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# ESSENTIAL STEPS TO PRODUCTIVE FAMILY MEETINGS

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO MAKE THEM WORK FOR YOU

**F**amily meetings have become the hub at the center of how our family functions. Just about everything flows from them. How smoothly things run for our family each week depends on how well our family meeting works.

I often talk about how family meetings are significant, yet they can also be intimidating and challenging.

I've had the opportunity to personally coach many families through implementing my entire approach of applying proven business principles to families to help them win.

Without exception, they all end up telling me after a certain period of time that family meetings are it. That the meetings are indispensable. That they are magic. That they are the pixie dust that makes everything else take off.

However, they also tell me at some point, *Wow, that was tough. Or, We're just not getting off on the right foot.* In fact, I'm coaching one member of my friends right now through the family meeting process. I got a text this morning saying, "Had a rough family meeting last night. Blah. Ugh. Help!"

The rest of the message shared how this friend's kids were just looking at him and saying, "Are you sure this Mark guy has fun family meetings? Because this is not fun!"

It made me realize that I need to go further to make sure I share the best ideas and tips to equip everyone to have successful family meetings after I've sold them on the concept.

So let's explore why we have family meetings, unpack a few key principles, and discover some helpful tips for making them work well for you and your family.

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## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO MAKE MEETINGS WORK FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

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**I**magine a business team that never met to discuss how the business was doing. What if their only planning was done on the fly while passing in the halls as they hurried to return calls? How effective and successful do you think that business would be?

We've all experienced too many purposeless meetings, but without regular meetings of some sort, *your business—and your family*—will quickly descend into chaos.

For the Timm Family, our family meetings have become the hub at the center of all we do. In fact, on the rare occasion that we miss a meeting, we start feeling the chaos immediately.

Family meetings hold our family business together. Our entire family—all eight of us—look forward to our weekly gatherings. The meetings allow us to coordinate, communicate, and deepen our relational bonds.

But as critical and foundational as family meetings are to our success today, they were probably the most difficult piece of the puzzle for us to start. Initially, our kids were not on board at all. It took some time for us to overcome that resistance and learn how to conduct family meetings that everyone wanted to attend.

If you are thinking about starting family meetings as a proven practice to empower your family to thrive, you'll want to know the three essential steps we discovered for overcoming resistance to family meetings.

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## 3 ESSENTIAL STEPS FOR PRODUCTIVE FAMILY MEETINGS

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### 1. BE CONSISTENT.

When we first started to hold family meetings, we were not consistent. For our kids, that meant they were often caught off-guard and arrived mentally unprepared to participate. We often didn't give them much notice; we'd just say, "Oh, we have some time, let's do a family meeting." But they would have other things that they were thinking about doing. It made it very difficult to pull the family together in the right frame of mind.

Because we were not predictable, we often set ourselves up for conflict. Almost without fail, when we announced a family meeting, one of our children would say, "I have a big exam tomorrow. I need to study." Then we were in a no-win situation of our own making, being forced to choose between having them study or go to the family meeting.

One of the most important steps we took to solve this problem was to make our family meeting consistent—same day, same time, every week.

When our children knew they could plan around it, we could expect them to do so. They no longer had an excuse for skipping the meeting, and we no longer had to make the tough call between two important priorities.

## 2. HAVE FUN.

I'll admit it—our first meetings were boring. They just weren't enjoyable at all. We learned quickly that with kids we needed some entertainment value so that they saw the experience as a positive one.

Think about it: None of us want to go to lifeless meetings at our business that feel like drudgery.

We soon figured out that what works in business meetings also works at home—food. That's right; we resorted to bribing them with special treats. For example, we generally don't keep ice cream handy at home, but we bought some to enjoy at the family meeting. News of the ice cream's arrival created a buzz about the meeting, and the kids all showed up promptly, ready for a fun time.

When the weather is cooperative, we love to cook s'mores around the fire. So we started doing some outside family meetings and used the s'mores as our special treat, setting up a s'moregasboard from which the kids could create their own sweet treats. We all began to associate family meetings with treats we don't normally get.

But more than having cool food, we focused primarily on having fun. We reflected on funny things that happened throughout the week and laughed about ourselves. By focusing on fun, our family cleared the way for more productive conversations to take place.

## 3. MAKE A PLAN.

One reason we struggled mightily at the outset was that we simply had no idea what we were doing. The early family meetings didn't have a clear agenda, so we didn't really know what we were going to talk about.

Our kids could tell we were not organized; therefore, they didn't have a lot of respect for what we were trying to do. The more disciplined and intentional that my wife, Ann, and I got about preparing for the meeting, the more the kids engaged. It was as if they thought, *Hey, they're on this. They've talked about this in advance. They've got an agenda, and they're following it.*

Even if your plan isn't that complex, have one, execute it, and be done. Don't think that a long meeting is necessarily a better one.

Our family meetings are now very consistent. We have a ton of fun and always know exactly what we want to accomplish.

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## TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED WITH FAMILY MEETINGS

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**M**y first suggestion is: *don't go too fast*. When you first discover the family meeting concept, it can be really exciting. You can see the potential, and you're thinking, *Wow! This could be great for our family!* The tendency would be to go too fast, to jump in and try to accomplish so many things in your early meetings that all of a sudden it's not fun.

Tip number two would be to *make first meetings about something fun*. It's even a good idea to actually orchestrate the fun. I mentioned s'mores earlier. Here's how we did that:

At one of our early meetings, when we realized this wasn't going well and the kids didn't want to come to meetings, making all the excuses why they couldn't come, we literally had a family meeting all around the topic of how to make the perfect s'more. Now for those of you that don't know what a s'more is, that's basically where you take jumbo marshmallows, toast them up over a fire, then layer the toasted marshmallows and a few squares of a chocolate bar in between two graham crackers. In other words, you make a type of sandwich out of marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers. Delicious!

But in this case, my wife and I took it up a notch and put out a "S'moregasboard," if you will. We had peanut butter, fruit, Reese's cups, Heath bars... you name it! We had the most amazing treats,

and the kids were trying to create the perfect s'more. They were bragging about what they were creating, and we made it into a game. Ann and I even had them make some for us, and after it was all over — and our bellies were full — that was the majority of the entire family meeting.

So you could schedule some sort of a fun family meeting — something where they can all participate and do something fun or make something fun, or even try something new that they've never done. Maybe it's a game — something that you've heard about or learned about — and so the family meeting is all about playing this game. And if it goes really well, and you want to slip in a little family business amongst the fun, then go for it! But I want you to be okay to just have a really fun family meeting, so when they say, *Is that it?!* be fine to say, *Yep! That's it! That's our meeting! Same time, same place next week!* And all of a sudden they're excited to be there, and that's what you want.

*The third tip is be vulnerable.* Don't be afraid to tell a funny story about yourself, maybe something embarrassing that happened that week. I promise you if you're vulnerable, they'll be vulnerable. Make fun of yourself! Admit a mistake you made. When you show that you're not afraid to laugh at yourself, they will be next in line to share. And again, it becomes contagious very quickly.

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*The next tip is to participate.* Find some way to get the kids to participate. Nobody likes to be lectured. Nobody likes to just be talked to. So find a way to get them to participate in the family meeting in some form or fashion. I guarantee the more they participate, the more they will find the family meeting to be valuable.

And most of all, remember, in the early stages, this is about developing the habit of family meetings. It's not about the content of the early family meetings. The content can come after the habit has been created.

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## TIPS FOR FAMILY MEETINGS WITH YOUNGER CHILDREN

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**B**ut what if your children are younger?

I often hear from parents who have this question. Here are 3 tips to help have productive family meetings with small kids.

### TIP 1:

Keep. It. Short. A family meeting can be five minutes. Again, this is about developing the habit of family meetings. So just getting into the habit of a time and a place every week that you're having a family meeting. There's nothing wrong with keeping it short for the little ones.

### TIP 2:

Let them participate. If they can talk, they can participate. Ask them a question. Let them feel that they've brought value to the meeting. As I said, start that habit of participation early on, the habit of communication. You can instill that early on through family meetings, even with your little ones.

### TIP 3:

Reward them! I don't know what your family situation is, but even if you don't have any sweets in the house, there has got to be something that they love, some special thing that they love to do. And if you're like us, we don't have sweets in the house, so sweets are a HUGE reward. So we'll give them some sweets around family meetings if they do a really good job, and they love that. You come up with the reward, and then reward them for being there and participating in the family meeting.

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## ADVICE FOR MEETINGS WITH OLDER KIDS

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**O**ur kids are older now, so we've evolved through the younger stage and have arrived into the next stage. One of the things we like to do is to give one of the older kids an assignment, something that he or she can research and then later present to the family. We have found that if they've spent time and energy to come up with what to share, then they want everybody to pay attention as they present. The next time when it's their turn to pay attention, it's an easy reminder: *Hey, remember how you wanted everybody to listen and to pay attention? Well, now it's your turn.* They'll get more value from the meeting, and will have more stake in it, if they've participated.

And there's an added bonus! When do your kids get the chance to learn how to present in front of people? And what safer environment to present in than your family? My kiddos have never really presented in front of anybody before we started the family meetings. Within a couple of years, we were to the point where we were even doing power point or Prezi presentations, complete with embedded videos! We've even had some presentations in family meetings where we invited the grandparents over because we knew the kids were going to present something significant. And sometimes we're having them just present what they did over the weekend. Maybe they did something cool like going to a camp or a conference. Now, when our kids have to do a presentation at school, they're not intimidated at all because they've had plenty of experience.

As the kids get older, and you've done several family meetings, let them run part of each meeting. There's nothing cooler for a kid than to sometimes get up in front and be in charge. And then you sit in their spot, showing how you are participating, allowing them to have a little taste of what the other side feels like. For some, that leadership role could be life changing, allowing them to really grow.

Again, with older kids, participation is the key. If you don't engage them in active participation in the family meeting, their minds will be in a million other places. So be intentional about finding ways to make sure that they participate. Have them share their weekly schedule. Have them share something that they did, something they're proud of, or that they want to celebrate. Engage them in a way that naturally encourages them to participate.

One last suggestion: try changing the venue now and then. Everyone likes something different on occasion. You don't always have to do a family meeting in the same spot, at the same place. You can shake it up. You can move it. You can go somewhere fun to do a family meeting.

We've done family meetings at restaurants before where we celebrated something cool and then followed up with a quick family meeting right there. There's no firm, fast rule that says you have to do it at one place and only at that place. Changing the venue a little bit can help keep the meetings more interesting and the kids more interested.

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# SAMPLE FAMILY MEETING AGENDA

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**S**o, you're on board. You're ready. You see the potential benefits of your family holding a regularly scheduled meeting. Now what? I'd suggest that you create a working agenda, one that you can modify from week to week, but that sets the initial framework for the meetings. Here is an example of how our family agenda works:

- **CALL TO ORDER BY PARENTS** - *This is where you make sure they all turn off their phones, or better yet make sure NO ONE brought one to the meeting*
- **REVIEW THE AGENDA** - *Add to it as necessary if something was omitted*
- **CELEBRATE WINS** - *Make this fun and exciting*
- **SCHEDULE REVIEW FOR THE UPCOMING WEEK AND BIG STUFF FOR THE MONTH** - *Make sure everyone gets a chance to add something here or that their events/activities are mentioned*
- **PRESENTATIONS OR A FAMILY SPOTLIGHT** - *This can be an assignment from the last meeting or a place to really highlight/spotlight someone or something in the family*
- **FAMILY COURT (IF NEEDED)**
- **NEW BUSINESS AND OPEN COMMENTS** - *When things are really rolling this will have to be limited to maybe 2 per person*
- **RECAP FROM PARENTS**
- **END AND CELEBRATE WITH A TREAT OR A FUN EXPERIENCE** - *Do this right and they will look forward to family meetings*



# TIP:

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Here are 3 questions you can ask to get some discussion going

- 1) What went well in our family this week?
- 2) What did not go well in our family this week?
- 3) What do we need to work on in the week ahead as a family?

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# SAMPLE AGENDA FOR FAMILIES WITH SMALL CHILDREN

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- **START THE MEETING BY *EXPLAINING* THAT YOU ARE HAVING A MEETING, REMEMBERING YOU ARE TRYING TO GET THE CHILDREN INTO THE HABIT OF A FAMILY MEETING**
- **THANKS AND COMPLIMENTS** - *A chance to acknowledge good deeds, accomplishments and to be encouraging – make sure each person has a turn here*
- **APOLOGIES** - *We all make mistakes, so here is a chance to give some apologies and clear the air for a fresh start this week*
- **OLD BUSINESS** - *What are the 1-2 things we all agreed to work on our try this past week, and how did it work?*
- **NEW BUSINESS** - *New topics, questions or problems – this is where you can set your 1-2 goals to work on in the upcoming week*
- **ADJOURN AND DO SOMETHING FUN** - *A game or treat they normally would not get, outing etc.*

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# SOME LAST THOUGHTS

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I hope that you will find the preceding information helpful as you start this new approach to family management. And although I wrote *this* book on the topic, I didn't write *THE* book; there are others out there with some similar great advice.

For example, [Brett & Kate McKay](#) have some great things to say about how family meetings can really build family solidarity and boost fathers' sense of confidence and self-regard. And in [Psychology Today](#) magazine, Dr. Barton Goldsmith shares his 10 tips for holding successful family meeting.

I recommend that as you start this new endeavor, you read these and any other articles you may find by parents who've been there and done that, taking what you see as making the best sense for your family and running with it!

Finally, don't hesitate to [contact me](#)! I love hearing from you, and look forward to walking with you on this journey.