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Setting Up a Family Council

Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Life Specialist

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A family sitting down together and talking about important thoughts, situations, and issues is certainly not a new idea--it has been practiced for centuries. It is an idea, however, that needs to be put to work in the present day.

- Do you treat your child better, worse or about the same as you treat your best friend?
- Does your child have equal status as a person with the adults in your family?
- Do you assign chores and times to do them, or does your child help in the planning?
- Do you try to make decisions about your child's recreational activities, times to study and what clothing to buy and wear?
- Do you want to create feelings of trust, competency and independence in your child?

If you answer any of the first four questions with a "no," and the last question with a "yes," you may want to consider regularly holding a *family council* meeting.

It is fairly safe to say that people who live together will have conflicts of interest from time to time. The family council serves as a valuable place to discuss these differences, and is one way individuals can understand and cope with the changes, stresses and strains, and the business of living together as a family.

What Is a Family Council?

The family council can best be described by stating what it isn't. It is *not*:

- A discussion meeting around the dinner table.

- A discussion meeting while driving.
- A meeting called only when there is a problem within the family.

The family council *is*:

- A meeting of everyone in the family at a designated time and place.
- A meeting that has a chairperson and a secretary (each family member takes a turn as chairperson, but only those who can read and write take turns being secretary).
- A meeting with fixed rules of procedures.
- A cooperative way of making decisions that affect all family members.

A meeting is called, the issues are faced, and all of the members have a chance to say what they think or feel. Everything is done to foresee the possible outcome of various solutions. The discussion continues with changes in attitudes, ideas, or opinions until "the solution" finally emerges that is acceptable to each family member. Being "acceptable" does not mean that each family member likes it. It only means they will try it for a period of time to see if it works. After the decision is made, each person is expected to abide by it and to work for its success.

Individuals are more willing to follow a policy or work for a solution if they have had a voice in making it instead of having it dictated to them.

How the Family Council Works

Get Along Without a "Boss." Parents are usually thought of as being the "bosses," but in the family council they are group leaders. All family members should feel free to express themselves and to make contributions to the decisions and agreements of the whole family. Every group and activity requires leadership and guidance to reach desired objectives, but the "boss" approach should be avoided.

Expect Conflict. Conflict should be expected. The idea is not to begin with agreement, but to end with it. Most of the time conflict is thought of as being bad, but think of it here as an important part of the discussion needed to find the best solution to the problem at hand. Realize that sometimes conflict is below the surface--father has a cold, mother had a rough day working, or the children have been fighting. Conflicts and differences are part of life, and accepting this fact can help.

Listen Carefully. Good listening is the number one rule of human relations. You must listen not only with your ears, but also with your heart in order to get the real meaning of what someone says.

Another factor in listening is an open mind. If individuals have already made up their minds, they can't really hear what others have to say. Everyone should listen for something new, something which no one may have thought of before.

Seek Agreement. Even when there are differences, agreement can be reached. Some ways of reaching agreement are:

- *Domination*--one or two people determine what is done.
- *Compromise*--somebody gives in.
- *Majority*--those who disagree are outnumbered.
- *Consensus*--the group finds a solution that all feel good about.

Find Facts. Weighing and evaluating the facts is sometimes all that is necessary. For example, suppose

a family is trying to decide on a house plan. If one plan does not fit the lot they have, and another costs too much, the decision is made through the process of weighing and evaluating the facts.

Accept Feelings. Remember that feelings are important in decision making, even when they appear to have no rational basis. The problem need not be choosing between reason and emotion, but of keeping a balance between the two.

Why Should Our Family Have a Family Council?

In many families, members are on the verge of declaring war against one another. Negative feelings are so strongly felt by some of the individuals involved that many members develop alliances with others in order to get their own way. Usually each person will see only one viewpoint as correct. Such families might ask, "what's in it for us?" There are many positive benefits that occur where a family uses a family council. The following are some examples.

Happiness. Everyone wants to be happy. In daily life, tempers flare, family members shout back at each other, and so on. Everyone needs respect, but at times find it difficult to give it to others. For example, a parent expects a child to respect the parent and other elders, but doesn't realize that the child is equally worthy of respect. When a parent shows respect to the child, there is harmony and, from that, happiness.

Efficiency. A positive outcome of the family council is that family business can be done more quickly, simple and efficiently. Every family has many tasks and rules to observe, both for daily living and for long range goals. A primary function of the family council is for all of the members to discuss who is responsible for specific tasks in the home and how these tasks are to be distributed. The goal is for more equality in responsibility and the assignment of tasks appropriate for the people involved.

When the family council functions well, work gets done without nagging and family members can enjoy each other. Talk between members is pleasant and complimentary. Probably the biggest payoff is that the family cooperates in the job of keeping the home running smoothly.

Communication. Much useless talk disappears when a family council is functioning well. Nagging, complaining, scolding, screaming and threatening are not needed because each family member is aware of what will happen if everyone does not perform agreed-upon tasks. Instead, there is friendly conversation and willingness to share ideas or discuss problem situations.

Less Need for Discipline or Punishment. As family members become more and more adept at using the family council, the need for disciplining or punishing the children lessens because 1) they discover misbehavior is not necessary in order to get the parent's attention, and 2) family members are more trusting and cooperative.

An accurate way to rate the success of the family council is to ask, "did I decide?" If "I" decided, chances are one or both parents pushed through a decision without general agreement from all of the members. On the other hand, if "it was decided," chances are all of the members joined in reaching agreement.

What Are Family Council Concerns?

Typically, a family council meeting is concerned with all of the relationships and business affecting the family. The following are some examples of the concerns a family council may include are the following.

Information. Family council meetings are a time when members can discuss coming events, plans for fun or work, changes in living arrangements, vacation, planned visits, and the progress and achievements of individual members.

Problem Solving. The family council provides a chance to discuss and review individual and family problems in a less crisis-oriented setting. It also allows for freedom of discussing problems in a sensible and thought-provoking manner, while at the same time allowing family members to be creative thinkers in problem solving.

Planning and Decision Making. The old cliché, "a person learns best by experience," applies to the family council. The parent who allows the child to participate in decision-making soon learns that the child will cooperate more readily. Discussion can be time-consuming, but the decisions reached are more acceptable to all of the members.

Family Involvement. In every family, there are certain daily, monthly, seasonal and yearly tasks to be performed in order for it to run smoothly. Frequently these tasks are performed by only one or two members. Through a family council, members can discuss what tasks need to be done, who will do them and how, and how to share responsibilities, make decisions and cooperate in carrying out the tasks.

Sounding Off and Airing of Concerns. Family life can produce anxiety, tension and disagreement. At a family council, each member can discuss what is dissatisfying within the family, and make desired changes known. This can eliminate bickering. When complaints do arise during the week, they can be deferred for discussion at the next family council, or if the situation is serious enough, an emergency family council can be called.

A Social Learning Experience. Through the interactions of family members, a child develops opinions of self and social relationships. The family council is a good means for developing independent persons who care and are concerned about others.

How Do Families Start a Family Council?

Probably most important when starting a family council is "openness." Think, "how can we, as a family, go about this together?", rather than "now you've all come to the meeting I planned!" Following are some key points to starting a family council.

Set a meeting date and time. The family council should meet periodically, perhaps once a week or three times each month. Find a time when all family members can be present. It is important that a family council meeting be held on a planned basis, not just whenever someone wants to call a meeting or when things seem to be going wrong. If a family council is called only when things go wrong, too much negativism enters in, which is destructive to the purpose and intent of the council.

Attendance. All family members are invited, but not required, to attend the family council. Any member can choose not to attend or can leave the meeting. However, those not attending should know that family decisions will be made regardless of the number of members present. Don't use this as a threat, but rather as a natural and logical consequence of a given happening.

Who is included? Everyone who lives in the household should be included and on an equal basis. As a rule of thumb, a child who can use words is able to participate effectively in the family council. An elderly person or a non-family member living in the household should also be included.

Who should preside and who should take notes? Each meeting needs a chairperson and a secretary. These offices are usually held by a parent until all of the members feel at ease with the family council. Then, these offices can be rotated so each member has a chance to be chairperson.

Order. Order is as important to a family council as it is for any other meeting. If anyone misbehaves to such a degree as to make meetings unpleasant, or if anyone becomes sufficiently annoyed, that person can leave. Remember, the purpose of the family council is to discuss concerns in a sensible and clear manner. If a member disturbs the meeting, the chairperson has the responsibility to ask that person to behave; if the member does not behave, than anyone who is annoyed can leave. It is very important to point out that a member cannot be expelled from a meeting because of unpleasant behavior.

Procedures. The family council should be considered an open forum with complete freedom of expression. Members are allowed to express their opinion, and no one can quiet the person who has the floor. Every member should have a turn. A person should be especially aware not to interrupt, correct, criticize or expand on a child's comments.

The family council is not a time to preach, scold or otherwise dominate the meeting. It is a meeting where one member can express opinions on an equal basis with everyone else.

Issues. The family council should be open for grievances, issues, problems and any matters of common concern that affect the family. It should not be used to settle personal quarrels. The general rule to follow is that any member except the chairperson may bring up a subject to discuss.

How to decide. The general rule for making decisions in the family council is *consensus*. Issues should be discussed to reach a consensus in the same manner that labor and management negotiate their contracts. If unanimity is not possible, table the issue until the following meeting.

General Rules for a Family Council

Keep rules simple. If members keep in mind that a purpose of the family council is to expedite communications between each other, and not to teach them how to run a meeting, the family council concept will flourish. To help establish a family council, the following guidelines can be used.

- A member is allowed the floor by being recognized by the chairperson.
- The person who has the floor cannot be interrupted by other members.
- The person who has the floor is asked to comment on the point or issue being discussed. It should be understood that new topics are not to be started unless the concern being discussed is resolved or tabled.
- Decisions can be made that influence other members who are absent. However, these decisions should not punish those not attending.
- Minutes should be kept and posted in several places around the home.
- Compromise the wishes of the group when health, education, or other real values are not endangered. If brothers and sisters disagree about household tasks, they can make a list of necessary jobs, and then choose what jobs they will do for a week until all the jobs are taken. In this way, children can learn that each person must make some sacrifices so that all can enjoy the home more.
- Watch for signs of growth in responsibility and ability to cooperate with others. Are the children learning to control angry expressions when others disagree with them? Can they present a differing point of view without discrediting another's intelligence and motives? Can they place group benefits and long-time interests above their own immediate wishes? If so, the family

council is a success.

Remember, the interactions of family members change over time, and so may rules or guidelines that govern the family council. All rules or guidelines need to be examined and reevaluated from time to time.

If young people want to do something that seems like a mistake, discuss it rather than laying down the law or forbidding it. Call attention to some things which they may not know or may have overlooked. If the matter is not too serious, allow them to make their own decisions and then face the consequences. Children are more apt to learn to make good decisions if they have proper knowledge and can take the responsibility for a poor choice as well as reap the benefits from a good one.

A good way to end a family council meeting is with some family *fun*, such as a special treat served afterward.

Summary

Probably the most important advice ever given to a parent is to establish a family council. However, before starting a council, you must understand the procedures and hazards. To succeed, the family council must operate in a democratic spirit.

Finally, don't allow yourself, as a parent, to be sabotaged by your child in giving up the idea of a family council. The family council represents something new to the child--a change in the game plan which may not be liked. There may be a desire to return to the rules used before the family council was instituted. If you believe in the family council idea, stick to it; others will soon realize that this is the real way of participating in family decisions.

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