

Could family meetings help you get on better with your kids? Yes, but they can also go horribly wrong

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[Family meetings](#) are often touted as an effective way to resolve conflicts, work out some shared goals and bring the family together.

They seem to wax and wane in popularity. But as [Google Trends](#) shows, there has been a steady growth in people searching for information about family meetings over the past decade, with a spike during 2021, at the height of the pandemic.

I'm a psychology researcher interested family dynamics and how they affect children's development. Here are some of the [potential benefits](#)—and risks—of holding regular family meetings.

Do you need family meetings?

Well, it depends.

People sometimes question the difference between a family meeting and, say, dinner.

If you all get together at mealtimes and engage constructively with plenty of conversation, it may well be redundant (and a waste of your kids' valuable play time) to throw in an extra meeting just for the sake of it.

However, some families (including situations where parents are shift workers or FIFO workers) may find getting everyone together around the table on a regular basis quite challenging.

How to hold a productive family meeting

Regular family meetings certainly can have some value—especially if everyone gets a voice, feels heard and feels they can speak freely.

These type of meetings could be framed as an opportunity to:

- catch up with what everyone is doing and feeling
- inform each other about upcoming events or challenges
- genuinely canvass different opinions on how best to move forward.

A positive family meeting ensures everyone (even the quiet kid) is asked their opinion, and can speak their mind without interruption or criticism.

Consider the children's ages and what issues are actually not up for them to decide. Children don't get to vote on having ice cream every night for dinner.

At the end of the day, families are not pure democracies. While a child's brain is still developing, they [aren't ready](#) to forecast outcomes or hypothesize solutions. They rely on their parents to help them do that.

Meetings at different stages of family life

The pre-adolescent child lives in the [here and now](#). What is right in front of them is what they can understand.

The idea of moving house, for example, may seem catastrophic; they might feel they're being taken away from their school, sports and friends. Using a family meeting to hear their concerns or fears and work together on solutions or compromises might prove useful.

Teenagers are typically quite capable, but it's developmentally normal for them to [feel their emotions](#) very keenly. Their reactions may appear,

to adult eyes, a little overwhelming in the moment. Give them time at family meetings to think and process, and articulate their position.

While there are few peer-reviewed studies on family meetings, research does show they can work where there are serious issues to discuss.

For example, family meetings involving adult siblings in the case of elder care or [palliative care](#) have been trialed with moderate success.

In general, keeping lines of communication open and ensuring even the family wallflower has a regular contribution sounds positive. But there's also a wrong way to hold family meetings.

What not to do

There's a notable lack of actual research around family meetings involving children, even though they are prominently recommended in pop psychology.

Given the paucity of [research](#) in this field, I had a quick trawl through some threads on Quora and Reddit, where adults discussed whether their family meetings as children were useful. Many responses revealed some less-than-helpful experiences.

Some described family meetings as being dominated—usually by one parent—to dictate to everyone else in the family what was happening (from their point of view only).

A dictator parent might, for example, use a family meeting to issue orders about what they expected of everyone else (without allowing any feedback on their own performance).

People spoke about:

- having chores assigned to them (with no negotiation)
- parental decisions (such as moving house or schools) being imposed with zero input or feedback allowed from those affected
- a sense that not everyone could speak freely or safely.

Research tells us [authoritarian](#) parenting (where communication goes one way only, parents are inflexible and don't listen) leads to a range of negative impacts on children. These can include anxiety, poor self-esteem and feelings of failure.

A weaponized family meeting from the family dictator may well prove extremely detrimental.

It may even go as far as inducing [learned helplessness](#). This is where people "learn" their voice is unimportant, and just give up even trying to have a say.

Others remembered a family meeting was only ever called when divorce or death was about to ensue.

This associates family meetings with a sense of impending doom. Unsurprisingly, this left some adults with a very strong aversion to the idea.

All in all, it seems the concept of a family [meeting](#) is a reasonable one. But like most things in life, the devil is in the detail.

As one US [study](#) put it: "Just holding meetings does not matter, but inclusiveness of those meetings does matter."

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