



Building Stepfamilies That Work®

Telephone: (403) 245-5744 • Email: info@stepfamily.ca

The Secrets of Successful Stepfamilies: How to hold family meetings that work

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Family meetings are vitally important because they:

- Bring people together on a regular basis to participate in family decision making and problem solving
- Reinforce the leadership roles and effective co-parenting
- Introduce structure over chaos
- Help kids feel secure because they know someone is in charge
- Serve as a forum where expectations, roles, rules, routines, rewards and consequences can be spelled out, and revised as necessary
- Provide a predictable time and method for voicing concerns and addressing issues (vs. letting them stew until they explode)
- Ensure that effort and contributions are acknowledged
- Provide an opportunity for feelings to be validated
- Bring people together to develop solutions
- Build closeness, participation and a sense of belonging,
- Underscore the importance of the family unit, and
- Your commitment to making the family work.

Meeting parameters:

- Family meetings are usually held weekly. The time should be the same each week but selected (initially) to be workable for all concerned. If one member cannot make a meeting, it is up to them to find a time that will work for all others. If a person fails to attend, they will be expected to fully support all decisions made in their absence.
- Family meetings should not be held before or during a meal. We're often grouchy before meals. Sometimes the agenda items are too difficult to manage with the distractions of dining.
- They should have a specified maximum duration. Children lose interest quite quickly. Teenagers burn out after 40 or 45 minutes. Longer meetings are OK if everybody wants to continue.
- No phone calls, door-to-door salespeople, TV, radio, Walk/Discmans, or visitors during meeting. No disrespectful or profane language or yelling is allowed during the meeting.
- The meeting is chaired by one of the parents; and the "chair" should alternate between the parents. In time, the kids can cycle through the role of the chairperson.

- The meeting follows an agenda. The agenda is usually developed at the start of the meeting. (Once the ritual of family meetings has become established, agenda items can be added to a list posted on the fridge.)
- Everyone is asked if they have any (additional) agenda items at the start of the meeting. Requests can be made to place particularly important items early on the agenda (otherwise the chairperson decides the order of the items; or its “first come, first served”).
- The first item on the agenda is always “Accolades”. This is a time where everyone in attendance provides a compliment or expresses thanks or praise to every other member attending. (For example, Pete begins with: “Bob, I really appreciated the fact that you helped me clean up the porch on Wednesday. Lynn, your smile when I came through the door really helped me to turn a miserable mood around. Katie, I really liked..., etc. Then Bob, in turn, provides his accolades to each person present.) Special contributions or notable efforts should be recognized at this time too. Note: Accolades are very powerful in setting a constructive, positive tone for the meetings. They also help us to “open our ears” so we will be better listeners when we are dealing with issues of concern later on in the meeting.
- When someone “has the floor”, they should be given ample time to present their item/concern. If others tend to interrupt, the speaker should be given an object (e.g., a teddy bear) to hold to signify that they have the floor, and are at liberty to speak uninterrupted until they pass the teddy bear on to someone else.
- If a lot of emotion is expressed, the presenter should be allowed to continue (rather than being comforted or challenged regarding the way they are feeling). When they indicate they have “said their piece”, validate the emotion. For example, say: “To me, it sounds like you’ve been feeling very lonely; and that you’d like to have some one-on-one time with your dad whenever he’s in town”. Or, “You have every right to be angry at your brother, but it’s not OK to hit him. How could you and he deal with situations like the one that got you so angry, in a different way?”
- Encourage and model the use of “I messages” rather than “You messages” (which tend to “fix” blame, rather than the problem).
- Once a problem has been identified, apply a systematic problem solving strategy. Propose trying the solution out for a week or two to see how well it works. Review its effectiveness at a family meeting, and revise if necessary.
- Keep in mind that kids get a vote, but not a veto, in family meetings.
- Finish the meeting on time, and on a positive note. A family hug might work as a closing ritual.

Your Assignment:

Hold your first family meeting. Make sure you begin with Accolades. The parents should go first to show the others how it’s done. It’s OK if you don’t deal with any items of concern, but it is important to spell out clearly when the meetings will be held, and how they will be run. It’s also important to end the meeting on time and on a positive note.

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