

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## LAWYER PARENTS, THIS IS FOR YOU

In a TED talk by Jennifer Senior, she spoke about how parenting has changed and attributes the difficulties we feel about our parenting to two main causes: (1) children became economically worthless but emotionally priceless (i.e., children stopped working on the farm or in factories); and (2) we don't know what future we're preparing children for because change happens so fast nowadays. Ms. Senior then advises parents to embrace the "middle ground," which she describes as:

- Between helicopter parenting and hands-off parenting; between overscheduling children or yourself and under-enriching your children or yourself;
- Between following what other parents find acceptable and what you would otherwise choose; and
- Between authoritarian and permissive parenting.

What Ms. Senior didn't address is how to find and to stay in that middle ground – with your children and with your parenting partner. Family meetings provide a process to navigate and sustain the middle ground in these and many other facets of parenting.

I can almost hear you saying, "But we have family dinners almost every night; isn't that enough? Do I have to fit more into my already busy life?" First let me address why family dinner conversation may not fulfill the same purpose. Here are five reasons:

(1) Quieter members tend not to participate – or only a little.

(2) Dinner conversations tend to be reactive rather than proactive.

(3) It may be difficult for children to bring up their concerns at dinner and have them addressed thoughtfully.

(4) Some families prefer to preserve dinner time as a pleasant family time and subscribe to, "Emotions are fine but not when we dine," preferring not to end dinner with a scene.

(5) Family meetings open the lines of communication. They can be less confrontational than we experience in dinner discussion. Dinner conversations are often more about conclusions and opinions than deeply discussing topics with dialogue and true understanding.

Family meetings are a method to help you "stay in the middle" with your parenting.

You already know a lot about good meetings. In your work life, on committees, and in many other contexts, you have attended meetings where you noticed what was done well and what was completely annoying about the meeting. Use this knowledge in your family meetings! Have an agenda, share the air time, and be respectful of others.

However, you'll need to do some things differently in a family meeting than in a business meeting.

- Ground rules are essential. Your children are accustomed to them from school. Ground rules keep family meetings a safe place to talk and a place where sibling or spousal competition is left at the door.

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- Family interactions are more important than decisions. In a business meeting, achieving goals and covering the agenda are paramount – but not necessarily in a family meeting. Since family meetings are held over time, there is no need to come to a decision in a single family meeting.

- End on a positive topic. No one wants to attend meetings that are all about problems! That’s no fun. So have a positive item for the last topic of your meetings, like planning an outing or inventing a new holiday. Most people remember best the discussion that happened last.

- Ask for agenda items from both children and parents. You’ll be surprised at what children will bring up once they feel like this is their place to talk about what’s important to them. When children have a say in family life, they are less likely to need to rebel in their teen years.

- There are four types of conversations in family meetings: (1) current issues; (2) keeping up with the age/stage of your child; (3) planning and policy; and (4) hard times. We all know what current is-

...sues might be, but what about planning and policy? These are the discussions about requests that would otherwise be a series of “can I, can I, why can’t I?” conversations. As for the hard issues, have you noticed how difficult it is to bring up sex, drugs, death, etc., in ordinary conversation or at the dinner table? It seems like such a big deal to take a child aside to “have the talk.” Family meetings are a natural place to bring up the hard topics, having practiced the easy ones over a period of time.

Both generally and in family meetings, lawyer-parents need to keep in mind which skills we use every day and how they affect our parenting. Some lawyer skills are quite helpful and others quite harmful. For more information about how family meetings can enhance your home life and how to hold them successfully over time, refer to the recently published *Family Meeting Handbook: Here for Each Other, Hearing Each Other*.

KATHERINE FOLDES, JD

AUTHOR OF *FAMILY MEETING HANDBOOK: HERE FOR EACH OTHER, HEARING EACH OTHER*

### Lawyering Skills That May Help or Hinder Parents’ Relationships with Their Children

HELP	HINDER
Ability to identify issues and frame them neutrally. Fact-finding.	Arguing to win. High intensity or duration “persuasion.”
Ability to explain, to articulate – especially to articulate what another person is saying.	Going to the logical extreme to illustrate consequences.
Ability to think beyond the words to the intent. High emotional quotient.	Thinking of one’s own reaction while another is talking – sometimes benignly characterized as “thinking on one’s feet.”
Once needs are expressed, ability to come up with win-win or creative solutions. Negotiation.	Overpowering another with a cascade of words.
Ability to follow through with decisions.	Forgetting to check for another’s understanding.
Keeping notes. Writing down agreements.	Never or rarely “backing down” or apologizing.
Collegiality within one’s “team” or group. Mediation skills.	Wanting a result on one’s own schedule or before all are ready.
Respect for rules.	Behaviors that communicate lack of respect.