

THE FAMILY TABLE

(WHEN EVERYONE IS MOVING CHAOTICALLY IN ALL DIRECTIONS AT ONCE)

Idea: Have you noticed that you don't sit down and talk much as a family? Your kids are going in one direction and, if you are not driving them this way or that, then you are rushing off pursuing your own goal.

So what happens when things are out of whack? What happens when there is tension and conflict in your family? When happens when there is chaos and no connection? Usually families explode, build grudges, express resentments without thought, and mostly harmony and hope is lost. This isn't what anyone signed up for. This is not what families are for.

And lots of families are single parent families. A mom or a dad with one or more kids who is working during the days of the week and parenting all the rest of the time. How do you spell "stress"? And how do you have a friendship life beyond the constant work? Family Tables are a godsend for these families. (If you want some specific input about how single parents can do this, please write me.)

Some biases I have about families:

- I don't think that kids, including teens, should have to lead the family. I think that is what parents are for. I think that kids should grow up with thoughtful direction respectfully and affectionately modeled by their parents. But a lot of parents are more confused than their kids. They may well be frustrated that the family chaos is also poorly affecting the marriage and their work. When parents don't lead then kids will lead and probably lead poorly.

- Another bias: I think that kids have a lot to say and that parents should respectfully listen and lead the family accordingly. Resiliency, not ruling, is a big thing to me.
- I am interested in group cohesion more than leadership coercion. I look for all members of the family having an impact appropriate for their ages. I look at healing emotions and resilient impact. I like the idea of looking across the table rather than down from a ladder.
- I think that The Family Table should be fun and funny. Getting all serious, urgent and important are thrusts that interrupt rather than help. Be serious about what is serious, and for all the rest, get a perspective.

So what's "The Family Table": I learned about the "family council" in grad school and you can find lots of information about it online (check out Amazon.ca for a listing of Rudolf Dreikurs books). It is a multigenerational planning and thinking activity for families. Grandparents or anyone else living in the home can be involved, though toddlers won't have much to contribute! The approximate time involved is one hour or less. It is horizontal influencing rather than vertical persuasion. Parents lead in a mission where everyone can participate in an age appropriate way.

Here is what it can look like: Imagine problem solving, solution discovering, friendship making, food eating around a table where some smiling is going on. Imagine a weekly hour, say on a Saturday morning when parents and kids sit around the kitchen table and think about the week to come and the week that has just happened. All are needed to be there (I mean older than littles) and it doesn't make much sense to do this when someone doesn't show up – so everyone needs to come.

You build the hour around something good, like pancakes and bacon and dark coffee, or the distribution of a weekly allowance -- something inherently valuable to kids. I know one family that all go to a coffee shop mid Sunday afternoon and sip hot chocolate and tea. The parents have the responsibility to set the "tone" – we call this "ethos management" in psychology. If your tone is grouchy, I don't think it will work.

Ethos management: Parents get to pick a tone for the time together. Thankfulness is good, as is practical and non-blaming problem solving. Appreciative inquiry helps; that is, asking questions that others can answer without feeling blamed or judged. If you don't lead the tone, then the worst emotion will dominate and I guarantee that people won't want to come to the next Family Table.

By the way, you don't have to call it "Family Table;" this sounds a bit parliamentarian or something. How about "the family knot," or "the journey," or "the chocolate discovery hour," etc.

Structure: There is a structure to everything so I think you should decide on the structure before you start. Here are some of my ideas and you add your own.

- Start on time and end on time. Make it that same time each week unless you all agree to change it.
- No phones and no interruptions – this includes the parents. It is less than an hour after all. No TV and no music and no computers. Just people who are thinking and deciding and wondering.
- Young kids can colour or doodle but not build Lego – way too distracting.
- Someone should be the "in charge" person. This can be anybody but it shouldn't be one person all the time, especially not one parent. This person leads the discussion and invites people to speak.
- Someone should take brief notes (the "recorder") about what has been discussed and what decisions have been made. These notes can be posted later where all the family can see them, say on a bulletin board.
- The following meeting you can read the minutes of the last table conversation and use the structure to plan for the coming meeting. Simple and straightforward.
- Everyone is free to talk but no one is free to interrupt. And when someone is talking the others should listen. Parents do not dominate or enforce their points of view and neither do kids. Shouting and threatening and pouting are discouraged.
- You might want to pass around a Nerf ball or a wooden spoon to indicate you are talking. Then it is passed to the next talker.
- If something needs to be decided, then a simple vote or a flipped coin can decide. Note: parents worry about their loss of authority in this. But kids want to be led and the family will over time return to asking parents their best advice.

Agenda: Here is what is typically covered in any meeting.

- Minutes from the last meeting, including review of solutions to previous problems are discussed.
- Calendar of activities for the coming week. This can be done on a paper calendar and posted in the kitchen or other common space.

- Allocation of chores and privileges for the week. We all know what chores are but most of us forget that families flex for privileges too. Say for example, a grade 6 kid has a big assignment to complete. The family can flex a bit and allow the child extra study time and thus dropping a chore or two. This is discussed and voted on.
- At the Family Table anything can be discussed, even concerns expressed by kids about their parents. There is freedom to talk about anything you have on your mind without fear of being shut down. You can discuss urgencies, changes in plans, ideas, wants, events, vacations, home duties, problems, cell phones, finances, dating, car use, drug use, etc. It is a time for talking and listening together.
- Note: even when kids seem to be not listening, they are hearing and it can be deeply impacting to them.
- At the Table planning can be done, decisions may be made, conflicts may be resolved, but the focus of the time is to enhance the emotional relationship in the family. When emotions are in good shape, lots of problems can be solved and when there are mostly unhappy and contentious feelings, solutions never quite exist.

Focus on relationships: Hold Tables weekly, not just for emergencies. When someone has a concern during the week, it is great to know that the Family Table is just a couple of days away where the problem can be expressed. This keeps folk from building up resentment and exploding. Here are some additional ideas:

- Parents should plan ahead for it to be as enjoyable as possible; it is not a time to mete out punishment or to shame kids. It is a time for a little celebration about being a family.
- Limit the amount of time spent dealing with complaints, conflict and chore assignments to less than half the meeting; otherwise enthusiasm will fade over time.
- Parents need take their turn with distasteful household chores especially alongside their kids. Wouldn't it be great if Dad volunteered to take out the garbage so that Jack could watch the football without the interruption?
- Each member has an equal voice and equal vote. And old folks don't get to vote twice!
- Avoid "winners" and "losers" in decision-making as much as possible. Strive for consensus.

The first 5 minutes predicts the outcome of the meeting: Each person can tell about a positive or exciting event that happened to him or her during the past week. An

alternative to this would be for each person to share a positive comment about each other person in the family ("What I really appreciate about ____ is that..."), or have each person tell about one good thing that he or she believes has taken place in the family since the last meeting.

The last 5 minutes predicts the next meeting: So you have to figure out what you are summarizing. Perhaps it is the valuable contributions of various members. You might emphasize important events in the coming week; say a family dinner or an evening where everyone is going out to see Star Wars. Figure out a parting ritual. It might be a prayer or a reading or a group hug or a football huddle, or whatever else is affirming.

Have fun and have family!