

By Melinda Blau

The Skeptical Parent's Guide to Family Meetings

WE KNOW THE importance of spending time with our child and listening to him," says Anthony Williams, 29, a package car driver for United Parcel Service in New York City. That's why every Saturday afternoon or Sunday after church, Anthony, his wife, Salona, and 3-year-old T.J. hold an informal family meeting.

"We started doing it this year when T.J. began school," adds Salona, 24, a customer service clerk with the U.S. Postal Service. "It's a way for us to find out what's going on at preschool. And we want him to know that he can come to us with whatever is on his mind."

More and more, parents of very young children are recognizing the need to set aside regular times to be together as a family, to talk, and to listen to one another. Family meetings have become an important way of staying connected, especially if both parents work and their kids are in preschool or elementary school all day.

First proposed by psychiatrist Rudolf Dreikurs in his 1964 book *Children: The Challenge*, many experts view the concept of family meetings as an idea whose time has come. "As life becomes more complicated and people are running every which way, it becomes more important for families to plan—not only for how things will get done around the house but for fun. Some parents' names have been changed.

things," says Gary McKay, Ph.D., a psychologist in Tucson, Arizona.

Some people think of having family meetings as "a nice little idea," but it's so much more, says Amy Lew, Ph.D., a parent educator and psychotherapist in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, who literally wrote the book on family meetings with colleague Betty Lou Bettner, *Raising Kids*

Who Can: Using Family Meetings to Nurture Responsible, Cooperative, Caring, and Happy Children. Family

Family Meeting Agenda

- 1 Call family meeting to order.
- 2 Discuss best news of the day or week. Everyone tells about something good, funny, or surprising that happened. This could also be the time to thank one another for doing something nice.
- 3 Confront family challenges—from a fight with a preschool pal to fixing feelings or even the kitchen faucet.
- 4 Make weekend plans—let kids take turns selecting activities.
- 5 Adjourn.

meetings "give kids what they need most," she says. "We call them the three C's." That is, scheduling regular meetings makes kids feel *connected*; engaging in problem-solving and decision-making makes them feel *capable*; and seeing that what they say and do has an effect on the family makes kids feel like they *count*. Dr. Lew adds that children also develop four vital skills: "the ability to communicate, to use good judgment, to assume responsibility, and to have self-discipline."

The Littlest Leader

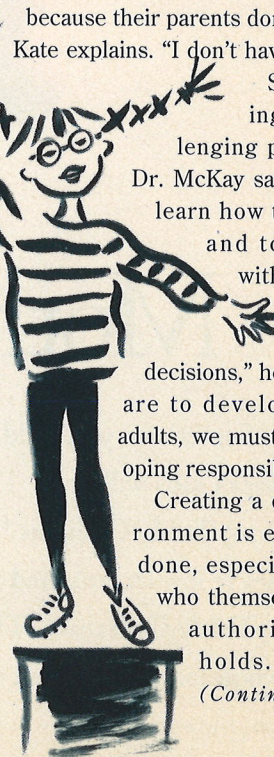
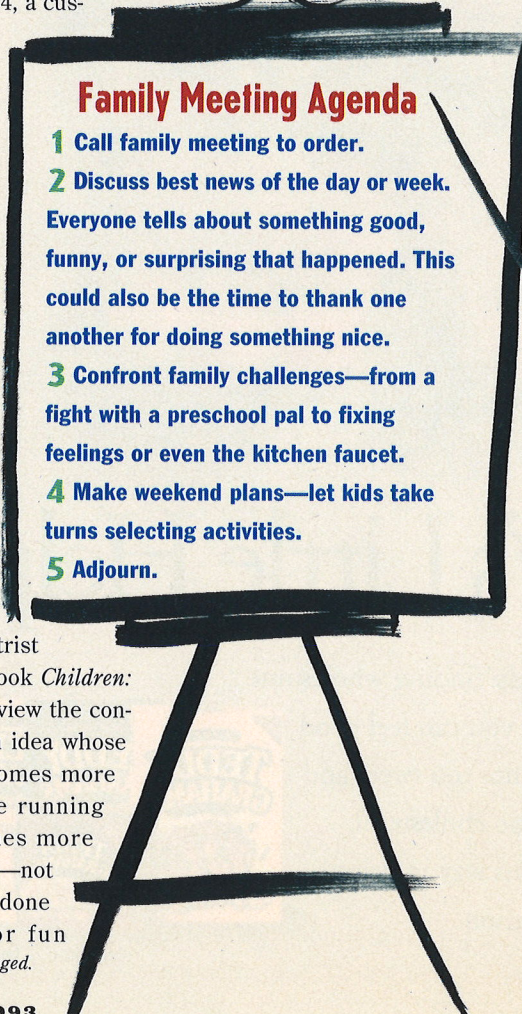
At 14, Kate Lonberg-Lew, Dr. Lew's daughter, is living proof that family meetings work for kids. "We have had a family meeting every week; they were doing it before I was born!" says Kate, who has a 17-year-old sister, Sarah. Family meetings, she explains, can be used to delegate chores or solve problems—anything from deciding on a vacation spot to settling disputes.

And Kate has been leading family meetings "ever since she was verbal," Dr. Lew says. "It was always important for her as the youngest and smallest to be the person in charge." Kate considers herself lucky. When she has a problem, she knows she can bring it up at a meeting. If she doesn't like a particular solution, or if one doesn't work out, she knows she can voice her displeasure and that, together, her family will try to conceive another plan. "Sometimes my friends say they just wish they could talk to their parents, or they get mad because their parents don't let them talk," Kate explains. "I don't have that problem!"

Still, family meetings require challenging parenting skills, Dr. McKay says. "You have to learn how to listen to kids and to talk to them without blame, and to help them start making decisions," he explains. "If we are to develop responsible adults, we must begin by developing responsible children."

Creating a democratic environment is easier said than done, especially for parents who themselves came from authoritarian households. However, Dr.

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McKay says, instead of trying to make children blindly conform to your rules, it is more effective to enlist them in the process. "Sure, parents have the obligation to control the environment in which the child grows up, but the idea is to control the situation, not the child—to give him choices within limits," he explains.

Children can be involved in every step of the meeting, from setting the agenda—using pictures if necessary—to taking minutes. Parents can show a 3-year-old how to push the play button on a tape recorder so that she can "take minutes," too. At the next meeting, she can be in charge and let her parents know when it's their turn to speak. "When there's a democratic process at work, and you draw on your children's creativity and problem-solving abilities and increase their sense of belonging, they're

more likely to make it work," explains Linda Seaver, M.P.S., A.T.R., a family therapist in Bedford Village, New York. And, she notes, kids often come up with as many solutions to a problem as their parents—and, sometimes, better ones!

A Gift Worth Giving

Those who have instituted family meetings on a regular basis agree: It is hard, but it's worth it. Seaver says these parents have given their children an invaluable gift of "empowerment and participation."

After hearing about family meetings in a parenting course nine years ago, Geri Quarracino, a homemaker in Kimberton, Pennsylvania, and her husband, Frank, a salesman, invited their daughters, then 2 and 4, to simply "be there and listen and add to the information if they wanted,"

Quarracino recalls. "To tell you the truth, they were mostly interested in the snack!"

Still, knowing that they were welcome to take part in their parents' discussion encouraged the girls to participate in the Sunday meetings. "It took about five years for it to become a ritual," Quarracino says. "But our son grew up with it. And he has been leading meetings since he was 5."

"I don't know what our family would be like without them," says Quarracino, whose daughters are now 13 and 11, and whose son is 9. She also cites what many believe is one of the greatest benefits of having regularly scheduled family meetings: "As they reach teen years and begin to pull away, it's a forum to know what's going on in their lives."

Dr. Bettner, a therapist in Media, Pennsylvania, highlights another advantage: When rules are made and chores are chosen at family meetings, a parent no longer has to feel like "the enforcer." She recalls a weekday evening when she was "on" cooking, and the table didn't get set. When one of the kids asked where dinner was, Dr. Bettner pointed out that it was ready but that the table wasn't set. "Who's on table setting?" the hungry child asked. "I don't know," Dr. Bettner replied. "You'll have to check the book. I know *I'm* not." At which point, the shirker was discovered and spurred into action by the other kids.

Of course, if parents become less responsible, they also become more accountable. "The minutes show that it's not only children who don't live up to agreements," she notes. "One of my foster kids thought of having a suggestion box, and my husband volunteered to build one. When he didn't, the kids reminded him, and after four weeks of his not doing it, one of them finally got a shoe box and punched a hole in it. This says to kids that they can make mistakes and that they can try something and change if it doesn't work."

Beverly Neuer Feldman, Ph.D., a psychologist in Los Angeles, and author of *Kids Who Succeed*, suggests that parents also use meetings to help kids understand where the family paycheck goes. "Kids as young as 3 have some comprehension of money. Divide a dollar into coins, and show what amount goes to rent and food and so on," she says. "Parents are often embarrassed to (Continued on page 64)

GATHERING AROUND THE KITCHEN TABLE

GETTING STARTED At first, keep it simple. You might combine a meeting with a family outing, suggests Carol Tatta, director of Central Nursery School and Family Forum Inc., a parenting program in Wayne, Pennsylvania. After everyone begins to trust the process, start tackling more delicate issues. Invite children to participate as soon as they're verbal. Toddlers can color or engage in some other quiet activity at meetings.

TIME The scheduled time can be changed only if all members agree. Meetings with young children should be no longer than 30 minutes; an hour with older kids. No one has to attend, but everyone is bound by decisions.

JOBS Rotate the roles of chairperson and secretary. "A child as young as 3 can be in charge of a meeting or take minutes," Tatta notes. "She can tape the minutes and then be responsible for having the family listen to them at the beginning of the next meeting."

APPRECIATION When you begin every meeting by doling out compliments and thank yous, everyone becomes more aware of and grateful for little acts of kindness and cooperation. Appreciation may be difficult and feel strange at first. "When a kid in our family couldn't think of anything, someone else would pipe in with a reminder," Dr. Bettner says.

AGENDA It might include chores, family rules, disputes, or personal problems. Don't forget to put family fun on the list—gifts, celebrations, outings, vacations, special projects. You can also keep a running list on the refrigerator for next week's meeting. Then, if there's a dispute during the week, everyone knows it will be dealt with—but not necessarily in the heat of conflict. For children too young to read, use pictures. Everyone gets a turn to add to the agenda, but no one is allowed to criticize, blame, or cut someone else off. The chairperson should say, "This sounds like a problem for you"—then ask the group for solutions.

PROBLEM SOLVING It's more important to air problems than to solve them. Sometimes you may have to table a difficult issue. "There always has to be a consensus," Dr. Bettner stresses. "If you override one person's objections, then kids see family meetings as just another of Mom and Dad's weapons to get them to do what they don't want to do."

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when their three sons were 8, 11, and 16, and their daughter was 17. "We posted a big note on the refrigerator, saying, 'Family meeting?' and had people fill in what day they thought might be good."

"We wanted everyone to participate. The younger ones thought it was a neat idea, but the older ones didn't want to be there," recalls Votchik, who admits that it took some stretching on her part to provide such a democratic arena. "It was odd to come up with an agenda and to actually let everyone bring up their own topic. At first, the kids weren't sure what was okay, and we had to let them know that this is a place where anything can be said."

The oldest son was a holdout at the first several meetings, but Votchik and her husband, a lawyer, asked him to at least listen. "He sat on the steps behind us," she says. "He didn't trust at first that he'd be listened to. He thought there must be some catch. Eventually, when he realized that we all had a chance to have our ideas heard, he became one of the biggest contributors."

Votchik certainly doesn't romanticize family meetings; keeping up with them on a regular basis has been a struggle. "The family changes," she says. "It would be ideal to think that you could do this once a week, but as we were going through different transitions, we'd drop it for a while."

She recently pored over the notebook of minutes. "It started with the big printing of an elementary school child and had things like 'Feed the cat' and 'Empty the litter box,'" she says. "Then it got more sophisticated—not just the handwriting but the issues." She realizes that this six-year chronicle of life in the Votchik family is not only proof of the good that has come out of their meetings, but a memento that will be cherished for years to come. ■

Contributing editor Melinda Blau specializes in family issues. She is writing a book called Families Apart: 10 Keys to Successful Co-Parenting.

THE NEW FAMILY

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say, 'We can't afford it,' but if you make children a part of financial planning, they'll be more cooperative and realistic."

Dr. Feldman recalls a California couple whose children wanted to vacation in Hawaii: "After they looked at household expenditures, the kids decided to do the gardening and the housekeeping—jobs that their working parents had been paying outsiders to do—and they saved enough to pay for the vacation."

Going With the Flow

Naturally, it's better if you start this process when kids are young. If you pose the idea to older children, especially if your family is not accustomed to airing problems or solving disputes together, expect some opposition—even suspicion—at first.

Alice Votchik, a homemaker and an artist in Haverford, Pennsylvania, grants that it wasn't easy. She and her husband, a lawyer, initiated meetings six years ago,

SPECIAL BENEFITS FOR SPECIAL FAMILIES

According to Dr. Bettner, who has mothered four children of her own and 15 foster children, family meetings have additional benefits for various family styles. Here's how they can bring out the best in nontraditional households.

ONE-CHILD FAMILIES

Family meetings help you avoid unhealthy triangles and give the child, who might feel outnumbered by the adults, a sense that his or her voice counts.

SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES

The parent who tends to take on too much responsibility learns to share duties of family life without feeling guilty. "She doesn't have to be Mom and Dad."

FOSTER FAMILIES

Foster children often feel voiceless. "Through meetings, the foster kids could see that they didn't have to bend to our family and that they also could influence it."

STEPFAMILIES

Meetings help everyone adjust and blend values and practices. "If you're going to unite Russia and the U.S., you have to talk about how you're going to co-exist."