

FAMILY MEETINGS AND SPECIAL TIME

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 an 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.

SPECIAL TIME

Making time for children is one of the most important things a parent can do. Children want to spend time with their parents, yet parents often find it difficult to find time for their children. Even when parents interact with their children, the parents often determine the time, the amount of time, and the activity, which detracts from the value of the interaction. Special time is one way to fill the deep, constant needs of parents and children for attention and encouragement.

Special time is for one child and one parent. The child chooses the parent, and the other parent and children make other arrangements. Parents with two or more children may have to alternate them so each has time alone with that parent.

Special time is a pre-arranged, guaranteed, and uninterrupted time that the parent spends with a child, a period of time in which the two interact without the parent being judgmental or directive. The family decides how often to have special time: daily is ideal. It is a time of day in which the parent is unconditionally available to the child. It is a commitment to the child and demonstrates by action that the child is valued and loved.

Special time is suitable for preschoolers, school age children, and adolescents.

Purposes of Special Time

- It offers children the opportunity to have some input and control over special time, which makes them feel competent and respected. It defuses a power struggle between parents and children by giving them decision making power and the accompanying self-respect. During special time, the parent might say, "You're in charge. You pick the activity and I will join you."
- By participating, the parent acknowledges the child's rights, capabilities and needs.
- Special time can eliminate conflicts. If a child is pestering the parent to play a game, the parent can respond that he is doing something else, but "We can play the game during special time."
- Special time allows parents to observe children up close and focus exclusively on them. The parent learns much about the child and has many opportunities to praise, encourage, and express affection.
- Special time helps parents alleviate their guilt over not spending enough time with their children.

Special time provides a form of "time in" for parents and children, an opportunity to spend time with each other, which builds a sense of trust and commitment. It provides predictable, regular, and protected time for the child and parent.

Implementing Special Time

- The parent should suggest the notion of special time at a pleasant or neutral time and simply ask the child if he/she would be interested in spending time together on a regular basis.
- The parent and child select a mutually convenient time of day. This can vary from weekday to weekend.
- The child chooses the activity so long as the activity is within the limits of parental time and financial resources, and does not violate the dignity or the authority of the parent. Parents may offer younger children a choice of activities. Suggested activities include reading a story, playing a board game, telling bedtime stories, playing a sport, fixing a broken toy or bike, and going out for a meal. Sharing a musical or artistic activity, going to a museum or library, and cooking a meal are other types of special time. Older children and adolescents may prefer to go shopping, practice driving the car, or carry out an activity over several sessions, e.g., a time-consuming board game or chess game.
- One of the best opportunities to talk is when parent and child take car rides, when they are away from the distractions and interruptions of the home.
- Generally interactive activities are preferable, but occasionally a passive activity (TV viewing) is okay and sometimes even preferable.
- The parent and child should both decide how much time to spend together, but this should be based on the parent's ability to keep the commitment. It is better to start with short periods of time to avoid fatigue and boredom, e.g., 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the age of the child.
Once a schedule has been established, the parent can post it on the refrigerator or in several places (in the bedrooms, bathrooms). When starting special time, it is easy to forget or cancel it.
- Parents should work hard to keep their promise of special time.
- If special time needs to be rescheduled, the parent and child need to do it together in a democratic manner.

Guidelines for Special Time

- Special time should be called by any name the child chooses, e.g., "Fun time."
- Special time is given to each child as scheduled regardless of behavior or mood. It is given unconditionally.
- If a child is disruptive or uncooperative during special time, the parent has the option to cancel it or suspend it temporarily until the child settles down. The parent might want to put the child in Time Out for a brief period or impose another consequence. The parent decides if the disciplinary action is part of the allotted time or is separate.
- Special time is not "saved up" and used to extend the time of the next special time. Each special time is for a pre-determined amount of time, but sometimes the parent and child may both agree to extend a particular session to finish an activity.
- Special time should be without interruption of any kind, except true emergencies.