking to the issues with dignity and respect

## **SAMPLE EMPOWERING RESPONSES**

Adapted from *Teaching Parenting the Positive Discipline Way* by Lynn Lott & Jane Nelsen

SHOWING FAITH: "I have faith in you. I trust you to figure out what you need. I know that when it's important to you, you'll know what to do."

RESPECTING PRIVACY: "I respect your privacy and want you to know I'm available if you want to discuss this with me."

EXPRESSING YOUR LIMITS: "I'm not willing to bail you out with your teacher. If your teacher wants more information, the three of us can get together to discuss the situation. I'll be there while you explain."  
(A respectful attitude and tone of voice is essential)

LISTEN WITHOUT FIXING OR JUDGING: "I would like to listen to what this means for you."

CONTROLLING YOUR OWN BEHAVIOR: "If you need my help with your homework, please let me know in advance"

LETTING GO OF THEIR ISSUES: "I hope you'll go to college, but I'm not sure it's important to you."

AGREEMENT NOT RULES: "Could we sit down and see if we can work on a plan regarding homework that we both can live with?"

LOVING AND ENCOURAGING: "I like you just the way you are and respect you to choose what is right for you"

ASKING FOR HELP: "I need your help. Can you explain to me why it isn't important to you to do your homework?"

SHARE YOUR FEELINGS: Share your truth by using the "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ about/when \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ and I wish \_\_\_\_\_" process without expecting anyone else to feel the same or grant your wish. This is a great model for children to acknowledge their feelings and wishes without expectations. "I feel upset when you don't do your homework because I value education so much and think it could be very beneficial to you in your life, and I really wish you would do it."

JOINT PROBLEM SOLVING: "What is your picture of what is going on regarding your homework? Would you be willing to hear my concerns? Could we brainstorm together on possible solutions?"

RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION: "I'm feeling too upset to talk about this right now. Let's put it on the agenda for the family meeting so we can talk about it when I'm not so emotional."

INFORMATION (INSTEAD OF ORDERS): "I notice you spend a lot of time looking out the window and talking during the time you have set aside for homework" or "I notice you often leave your homework until the last minute and then feel discouraged about getting it done."

CURIOSITY: "What is your plan?"