

# meet the family

Regular meetings are a great way to nurture household harmony, the author had heard. But would they work for his family?  
By Jeff Wagenheim

**S**arah came charging out of her home office/laundry room. My wife's white-knuckle grip on a sheet of paper and her dramatic soprano pitch as she yelled for the kids signified that it would be wise to give her a little space. "Aaron! Rebecca! Come here! I need to show you something."

The boy was 11 years old and his sister 9, both old enough to recognize the loaded tone of Mom's voice. Or maybe not, because they came right away. The little innocents probably expected to be shown an online video of a funny baby or a cute puppy. Instead, they got the electric bill shoved in their faces. "You guys have to learn," Sarah said slowly, sternly, "to turn off the

lights when you leave your rooms."

The kids stared at her. I stared past her, to where both the ceiling light and desk lamp in her office were sucking up wattage. Of course, only a dim bulb of a husband would mention this in front of impressionable children, but no one's ever accused me of being enlightened. "Sarah," I said, employing my sober voice of reason, "instead of yelling, you could lead by example."

Shockingly, this did not soothe the situation. It just riled up the kids, who launched into righteous finger-pointing and cackling, and did pretty much the same for my wife, minus the laughing part. We all stood there in the hallway talking over each other, burying Sarah's complaint beneath a cacophony of miscommunication. Then Rebecca and Aaron retreated to their well-lit rooms, Sarah went back to paying

the bills, and I was left to reflect on how sadly typical this was for us.

Too often, our family issues were coming up at random times and in clumsy ways, with predictably unproductive results. I had a strong suspicion we weren't alone in our anarchy, though, so I started reading up on organizational tools for a happy household. An idea put forward again and again—by family therapists, self-help authors, even businesspeople-turned-parents—was to hold regular meetings, complete with rules of engagement and explicit goals. This sounded efficient but torturous. I get headaches just remembering the hours of business meetings I've sat through. Did I really want to turn my generally content little brood into a Forlorn 500 company?

Then I got to thinking about what may be the smartest thing Sarah and I do: our nightly check-in. After the kids are in bed, we each get a few minutes to talk about what's on our minds, while the other simply listens. It might be a workday frustration, a relationship concern, anything except the kids (that's the rule). Whatever it is, no analysis or problem solving comes into play, just an active set of ears, and the process creates a cozy connection that works like a spa treatment to dissolve stress.

What if as a family we adopted this practice, scheduling meetings for the four of us? If we could make it a pleasant experience—not a party, necessarily, but tedium-free—our



Let's try something new!





household might evolve into a tighter ship, and we shipmates might grow tighter, too. When I suggested this to Sarah, it was as if a lightbulb started to glow above her head.

**MEETING 1**

**orientation express**

Aaron was upside down. Draped over the sofa, his longer-every-day legs riding up the wall and his head hanging over the side and nearly grazing the rug, he seemed to be floating in our presence but barely with us. This was maddening, since our first family meeting was all of five minutes old. I was still explaining to the kids why their mom and I had asked them to sit with us. Rebecca was sitting with us. Her brother, though?

“C’mon, sit up,” I said. Aaron groaned the groan of someone whose mind’s eye is looking to be elsewhere.

I had a groan welling up in me, too, but I suppressed the urge. One of the tips for family-meeting success I’d seen repeatedly was to encourage everyone’s participation, not try to control said participation. That was a hard one to swallow, but I understood. Sure, I wasn’t on board with my boy’s yogalike position; still I knew harping on it would draw him into this experience about as much as kneeling in pews every Sunday as a kid had shaped me into a lifelong churchgoer. Heathen though I am, I opted to have faith in the kid rather than to pick on him.

“You’re going to like this,” Sarah told him with a mom’s tender assurance. “You’ll have a chance to talk, to tell your dad and me what

you’d like to happen in our family.”

“We get to talk about what?” Rebecca piped up. My wife and I caught each other’s eye and shared a discreet smile. We knew this opportunity would grab our girl’s attention. She loves, loves, loves to talk.

Kids, you're going to like this!





Our mutually beneficial arrangement: more screen time (for the kids) and more help around the house (for us).

And Aaron loves to seize any opportunity to get more of what he wants to do. “Can we talk about adding computer time?” asked the upside-down boy. “Instead of just weekends and—”

“Aaron! I’m talking!” His little sister wasn’t done.

And back and forth they went, loquacious girl and languishing boy jostling for attention, until I grabbed something from the coffee table—a felt pyramid-shaped tchotchke Rebecca had made in art class—and tossed it onto my daughter’s lap. “OK, Rebecca, when you’re holding that,” I said loudly, quieting both kids, “you’re the only one who gets to talk.”

This edict was inspired by another expert tip I’d run across: Use an object to designate who talks when. The suggestion initially had me shaking my head as I recalled

all the woo-woo workshops I’d attended, where stick-wielding chatterboxes would suck the air out of the room. In our house the dynamic was different, though. It made sense to issue a license to talk—and for everyone else, a directive to listen. So when Rebecca had the little felt pyramid in hand, we didn’t react as we’re prone to at the dinner table, dousing her with deep sighs, raised eyebrows, or comments about congressional filibusters. Now it was her time, no one else’s.

Well, the ideas poured out until she ran out of steam, by which time Aaron had things to say. Seeing the boy open up surprised me; it put me in mind of some advice I’d seen from the American Academy of Pediatrics: “Each family member should be allowed to speak without criticism or interruption, to share his or her thoughts, feelings, achievements,

and hopes.” Rebecca having been allowed to do just that, he apparently felt he’d been given the invitation he needed. We were rolling.

#### MEETING 2

### let’s make a deal

Rebecca read out, “Number 4: computer stuff.” This was an important item; I could tell from Rebecca’s inflection as she made her way down a list of topics from our first meeting the week before. I looked over at Sarah as our girl continued reading from a pink notebook she’d adorned with purple and

I’ll take notes.





orange plastic gems, hearts, and a peace sign. Neither of us had expected this; we hadn't asked her to keep notes. Yet here she was, the self-appointed secretary.

Her keeping notes let us put into effect another family-meeting tip from the list I'd amassed. A psychologist's suggestion that the kids lead or keep tabs on some sessions had seemed like a recipe for derailment. I know about the importance of empowerment and all that, but would the kids keep us on track? Well, Rebecca turned out to be the little engine that could. When I later peeked inside her notebook, I noticed that "computer stuff" was the only item circled. The emphasis was interesting, since Aaron, not Rebecca, had brought that matter up.

Sarah and I had always been tight with the kids' screen time, both television and computer. They were old enough now, though, that they were using their online sessions for school research and e-mailing friends, not just for playing video games. It made sense for Aaron and Rebecca to have more than just weekend access, but Sarah and I wanted them to meet us

halfway. "We're willing to treat you guys like you're more grown up," I told the kids, "as long as you take on more grown-up chores around the house."

Such as? Making their beds every morning. Picking up their rooms at bedtime. Setting the table before meals and clearing it afterward. All small, simple things; we weren't talking renovating the kitchen or finishing the attic.

Underpinning this part of our family discussion was another bit of wisdom from the American Academy of Pediatrics: Parents get the final word. Isn't that obvious? It seemed misguided to spell this out. Far better, I thought, to nudge pecking-order reality to the background and spotlight the kids' autonomy instead. The more Sarah and I treated this discussion as an amiable negotiation, the more agreeable the kids were, to the point where I felt comfortable stipulating this condition: "We want you guys to write up a contract that says what you're agreeing to and what you expect in return. We'll sign it, and you'll sign it."

Aaron groaned.

### MEETING 3

## the writing on the wall

The document "My Contract" had sat on the dining-room table ever since the day after our last meeting. It looked like my daughter's handiwork—neat penmanship on green construction paper—she'd probably done it in the morning before school. Yet a week had already passed, and I'd barely looked at it. I told Rebecca I was waiting until Aaron gave us his contract so that I could read them together, but the truth was I'd simply had a bunch of busy days in a row.

The night we had set aside for family meetings came up, but then dinner had run late and, before we knew it, bedtime was upon us. The next evening, the meeting just never materialized. We were losing momentum.

## WHAT WORKED

THESE FIVE TIPS MET OUR FAMILY'S MEETING NEEDS.

### 1

#### A POSITIVE VIBE

There's a time for allegation and altercation, and this is not it. Civil communication is a building tool.

### 2

#### YOURS, MINE, OURS

Roles and responsibilities differ within a family, but in a meeting no one voice gets to drown out the others.

This troubled me, because experts and regular folks alike always emphasize consistency as key. Meeting each week in a different setting is fine, but it's important to zero in on a regular day and time. Yet the fact is, lives get busy, and duties and deadlines can be unforgiving. So even though our family was already seeing some benefits from structured communication, it was a challenge to make it happen. Sarah and I needed the kids' help.

On the way home from school a couple of days later, I casually mentioned to the kids that we couldn't start weekday computer time until their mother and I had signed contracts in hand and a schedule of chores worked out. I was hoping to spark the kids' eagerness, which in turn might prod us back to the boardroom.

It didn't take long until dinner conversation turned to family meetings, with Rebecca wanting to schedule one and Aaron asking, "Why not tonight?" Within a few minutes, we'd moved to the living room to nail down the details of our chores schedule. Sarah had brought home a whiteboard on which she'd listed days of the week across the top and chores down one side, with movable stars in two colors to indicate who did what when. Rebecca loved moving the stars around because she adores structure. Though Aaron recoils from it, he thrives on it.

**We're willing to treat you guys like you're more grown up, as long as you take on more grown-up chores around the house.**



**MEETING 4**

**Lessons learned**

**I** don't like all the sitting." We'd decided to devote a meeting to the long-term future, or at least the future of these meetings, and this was Aaron's input. It sounded apathetic, but I dug into it a bit. "So you're not in favor of us continuing these meetings?" I asked, trying to keep my tone neutral.

"No, I think they're good," he said. "Things have improved."

But. "I just get a little restless sitting here."

So maybe we should get the family out of the house next time? This is another common meeting tip: Change the venue to spice things up. But my suggestion that we take it to a restaurant unnerved Rebecca.

"What if someone hears what we're saying?" she said, with a furrowed brow. We opted to save restaurant outings for when we're hungry.

No family hike, either. "No, no, no, I don't want to walk," said Aaron, sitting up wide-eyed at the idea. "I just need something to fidget with, then I'm fine." This was an aha! moment for me, a revelation that the yo-yo and kendama he'd been playing with intermittently during our meetings weren't symbols of his desire to be somewhere else. They were keeping him with us.

It then occurred to me that our meetings, for all of their practical give-and-take on matters such as chores and screen time, were most important to our family in a less tangible way. They served as a mentally uncluttered environment in which we could learn how each of us thinks. Seeing Rebecca break down everything into orderly nuts and bolts, for instance, brought her essence to light for Sarah and me. And while Aaron's ability to pay attention without paying attention will always be unnerving, I now recognize that just trusting him and letting him be is the most conscious way to be with him. Being

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<p><b>3</b></p> <p><b>SHORT IS SWEET</b></p> <p>Just getting into a groove, you say? Momentum tends to wind down after half an hour. Don't drag things out.</p>	<p><b>4</b></p> <p><b>FUN TO THE FINISH</b></p> <p>A yummy dessert? A board game? Ending with something special will interest everyone in a return engagement.</p>	<p><b>5</b></p> <p><b>NOTE TO SELF</b></p> <p>Keeping a record of what's been discussed will help get the conversation off the ground next time.</p>
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# workbook



> recipe

## LET'S EAT!

### PARMESAN-CRUSTED COD WITH GARLICKY SUMMER SQUASH, p. 36

#### INGREDIENTS

2 small zucchini, sliced into  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-thick rounds  
2 small yellow summer squash, sliced into  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-thick rounds  
2 garlic cloves, minced  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cup olive oil

Salt and pepper  
4 (5- to 6-oz.) cod fillets, skinned  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cup panko bread crumbs  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cup grated Parmesan  
2 tbsp. chopped parsley

ACTIVE TIME: 20 MIN.

TOTAL TIME: 40 MIN.

MAKES: 4 SERVINGS

1. Heat oven to 350° with a rack in the center position.
2. Toss together the zucchini, squash, garlic, and 2 tbsp. olive oil on a rimmed baking sheet. Season with salt and pepper and spread the ingredients evenly, leaving space for the fish. Place the fish on the pan and season with salt and pepper.
3. In a small bowl, combine the panko, Parmesan, parsley, remaining olive oil, and a pinch of salt. Press the mixture onto the fish, distributing it evenly.
4. Bake until the fish flakes apart when gently prodded with a paring knife, about 20 minutes.

PER SERVING: 314 calories, 29g protein, 17g fat, 3g sat. fat, 12g carbs, 2g fiber, 432mg sodium

> continued

## SPOTLIGHT

### MEET THE FAMILY, p. 75

patient can be painful, but it yields a more communicative boy.

There are limits, of course, to how communicative kids of 9 and 11—or at least my kids at these ages—are willing to be. Rebecca liked the concept of probing deeper because, she said, “in some books I’ve read, like *The Cupcake Diaries*, there are people who keep their feelings in, and then their faces look down.”

Aaron shot back, “Life isn’t about cupcakes, Rebecca.” Her face wrinkled as she tried to process that. There was silence all around until Aaron offered up something that danced on the thin line between grudging endorsement and Zen koan. “Sitting here is like sitting in the doctor’s waiting room when the doctor is going to tell you your broken arm is all healed,” he said. “The waiting room might be boring, but the result is good.”

*Jeff Wagenheim fancies himself the CEO of his Western Massachusetts family, but the two junior board members typically order him around like an unpaid intern.*



## ROAD TRIP

### OHIO'S WILD SIDE, p. 90

#### Day 3

After all the cornfields, the winding roads of the **Hocking Hills** region, lined with thick, towering trees, seemed otherworldly. The girls were nervously excited about the morning’s planned expedition. Rachel peppered us with questions all the way to **Hocking Hills Canopy Tours** in Rockbridge. She didn’t begin to relax until we were suited up in full-body harnesses and helmets. But anxiety quickly gave way to exhilaration as we followed our energetic guide for