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Thriving in Today's Times: The Family Meeting

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All individuals and families experience stress. One of the most important ways your family can *prevent and control* stress is by communicating. Good communication takes time, effort, and patience, and it's never too late to start. In fact, starting right now is critical if you are currently experiencing stress, regardless of the source of the stress.

Family meetings encourage effective communication. A family meeting is planned ahead—it is not spontaneous; it involves all family members; and each person is listened to with respect, no matter their age or verbal ability. Each family member has a chance to discuss personal concerns, needs, accomplishments, and endeavors.

The meeting is conducted in an open, comfortable atmosphere in which all members feel they have a voice in problem solving and decision making. For example, son Jack is intent on saying at tonight's family meeting how unfair it seems that his parents don't ever come to his baseball games. Jack knows he won't get into trouble and won't be called a "baby." He understands that family meetings are a place where everyone can talk openly.

Jack's dad, John, also has something that is bothering him: the possibility of losing his job. John has worked for his employer for over 15 years, but he knows that with today's economy, being laid off is a real possibility. To Jack, getting his parents to come cheer for him at the game is just as important a problem as John's. Both stressors are both real and possibly painful to the family.

In a time of crisis, such as a poor economy, families should openly discuss family issues. They should have a family meeting. The first step is to decide what they want their family meetings to accomplish. Include young chil-

dren in the meeting; it's a way for them to see—and learn—open communication with other members of the family. Set the stage for children of all ages to feel comfortable in discussing their true feelings. Remember: what may seem insignificant to you may be causing stress in your children.

Define meeting limitations ahead of time so that no one automatically expects problems to "go away" after being discussed once.

Goals of a family meeting

- increased positive family time
- prevention of problems
- solving a problem before it gets out of hand
- learning more about each other's feelings and expectations
- role clarification
- organization of schedules
- assignment—and acceptance—of family chores and responsibilities
- planning for an enjoyable family activity
- learning problem-solving and decision-making skills

Each meeting should be approximately 30- to 45-minutes long. The length of the meeting, however, should be flexible and based on the members' needs. It is important to have a set start time for family meetings, and the start time should be convenient for all family members. (Not a good time for a family meeting: right before meals, school, or bedtime.) Discuss the family's schedule of activities so that all family members can be available for the meeting. The meeting should be held in a neutral room. Somebody should be responsible for organizing the meeting and keeping things on track; rotate this responsibility.

Rules of a family meeting, established at the start

1. Every family member is invited.
2. There will be no yelling, name calling, and so forth. Each member must show respect to everybody else.
3. Topics that are non-negotiable should be noted at the very beginning. For example, it is non-negotiable that children cannot drive a vehicle without a license.
4. Family meetings are not a place to “lecture.” They are a place to discuss. Adults are leaders only.
5. Consider deciding by consensus instead of by voting or majority rules. Deciding by consensus means that everybody goes along with the decision, although not everybody may find the decision 100% suitable. Keep talking until you get to a point of agreement. In voting, there tends to be winners and losers.
6. The television set is off and phones are turned off or taken “off the hook” during the meeting. Family members can call for a meeting at any time during a crisis. At the start of the meeting, there should be a list of issues to discuss.
7. There will be no off-topic wandering, no matter how interesting a digression might be. Everyone stays on one subject until the family has come to a consensus that it is time to move on.
8. Decisions made during a family meeting must be followed. They cannot be changed unless renegotiated during another family meeting.
9. Taking turns is imperative. It is important to not have one person monopolize the conversation.
10. Family members should be encouraged to try to see each other’s point of view. Try not to be judgmental.
11. All family members have an equal role in the process, no matter their age, developmental level, or gender.
12. The meeting should focus on family strengths and positive aspects of family life. The meeting should not become a “gripe” session.
13. Using problem-solving and brainstorming techniques at other times—e.g., in the store, on the school bus, at other locations—should be encouraged.

Communication techniques

1. Actively listen. Pay attention to body language, tone of voice, and rate of speech.
2. Be responsive to the speaker’s emotions. Clarify his or her emotion: “You seem really angry because I might lose my job.”

3. Make sure to talk *with* the person, not *at* the person.
4. Use “I” messages. Instead of “You make me so mad,” say, “I get mad when you don’t show up at the game because it is embarrassing,” or “I feel that I am not wanted anymore in this family because I lost my job.”
5. Don’t interrupt. Some people may take a long time to tell their story. Nevertheless, it is their story to tell. Take the time to listen. (Sometimes you may have to help guide a young child by helping him find the right words.)
6. Make sure that you understand what is said. Summarize and clarify statements being made.
7. Try not to be defensive or give unwanted advice.
8. Don’t shame, ridicule, threaten, preach, lecture, or ignore family members when they are talking.
9. If confrontation does occur during the meeting, the rules of the family meeting need to be reviewed.
10. Try to model effective communication skills, but if you make a mistake it is important to apologize to everyone. For example, “I am sorry. I jumped to a conclusion too fast. I am listening now.”

Steps in problem solving

Effective communication promotes effective problem solving and family resiliency. Problem-solving techniques often include several steps:

The first step is to present the problem. Give the facts as the person understands them. This step may also include the presenter’s feelings or emotions. What one person perceives as a problem, another person may not. This makes identifying, defining, and agreeing on the problem very important. This step also allows other family members to explore other points of view.

Example #1: Jack may suspect his parents don’t care about him and what he does. He bases this on the fact that they have not attended a single baseball game all season. At the family meeting, he explains how embarrassed he is in front of his friends and how hurt he feels when they don’t show up. The parents express that they do love him but because of the economy they have been focusing on making more money.

Example #2: John perceives that his role as a provider may change. He is uncomfortable with the idea that his wife may have to get a job, but he knows his family needs to save money.

The second step is to brainstorm different ways to address the problem. This is when family members can be creative. Look at the family's assets and strengths. Can those assets and strengths be used to help solve this problem? List all possible solutions. Ask each family member what he or she thinks will help. Which solution(s) do they see as easily attainable?

After exploring all suggestions, choose the most viable solution and make plans to carry it out. It is important to first let everyone discuss the options and then find one option that everyone can agree to try.

Example #1: One solution that may be offered is that Jack's parents quit working when it is time for the game. Another solution might be that only one of Jack's parents comes to the games, while the other parent stays home and works. Another is that Jack and his siblings help his parents with the chores so that they can come to the game (and other activities) and still get their work done.

Example #2: One solution that might be offered is that John talks to his boss about the true likelihood of being laid off. He could be stressed for no valid reason. Another solution might be that John's family openly discusses and brainstorms what would need to happen if John lost his job. Yet another decision may be that the family takes a vote for any major changes after each member of the family has been able to explore the options (voting eligibility might have to be clarified).

The third step is to formulate an action plan. What are everyone's responsibilities in the chosen solution? Does everyone understand the plan and the expectations of each other? Some families may choose to put the action plan in writing and have everyone sign the plan.

Example #1: Jack and his family have decided that in order for his parents to see him and his siblings play, the whole family must pitch in more with the chores. They decided that chores will be assigned based on each child's developmental age.

Example #2: John and his family have decided that it is important to try to compromise. Thus, the family decides each member has to explore potential ways that they can help in the event of a possible family financial crisis—so that the burden does not fall entirely on John. Examples could be carpooling with friends, taking lunch to school and work

instead of eating out, and using the library instead of buying books.

The fourth step is to monitor and evaluate the success of the agreed-upon solution. Questions such as "Did all family members complete their responsibilities?" and "Did the plan meet the needs of the family?" should be asked. The fourth step is very important. If the solution does not seem to be working, then the family can meet again and brainstorm new ideas. If the solution did work, then it is important for the family members to continue to follow the action plan.

Example #1: Jack is excited. Both of his parents are coming to his game tonight. Although he and his siblings had to do more chores, it was worth it! He not only gets his parents to the game, he also feels really good that he is helping with family chores. He feels that he is truly part of the family.

Example #2: John and his family have decided to explore possible jobs for mom Mary, and the family will each choose one way to lower the family expenses. If John does not lose his job, the family has worked together and perhaps has saved some money that can be put in savings for times of crisis.

CONCLUSION

Effectively communicating and problem solving can reduce stress in families. Although they take time, effort, and patience, communicating and problem solving together helps families become closer, while also increasing their problem-handling capabilities. Family meetings strengthen both family communication skills and the family itself.

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