

Family Meetings by Dr. Jane Nelsen

It is difficult for me to choose a favorite Positive Discipline parenting tool, but family meetings are at the top. Children learn so much during family meetings, such as listening, respecting differences, verbalizing appreciation, problem-solving, and experiencing that mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn and focusing on solutions. I have a much longer list, but you get the idea. Family meetings also create a family tradition and will create many memories.



One of my favorite stories is about a time my teenagers started complaining about family meetings—that they were stupid and lame. I empathized, told them we could shorten them, but to humor me because they were so important to me.

During this period, 17-year-old Mary spent the night with a friend. She came home the next day and declared, “That family is so screwed up. They should have family meetings.”

Why are family meetings so difficult?

Since family meetings are so important, why do so many families avoid taking the time to implement them? And, when they do, why do they have so many challenges?

One parent wrote about her frustrations with trying to implement family meetings sharing that her eight-year-old son constantly displayed his new talent for burping during the meetings, and her five-year-old “freaks out” when anyone brainstorms a suggestion she doesn’t like.

Part of the problems could be that parents don’t take enough “time for training.” They may expect their children to have all the necessary skills for family meetings. When you think about it, this makes as much sense as expecting children to have the vocabulary of a college student the first year they start speaking.

Children under the age of four may not be developmentally ready to learn the skills for family meetings. If they are interruptive during family meetings (instead of being willing to play quietly), wait until they are asleep to have family meeting with older children. These first few meetings should take about 5 minutes.

A Family Meeting Training Plan

Week One: The Agenda

Introduce the five components of family meetings. Let your family know you will be spending as many weeks as it takes to learn each component.

1. The Agenda
2. Compliments
3. Brainstorming for Solutions
4. A family fun activity such as a game, cooking, or popcorn and a movie.
5. Calendar for family fun event

The first week you can spend more time on the Agenda. Let your kids know this is where they can write problems. (Younger children can ask parents to write on the agenda for them.) Ask if anyone can think of any problems they would like help with. If they can't think of anything you could say, "What about _____ (whatever problem you have noticed during the day between or with the kids). You could then say, "I would like to add burping." Let them know that the agenda will be put on the fridge and anyone can add anything they want during the week. You won't try to solve any of the problems until after the kids learn about brainstorming. Let your kids know that next week, they'll learn about compliments so they might want to be thinking of what they appreciate about everyone in the family so they'll be ready.

Then put the agenda on the fridge and end the meeting.

During the week, when you notice the kids having a problem you might say, "That sounds like a good one to add to the agenda." Don't insist. Just notice if they do or not. If you see kids fighting you might say, "Would one of you like to put this on the agenda?" They may or they may not. You are just making a suggestion that increases awareness of the agenda. When you have a problem, such as kids not picking up their toys, you could say, "This is a problem. Would you like to put it on the agenda, or should I?" If they don't, you can.

Week Two: Compliments

Bring the agenda to the family meeting and say something such as, "We have quite a few things on our agenda (even if you are the one who has put most of them on there). It will be interesting to see how we solve these problems after we learn about brainstorming. Tonight we are going to do compliments. Who knows what a compliment is?"

If your kids don't come up with any of the following you can teach the following:

1. Thank you for something someone has done for you.
2. "Atta boy," or "atta girl" (acknowledgment of something someone has accomplished.)
3. Appreciation for something you like about a family member.

During compliments you can go around the circle and allow everyone to give a thank you for _____, anatta boy/girl for _____, or an appreciation for _____. If they struggle with this, say, "We'll practice again next week." If everyone does well, say, "Next week we'll learn about brainstorming."

During the week, when you see something "good," you can comment, "That would make a good compliment during our next family meeting." Don't write it down or tell them to remember. You are just creating awareness. Continue to make suggestions when you see something that could go on the agenda--and/or add things yourself.

Week Three: Brainstorming

Move on to brainstorming only when your kids are doing well (not perfect) putting things on the agenda and giving and receiving compliments.

Bring the agenda. Comment on how much is on it and that you can't wait to talk about brainstorming. Then do compliments. If they are proficient, go on to teach about brainstorming.

Brainstorming is when we think of as many ideas as we can to solve a problem. They can be practical or wild and crazy. After we have had fun brainstorming (with no discussion), we will choose one solution that we all agree on and try it for a week.

Choose a problem from the agenda and practice brainstorming. Be sure to teach about the wild and crazy part by suggesting some ridiculous suggestions at first such as, "No talking for a full day. Everyone will just burp."

If someone starts complaining about an idea, remind the kids, "During brainstorming any idea is okay. When we are finished brainstorming we can discuss some of the ideas before choosing one that works for everyone."

You might want to introduce a timer and set it for two minutes and challenge the family to see how many ideas they can think of in two minutes. This may help them stick to brainstorming for ideas instead of getting off-track into discussions.

After brainstorming say, "Now let's look at our list and cross out anything that isn't practical, respectful, or helpful." From what is left, choose one that everyone can agree to. If everyone can't agree say, "Okay. We are doing great at learning this process. Let's table this item and try again next week to see if we can find something we can all agree on."

Family Fun Activity and Calendar for Family Fun Events

These two components can be added any time after your family is doing well with the agenda and compliments. You may want to add one or both the same week that you add

brainstorming. Or you may want to use the family fun activity as a brainstorming lesson—brainstorm for a list of things kids would like to do at the end of the family meeting.

The calendar for family fun events means taking the time to make sure things you would like to do as a family get put on the calendar.

As you read all of this I hope you understand that the process is even more important than an immediate result. You are teaching skills that can last a lifetime. You are being patient. You are being respectful and encouraging. Whenever something doesn't do well, you may want to stop and say, "We'll try again next time."