

# OUR FAMILY CONNECTS

A simple guide to better family meetings



# Family meetings, without the boardroom

A family meeting is simply a bit of protected time to notice what is happening, hear one another and work out anything that needs working out. It can be planned or fairly informal. It can happen around the kitchen table, on the sofa, over Saturday lunch or wherever your family can actually settle.

You do not need a perfect agenda. You do not need everyone sitting beautifully with their hands folded. And you certainly do not need a meeting just because the calendar says it is Tuesday.

## It can be useful when you want to...

- catch up properly instead of communicating entirely through reminders
- appreciate what is going well
- talk through something that has been niggling at the family
- make a practical decision together
- plan something everyone is looking forward to
- simply hear how everybody is doing

**The meeting is there to help your family.** If the format stops helping, change the format.

# 1. Before everybody gathers

Choose a time when people have at least some chance of participating. Hungry, exhausted or already-late people rarely become better communicators because somebody has announced a family meeting.

## Keep the shape simple

**Arrive** - How is everybody doing?

**Appreciate** - What has gone well? Who deserves a thank-you?

**Talk** - What actually needs attention?

**Decide** - Is there something we need to do next?

**Look ahead** - What is coming up that we should know about?

**Close** - Finish in a way that feels like your family.

## A few agreements help

One person speaks at a time. Listen without interrupting. Talk about the issue without turning the person into the issue. Everyone can contribute, but nobody has to produce a perfect answer on demand. Try to understand before rushing to fix.

**If taking turns gets tricky:** choose a simple speaker object. Whoever is holding it has the floor, then passes it on when finished. A wooden spoon, soft toy or anything unmistakably ordinary will do.

Some conversations simply do not belong in a family meeting. If things become unsafe, threatening or too heated to continue well, stop. Choose another time or get the right kind of help.

## 2. Give everybody a way in

Children and teenagers are more likely to engage when the meeting is something they are part of, rather than something being done to them. That does not mean every decision becomes a vote. It does mean their perspective matters.

### Roles, if your family enjoys them

**Facilitator:** \_\_\_\_\_

Keeps things moving.

**Time-keeper:** \_\_\_\_\_

Notifies when one topic has eaten the evening.

**Note-taker:** \_\_\_\_\_

Writes down anything worth remembering.

**Snack person:** \_\_\_\_\_

Arguably the position with the greatest influence.

**Question chooser:** \_\_\_\_\_

Picks something to open or close the conversation.

### Older children and teenagers

Let them bring topics that genuinely affect their lives. Let them lead sometimes. Be willing to adjust the time when school, sport, work or social commitments make the usual slot impractical.

If a young person does not want to take part in a particular discussion, do not use their absence as a convenient way to erase their view. Household decisions may still need to be made, but decisions that materially affect them deserve an appropriate opportunity for them to be heard.

### 3. When you are actually together

#### Start where people are

Try a high and a low, or ask: *What has been taking up most of your headspace this week?* If everyone is fine and wants to move on, move on.

#### Notice something good

Thank someone. Notice effort. Celebrate a small win. It need not become a ceremony. Specific appreciation is enough.

#### Talk about what matters

Choose one or two things. Not every abandoned sock requires constitutional reform.

#### Decide only what needs deciding

If there is a next step, make it clear enough that people know what happens after the meeting. If there is nothing to decide, listening may have been the useful thing.

#### Look ahead, then finish

Check calendars and practical plans without letting logistics consume the whole conversation. Then close with whatever suits your family: food, a game, prayer or reflection, a ridiculous question, a family handshake, or simply, *Thanks. We're done.*

## 4. When there is a problem to work through

For ordinary disagreements and practical problems, CALM gives the conversation somewhere to go without turning the meeting into a courtroom.

### **C - Clearly say what the issue is**

Keep it specific. Describe what happened rather than describing somebody's entire personality.

### **A - Ask for ideas**

Let people suggest possible ways forward before deciding which idea is best.

### **L - Look at the options**

Which ideas are workable? Who would they affect? What might help, and what might make them difficult?

### **M - Make a next step, then monitor**

Choose what you are going to try and decide when you will check whether it helped. If it did not work, you are allowed to change it.

**CALM is for ordinary family problem-solving.** It is not a method for handling abuse, threats, serious safety concerns or situations that need professional or specialist support.

## 5. When the meeting goes a bit sideways

### **Nobody wants to participate.**

Try making it shorter. Let people suggest what is worth talking about. Feed them. Move rooms. Ten useful minutes counts.

### **Everybody is arguing.**

Stop trying to finish the agenda. Slow things down. If people cannot listen or speak safely and respectfully, end the meeting for now.

### **Nothing happens afterwards.**

You may be deciding too much. Choose fewer actions and make them clear enough to remember.

### **It feels painfully formal.**

Lose the clipboard. Take a walk. Talk over pancakes. Let somebody else lead. The structure is supposed to support the conversation, not star in it.

Some meetings will be warm and productive. Some will be distracted, short or a little grumpy. That does not mean the idea has failed.

## 6. A few questions for when nobody knows what to say

### To reconnect

- What has made you laugh recently?
- What has been taking up most of your headspace?
- What are you looking forward to?
- What do you wish we did together more often?

### To notice the good

- Who helped you this week?
- What did somebody in the family do that you appreciated?
- What ordinary thing about our family are you grateful for?

### Just because

- If our family had a theme song this week, what would it be?
- If we were a superhero team, what would our team name be?
- If you could instantly learn one completely random skill, what would you choose?
- What is the best smell in the world?

## 7. Our family meeting

This is a guide, not a form you have to complete. Scribble. Skip a box. Turn the page over if somebody has a lot to say.

| WHERE WE ARE                         | WHAT WE WANT TO SAY | ANY NEXT STEP? |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| <b>Arrive</b><br>How are we?         |                     |                |
| <b>Appreciate</b><br>What went well? |                     |                |
| <b>Talk</b><br>What matters today?   |                     |                |
| <b>Decide</b><br>Anything to do?     |                     |                |
| <b>Look ahead</b><br>What's coming?  |                     |                |
| <b>Close</b><br>How shall we finish? |                     |                |

**One thing worth carrying into the week:**

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## 8. One small thing to take forward

You do not have to leave a family meeting with a project plan. Sometimes one small, clear thing is plenty.

**What deserves a little attention?**

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**What might we try?**

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**Who needs to be part of it?**

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**When shall we see how it went?**

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**And before you go...**

Your family does not have to become brilliant at meetings. Use this when it helps. Change it when your family needs something different. Some weeks you may talk for half an hour; another week the whole thing may be five minutes and a biscuit. What matters is that there is somewhere in family life where people can speak, be heard, work things out and remember that they belong to one another.

**Sometimes a family conversation is not enough.**

If what is happening involves safety, abuse, significant distress, physical or mental health concerns, legal or financial issues, safeguarding concerns, or something your family cannot address safely on its own, please seek appropriate professional or specialist support.

*Then put this guide down and get back to your actual family. That was the point.*