

The Family Council

"The Practical Parent
ABC of Child Discipline"
Raymond Corsini

Were we to be limited to only one recommendation to help create a happy, cooperative family, we would say:

• "Start a family council."

People who live together inevitably have conflicts of interest at times. The family council gives invaluable training in human relationships. Each member receives practice in understanding others' opinions, feelings, and behavior. Parents as well as children learn how to get along within the family. This knowledge can be useful too in dealing with the outside world, the community.

We are going to give a detailed description of a family council, for experience shows that many parents who start one do not succeed because they do not understand important elements.

Membership

Everyone in the family, whether it be a two-person family (such as mother and son) or a multiperson family (such as grandfather, parents, six children, and a boarder), is a potential member. Even children too young to talk are included: membership encourages them to feel that they really belong to the family and are an important part of it.

Structure

The family council is *not* a discussion around the dinner table, or a

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discussion while driving. It is a formal meeting of everyone in the family. It has a chairman and a secretary. Everyone serves his turn as chairman. Those able to read and write may take turns being secretary, to keep and read minutes. There are fixed rules of procedure.

Scheduling meetings

The council meets periodically, on a schedule drawn up in advance, such as every Tuesday night after a certain television program, or every Saturday morning right after breakfast.

One of the reasons for failure of a council is happenings like this: someone asks, "Should we have our family council tonight?" Someone else says, "Is there anything that anyone wants to bring up tonight?" And if no one answers, someone says, "Well, let's not have one tonight." Missing meetings destroys continuity and weakens the institution.

Attendance

People are invited, not required, to attend the family council, and a member may leave a meeting at any time.

Order

Order in the meeting is determined by *feet*: If anyone misbehaves to such a degree that the session is unpleasant, any person who is sufficiently annoyed can leave—and in this way votes with his feet! The purpose of the council is sensible discussion, controlled communication—clear discussion, attentive listening. If a member disturbs the meeting, only the chairman can ask that person to behave; if that person still does not behave, then anyone annoyed can leave. *But a member cannot be expelled from a meeting because of unpleasant behavior.*

Procedures

Discussions are open and unrestricted. Anyone can say whatever he wishes, and no one can shut up the person who has the floor (not even the chairman). The council is an open forum with complete freedom of expression. If someone wishes to talk and talk, others can get up and leave if they don't want to listen.

opinions about procedures, but the final decision should be based on consensus. This meeting should also include some family fun—e.g., a treat, such as ice cream, served after the meeting.

Other points to consider:

1. Decisions can be made that affect absent members.
2. Decisions hold only until the next meeting. If anyone wants changes, they should be discussed at the next meeting.
3. Parents should always be examples for the children. They should attend every meeting on time. They should have the meeting even if children do not attend.
4. If a decision is made, parents must keep to it.
5. Parents should refuse to make decisions for the family that should be settled at the family council. "Take it up at the family council" should be a constant refrain in the family.
6. Meetings are not to be canceled except by unanimous agreement. Parents should not agree to cancel except for extraordinary reasons. That there seems to be nothing to bring up is not a valid reason for canceling a meeting.
7. No emergency meeting should be held unless every member agrees to have it.
8. Meetings should be time-limited—short at first (fifteen minutes), then later perhaps a half hour or forty-five minutes, as required.
9. Among rules that may be considered are the following:
 - a) Chairmanship to be rotated in some automatic way, such as by age or alphabetically.
 - b) Chairman to accept no new topic until all have had an opportunity to discuss the present one.
 - c) Chairman not to discuss an issue brought up by others until all have had their say; then he may come in.

HAZARDS TO THE FAMILY COUNCIL

Some of these have already been mentioned, but they deserve repetition:

1. Father or mother dominates.
2. Parents complain too much during sessions and use the family council to manipulate children.

3. Meetings do not take place on time.
4. One of the parents avoids attending.
5. Parents make decisions that should be made by the family council.
6. Decisions are not upheld.
7. Sessions are canceled for reason of "nothing to bring up."
8. People become discouraged when consensus is not reached immediately.

SUMMARY

The most important advice we can give parents is to establish a family council. However, do not start one unless you really understand the procedures and also the hazards. To succeed, you must operate in a democratic spirit.

An effective family council will help a family cure itself of almost anything that ails it. Families, like individuals, are organisms; and organisms, given an opportunity, are self-correcting. So whatever your problems, it is highly likely that they can cure themselves if a family council is established and maintained.

One last bit of advice: even if you do understand how to run a family council, and do keep to all the rules, you may lose your faith in its potential if your children try to sabotage it. Stick to it through thick and thin, doggedly continuing for at least a year—and somewhere along the line the children will suddenly catch on to the idea that this is their way of participating in real decisions in the family.