

A Model for Home Meetings

PROVIDER MEETINGS

In that life is full of complexities and diversity, it is important to recognize problems arising from interactions and identify strengths for use in family meetings. The family meeting suggestions on this page, although directed towards pediatricians, can be adapted for use by any helper or caregiver working with families to:

- Learn how to negotiate and how to give and take.
- Encourage use of the pronouns *I* and *we* in communicating with each other; that is, *I feel, I think, I wonder, we are aware, we are afraid.*
- Encourage every family member to share good, positive feelings about themselves and the family.
- Give everyone in the family freedom to talk and to have their say without interruptions, ridicule, or distractions.
- Allow feelings to be expressed even if they are not positive.
- Encourage every member to voice complaints, displeasures, anger, and so on.
- Be mindful of how differences in family culture may require more listening and respectful questioning to enable the conversation process to match the family's style.

Essential Aspects of Family Interviewing

1. Develop trust and rapport with each member.
2. Involve each member in the interview.
3. Explain that the meeting is a "safe place" to talk without being blamed, criticized, or punished.
4. Understand the child, problem, and family.
5. Search for strengths and past successes to renew/modify and use for solving the problem.
6. Use the family as its own greatest resource and the best expert about the child.
7. Co-construct solutions with the family.
8. Help the family adapt, cope, communicate and cooperate.
9. Be sure the therapeutic plan fits the family instead of the family fitting the plan.

Goals of the Family Meeting

1. To form a supportive alliance with every family member, a process that develops throughout the relationship. Without this alliance, the meetings will not succeed.
2. To provide directives and advice when needed, wanted, and appropriate. This advice is complementary to the family's problem-solving strategies and respects their own frame of reference, or is specific for an individual, e.g., medication for the child, or parent counseling.
3. To serve as a healthy role model, e.g., to demonstrate how to view a problem without blaming, to acknowledge others' thoughts and feelings, to share feelings and thoughts, to demonstrate affection, and to ask for help.
4. The pediatrician initially conveys that he or she is the leader. To provide leadership, guidance, and a meeting that is "safe" for each to be honest and open without fear of blame or disapproval.
5. As they become more competent and less dependent, the pediatrician helps the family develop competence and learn to prevent or solve problems (present and future) on their own. This is the ultimate goal of the family meeting.

FAMILY MEETINGS AT HOME

Family meetings at home are a very effective way for families to promote family communication and cooperative behaviors at home. In the home family meeting, like the office family meeting, every member is encouraged to share his/her thoughts and feelings and to take an appropriate, legitimate part in family-decision making. A home meeting also allows the family to practice or repeat the behaviors, the cooperation, the communication of thoughts and feelings that they have demonstrated in the office or clinic. When, in the course of family meetings with the pediatrician, the family does cooperate and communicate, the pediatrician must point this out as a way to promote the same behaviors at home. "Do you see what you're doing here? Congratulations! This is what you want – to "get along" better, to communicate, to enjoy your family. Would you like this to happen at home? I'd like you to do this at home."

After encouraging the family, the pediatrician needs to explain the purposes of a home family meeting, being sure to keep the expectations within their capabilities and respect their particular values and cultural beliefs.

Purposes of Family Meetings at Home

1. To provide a protected and pleasant time for the family to discuss good news/bad news and other issues without being blamed, judged, or humiliated.
2. To provide a regular, scheduled time for the family to sit down together, communicate, and organize the week(s).
3. To inform the family about everyone's activities, interests, desires, and concerns.
4. To bring up family problems or responsibilities which need to be discussed and solved, e.g., chores, or TV viewing.
5. To acknowledge and praise everyone's efforts and achievements of the past week(s). Individual reprimands are done privately at another time.
6. To teach children responsibility and to develop cooperative leadership. Parents have control, but encourage input from everyone.
7. To help parents decide how much power they will share. Children know they are not in control. In the meeting, parents share this limited and defined power with the children.

After explaining the purposes, the pediatrician offers some practical guidelines for family meetings at home.

Guidelines for Conducting Family Meetings at Home

1. Select a comfortable, quiet place.
2. Select a convenient time, e.g., after dinner (with a favorite dessert) or Sunday evening (with a snack).
3. Schedule meetings weekly or bimonthly. Post the schedule on a bulletin board or the refrigerator.
4. Let the family establish time frames. How long should the meeting last? (e.g., 20-30 minutes) How long can each member speak? (e.g., 3-4 minutes)
5. Determine what issues to discuss. Chores and general discipline should not dominate meetings.
6. Let each member write down topics for future meetings. Take turns keeping a record (minutes) of each meeting (taking notes or using a tape recorder).

7. Take turns chairing the meeting as is appropriate. A parent or older child might start.
8. Assign tasks at the end of the meeting and post a checklist. Encourage and support each member to be responsible.
9. Always end meetings on a positive note even if they don't always go smoothly.
10. At the end, play a family game or activity, or view a family TV show if time permits.
11. Be flexible about changing schedules if the family wants to meet at an unscheduled time, to cancel a meeting, or to shorten or extend meetings.
12. Stop a meeting that deteriorates (arguments, lack of interest). Discuss what happened at the next meeting.
13. Excuse a member who is not cooperative, is feeling ill, or has another pressing event or obligation.

Coleman, W.L. (2002). Family-focused pediatrics: A primary care family systems approach to psychosocial problems, *Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care*, 3(8), 255-314

Coleman, W.L. (2001). *Family-Focused Behavioral Pediatrics*. Lippencott, Williams, & Wilkins, NY.