

Around the Kitchen Table: Guidelines for Family Discussions

Families everywhere are facing new challenges. But with our hectic, busy schedules, getting together, talking and listening to each other is more important today than ever before. Some families schedule regular family conference time, others have family discussions as the need arises. In raising their two boys, Sandi Minnes, MOSAIC Counsellor and Dave Minnes, High School Guidance Counsellor always ensured that they had at least one meal together, which provided an opportunity for things to “just come up.”



There were also times when they would call their boys together for family group discussions as the need arose.

“We would discuss things like helping out around the house, sports or activities they wanted to do, rearranging the bedrooms, summer holidays,” says Dave. “We would also delve into more serious matters such as death, relationships with extended family or sickness among family and friends.”

“Children need to be included,” says Sandi. “It is better to be straight-forward and to make sure they get the right information, as long as it is age-appropriate. It’s important that every family member gets the same information at the same time.”

Dave and Sandi’s experience have taught them a lot about how to have family discussions. “We found that often one parent would talk first followed by the other parent. Then we’d ask if they had any questions. We made sure everybody had an opportunity to talk.”

Sandi and Dave also have some other suggestions to assist with family discussions.

- Don't interrupt. Everybody will get a turn to speak.
- Try to start with something positive in the discussion, "If you're talking about a problem, maybe say you're really improving on this and this, but this still needs work," says Sandi.
"How you frame your statement is so important," says Dave, "your tone of voice, how much energy is in your voice. It's not just the words, but how those words are packaged."
- Stay calm. It's better to cool down before involving the children. Turn the discussion over to the parent who is more removed from the subject at hand. That parent is more likely to be in a better frame of mind to deal with a contentious issue.
"It also helps when you can maintain your sense of humour," says Dave.
- Respect each other's differences. When a number of people live under the same roof, there will be varied views, likes and dislikes. Make sure everyone's views are heard and everyone's opinion is valued and respected. "As parents we are teaching our children to be good adults," says Sandi, "We want the children to share in the responsibilities and resources of the home and to understand our feelings and for us to understand theirs. We value what they have to say. They have good ideas and many times they provide a completely different perspective.

"It's not an equal system," adds Sandi. "There is still a distinction between the adults and the children. But, through family discussions you can at least let your children know that you are interested in and want to hear their thoughts and opinions."

