

Bring back the family meeting!

Dr Deborah Trengove

On many Friday nights, the Phillips family get takeaway. The menu might change but the format is the same – it's a regular family catch up time, known as "Takeaway Talks" where everyone checks in, the week ahead is planned and important issues are worked out.

Families are teams who live and run a household together. As in the workplace, an effective team doesn't "just happen". Parents are the family leaders who need a strategy to create a culture of cooperation and contribution, just as leaders do in a harmonious and productive workplace. As part of this process, family meetings can have a central place in modern families and are well worth investing the time and effort in running them effectively.

Young people are being raised to have a voice in their lives, whether that is at school or in our democratic society. "Seen but not heard" is long gone, and families who rely on an authoritarian approach are more liable to produce resentment or fearful subordination in their children, neither of which is healthy for their long-term development. This does not mean handing over all decision-making to children and teenagers: adults need to retain responsibility for promoting core values, protecting safety and promoting healthy lifestyles and decision-making. After all, parents have the experience and wisdom that young people are yet to acquire.

The benefits of family meetings

Family meetings can play an important role in building a sense of belonging, strengthening the bonds between family members and validating the idea that every member of the family is important. Through family meetings, children can learn many incredibly valuable life skills. Listening to others, articulating their opinions and ideas, problem-solving and finding compromises. These skills are explicitly taught and modelled through family meetings. In addition, the notion of the greater good balanced with individual wishes is lived out in the process of coming together as a team. These abilities are the "soft skills" sought after in the modern workplace and part of the emotional intelligence which enhances relationships throughout life.

It is vital that family meetings involve "positive" things too, such as chats about what's on at the weekend or planning for holidays and family events. Whether formal or informal, family meetings are a time when appreciation for efforts and cooperation can be shared, reflecting the importance of everyone's place in the family and their contribution, no matter their age.

10 tips for effective family meetings

1. Involve food if possible and put devices elsewhere to eliminate distractions.
2. Talk about fun stuff, not just problems or household chores.
3. Make it regular – weekly or fortnightly are ideal – one night over dinner or Sunday breakfast are popular times. Choose a time and place when everyone can attend and set a time limit.
4. Start with sharing positives: compliments and/or appreciations carry extra weight in front of others.

5. Let everyone voice their opinion without criticism from others. Most families nominate respect as one of their core values, and this is reflected in how each person is listened to.
6. Trial running a formal meeting: have an agenda, rotate the leader (including the kids) and record any agreements.
7. Brainstorm solutions and aim for consensus if you can. Encourage children and teenagers to think of all sorts of possibilities for solutions – you might be surprised at how creative and reasonable they can be. Depending on the issue, you can also discuss what happens if someone doesn't keep to an agreement.
8. Trial agreed options and review at the next meeting or when everyone thinks is a good time – for example, a new technology plan may be trialled for a few weeks before it is reviewed.
9. Difficult issues may not be resolved at one meeting but further discussed next time. This can give everyone some thinking time and allow for emotions to settle.
10. If a teenager refuses to join, keep the invitation open, remind them their voice is important. Sometimes adolescents won't want to join family meeting. The best idea is to not push it, but keep the invitation open, perhaps expressing a wish that they may join in next time. Remind them that their opinions are valued and you want to hear what they have to say.

Dr Deborah Trengove is a writer and parent educator. Deborah is also a former school psychologist, head of wellbeing and educational leader.