

ParentZone Pods - Episode 1: Family meetings

[0:09] Laurie Arrowsmith

Welcome to ParentZone Pods at Anglicare Victoria, we've been working with parents to support their experience for over 20 years. Parenting is the toughest and most important job you'll ever have. Hi, I'm Lorie and with me as Anita

Anita Weber

Hi Laurie!

Laurie Arrowsmith

And we appear in group facilitators at ParentZone. We're recording at the Pakenham ParentZone hub. And today we've got lots of birds outside so you might hear them through the episode. This podcast reflects our work with parents and the many conversations we've had over the years.

ParentZone acknowledges and pays our respect to the traditional custodians of this land we are recording on today, both the Wurundjeri and the Bunwoorong people of the Kulin nations. We also pay our respects to elder's past, present, and future.

In this episode, we're going to talk about family meetings and problem solving and how we can use family meetings to connect with our family in a positive way.

[1:07] Anita Weber

So Laurie, I've never had a family meeting, can you tell me more about them?

[1:11] Laurie Arrowsmith

We usually have family meetings once a week, possibly once a fortnight. And it's really just an opportunity for everybody in the family to get their voice heard. You know, there's different things that we talk about during the week that perhaps have upset certain members of the family, that we really want to get solutions for. We also use it for fun, so that we can come together and connect and do things together.

[1:34] Anita Weber

Oh, wow. So, who brings the issues to the meeting?

[1:37] Laurie Arrowsmith

So all of us have an equal voice. And we all have an opportunity to bring any issues or concerns that we have. For instance, last week, my little nine year old was upset because she couldn't find any food to feed her guinea pigs, because nobody was putting it on the shelf that she could reach. So she hadn't

even told anyone this but was even just a small thing like that, that she had a space to be able to open up. Or my 12 year old who was saying that she was having regular fights with some of her friends at school. And she wanted to know what my husband and I thought about that, and what she could say in response. So it just made it a bit of a format for us to be able to discuss things.

[2:13] Anita Weber

So you only get together to discuss those issues.

[2:16] Laurie Arrowsmith

So we use this as a special connecting moment. So what I do is we have movies on that night as well. And we get takeaway. So what we actually do, okay, tonight's our family meeting night, let's get together and discuss things that we need to discuss. Let's talk about our family holiday coming up. And perhaps what we want to do, because different people want to do different things. And then also, let's eat our takeaway and watch a movie together afterwards. So it's a nice positive experience for everybody.

[2:43] Anita Weber

And it sounds like you've got this well established routine. How do we go about starting that?

[2:47] Laurie Arrowsmith

Yeah, good question. So I guess it can be challenging depending on how you phrase it to your children. Because if you've been in a pattern of it's always been us that tell them what to do, then we want to flip it to say we all have equal say in this family, we all want to be able to have the opportunity to bring things up when they're bugging us. You know, certain things that mom or dad might be doing that are bugging us. So it's kind of in your delivery of how you talk about it. So let's get together as a family and discuss these issues. We even write them down. So my daughter will say, okay, this is the sort of thing that's been, you know, maybe upsetting me or something I'm looking forward to be write them down.

[3:25] Anita Weber

So you have like an agenda? Is that something that's contributed to during the week or on the fridge or something, in a prominent place?

[3:33] Laurie Arrowsmith

We have a whiteboard on the wall. And I mean, obviously, we can bring things up whenever they like, but if it's something they feel can wait to the meeting, then they'll put it up on the board.

[3:40] Anita Weber

I was gonna ask about that. You don't only talk about them at the meetings but throughout the week anyway. But yeah, this is a more formalized process. Back to how you set that up. How did your kids react when you initiated it?

[3:52] Laurie Arrowsmith

They're a bit apprehensive at first, because they didn't really know what to expect. But once we made it very clear that what they had to say was really important, and that we wanted to get solutions for them, then it became a really positive thing. So I think it's really important that when we set it up, we have to let them know that this is an opportunity for us to work things out together to get your needs met, to get our needs met, to come to solutions together.

[4:15] Anita Weber

Yeah. So what kind of topics do you talk about?

[4:18] Laurie Arrowsmith

We often talk about, funnily enough, my daughter's fight a lot. There's a lot of sibling rivalry going on at the moment. So they like to come together with us and work it out in a forum where it's not just the two of them, where it's Mum and Dad as well. Okay, these are the sort of things that might be upsetting you like for instance, my nine year old keeps harassing my 12 year old and knocking on her door constantly when she's watching the show, because she wants her attention. But because her sister so much older than her, she doesn't want to play those those games so, so we sit down and we work it out. Okay, so what's my 12 year olds needs? Her needs are that she wants to sit and talk to her friends on the phone. My nine year olds needs that she wants some sort of connection with her sister. Okay, cool. So then how do we work through that? So then we might sit down and say that the 12 year old, are there any other ways that we can spend some time with your sister that you find enjoyable as well? So it just kind of opens up that communication and that problem solving.

[5:13] Anita Weber

So as a parent, do you feel like you're giving up some of the power that we have.

[5:17] Laurie Arrowsmith

So this is very much a power with approach. It's about all of us getting our needs met, not just us as parents. I think sometimes when we have this power over approach, we sort of get our own needs met and don't think also about our children. So it's more about power with, how can we work together? So I don't believe we're giving up power, we're just working more as a team.

[5:37] Anita Weber

Yeah. sharing the responsibility and sharing the the solution making. That's right. Because obviously, you guys are there as parents, have you found that it's lead to them solving some of those problems and issues on their own?

[5:49] Laurie Arrowsmith

Definitely, yes. So because they've been, they've learned sort of the process that we go through, then they often I can hear them in the TV room negotiating and talking through the issues better than they would have done if we hadn't had that sort of sort of more formal format.

[6:05] Anita Weber

Yeah. So initially, you're helping them to understand that their voice is heard being heard, and their needs are being met. And now you're sort of moved on to them strategizing with you in regards to having those needs met on their own, and then taking responsibility for their own issues. And helping devise solutions with you.

[6:25] Laurie Arrowsmith

Absolutely. So it has that real knock on effect.

[6:28] Anita Weber

So if we were to get to the nitty gritty, take me through an actual meeting, what might occur?

[6:34] Laurie Arrowsmith

Okay, so we'll sit down, and we'll go through what's on the whiteboard. And we'll ask if anybody's got anything to add to that. We've actually got a family meetings book that we write, and we will go through every single thing on that agenda, you know, and we'll discuss it in detail. And we'll wait until everybody's happy with that solution. If they're not, we might need to spend time to re address it in the next meeting, or the next day,

[6:59] Anita Weber

Take a step back, how do you come to a solution?

[7:02] Laurie Arrowsmith

So what we'll do is we'll say, Okay, so, 12 year old, what unmet needs are you having, so what's not working for you? And she'll say whatever that is, and then we'll ask your nine year old, what's not working for you? And then we'll brainstorm. So the four of us will talk about, okay, what can we do to help? And then we actually write down on a list all of our ideas, then we revisit those ideas, and we go, okay, is this one going to work? And some might say, Oh, no, that's, that's definitely not going to work for me. And so we go through them in detail and make sure that they're acceptable to everybody,

[7:35] Anita Weber

Or what if they're not?

[7:37] Laurie Arrowsmith

And often they're not often they are not.

[7:39] Anita Weber

I'd see it been really hard to get four people to agree.

[7:43] Laurie Arrowsmith

Absolutely, it can be. So sometimes that will mean we need to spend a bit more time on it. Or we try a few different strategies and say, Look, this isn't set in stone, maybe we can come back in a week and revisit it and see if it's worked or not?

[7:55] Anita Weber

Yeah, so you try out a solution. And if it's not working for everybody then start again.

[8:00] Laurie Arrowsmith

And to let them know that it's not set in stone, so they don't think oh, no, if I if I say yes to this, then you know, it's gonna be like this forever. No, if it's not working for you, you let us know.

[8:08] Anita Weber

Come back and let us know that. Yeah. Great. What else do you do? What else?

[8:12] Laurie Arrowsmith

Yeah, so we talk about things like, you know, what are we going to have for dinner for the week? For instance? That's something that we talk about. ,

[8:18] Anita Weber

I'd love that every week. I'd love some help making all that planning decision and then the ingredients. Actually, I know of a mum that once recommended that they put a notice board on, you know, what meals do you want? And what ingredients do you need for teenagers? Oh, that works really well.

[8:34] Laurie Arrowsmith

Yeah, yeah, that's a great idea. So with my children, we all eat different things. So we've all got different needs in that respect. Let's say one person chooses Monday, Tuesday, the next person, whatever it might be, and if one child will say, Yeah, I like that, but I don't want tomatoes on mine, you know, so we can vary it slightly, but at least we come up with a plan for that next week. I think it makes it so much easier, because often mealtimes are a struggle for parents, children will often turn up their nose to meals, but if they've been agreed beforehand, and we've made a little bit of, you know, changes perhaps if need be, it can really help.

[9:08] Anita Weber

Oh, definitely. And yeah, just catering to everyone's preferences, knowing that they're going to be heard and knowing that, okay, I'll put up with the yucky meal tonight because my favorite's tomorrow night, you know, and knowing that you get that consideration. Yeah, that's a really good thing.

[9:25] Laurie Arrowsmith

And the other thing we might talk about, as you know, any upcoming holidays that we've got, you know, you know, what do we want to do? Obviously, different people have different things that they want to do, you know, let's put them all down on the paper. Let's see how much they cost. Let's see what's feasible, what's not, you know, things like that. So it's really getting the children part of those decisions.

[9:43] Anita Weber

And being more aware of those constraints as well. You know, as parents we often want to give our kids the world but we actually are constrained by finances and time. And other commitments, you know, and sort of providing them with the bigger picture.

[9:57] Laurie Arrowsmith

And I think it's really good for them to know that. Yes, I'd love to do that too but we just don't have the money to do that. Let's think of something else that fits within our budget that we can do.

[10:04] Anita Weber

So what are the benefits for your children have you found since initiating the family meetings?

[10:09] Laurie Arrowsmith

Well, the benefits are that they definitely feel like they're part of the decision making process and our family. So they take more responsibility. Even things like we discussed chores for the week, you know, so for instance, when someone hasn't done a chore, then I can just say, Oh, look, remember that this week, you chose to unstack the dishwasher. So it's those gentle reminders instead of the nagging. And so those sorts of things have helped, as you said before, they've then carried it into their day to day lives, that they've learned this problem solving together. They can carry it on into school with their friends. So that's also a benefit, but also just to feel part of that family unit. And to know that they are important, too, and that their needs are also important as well as ours.

[10:49] Anita Weber

Sounds fantastic. Have there been any disadvantages, do you think?

[10:53] Laurie Arrowsmith

Sometimes time-wise, we can't always meet every week, you know, sometimes it might be something on. And I do find if we've slipped a couple of weeks that the conflict can start to rise again. Because we haven't been able to had a chance to talk about those things that have been irritating us perhaps. So sometimes, in setting them up, we think i Everything's fine, and we kind of let them slip, and then things can start to happen again. So I think it's really important that they're quite consistent. And they don't have to do every week, but whatever suits you and your family.

[11:22] Anita Weber

Yeah. So finding that time and making sure that you are committed to it.

[11:27] Laurie Arrowsmith

And we're not distracted. Yeah, there's no phones, there's no technology, we're committed to each other.

[11:34] Anita Weber

They're actually sitting down and paying attention to each other.

[11:37] Laurie Arrowsmith

That's right. And often we don't give our children enough of that, you know, to sit down with them their eye contact, really listen to what they have to say. And I think this is a really good format to do that.

[11:47] Anita Weber

I can see the benefits for them is that sense of being heard that sense of being known and recognized.

[11:53] Laurie Arrowsmith

Yeah. And that sometimes we're not going to be able to find a solution straightaway, there might be bigger. But you know, we've started that process. And we're not going to forget about it.

[12:00] Anita Weber

Do you find when I'm in a parenting group, and we talk about decision making with kids, and often the way we approach things with our kids is that we might decide for them or, you know, when we're listening to their problems that we might actually come up with a solution in our head and try to impose that on them. Do you find using their family meetings, techniques, that you're more in a conversation or thing and that the children will actually come up with more solutions?

[12:24] Laurie Arrowsmith

Yeah, absolutely. Giving them the opportunity to do so. And you might make that mistake and come up with a solution. But then they can come back to and say, No, I don't want to do that. You know, and so there's that they can be heard at that stage.

[12:36] Anita Weber

Yeah. So I can say that it's been a really good benefit as well.

[12:39] Laurie Arrowsmith

Absolutely. I think it's also a good forum for exploring what's important in the family like family values. Yeah, I think that's really important as well. So an our family a really big value was of ours is that real connection, time together, that space to be able to be a family to chill out to have fun together. That's really important for us.

[12:59] Anita Weber

Yeah. Another thing that comes with values is we often we teach our children our values, but when they're teenagers, they start to choose their own. So how are you starting to see that with your 12 year old, she has very different values from you?

[13:12] Laurie Arrowsmith

She's really starting to come up with things herself that are important to her that I don't necessarily value. But again, this is such a great forum for talking through those, you know, so just because I valued something doesn't mean that she's necessarily going to, so actually hearing her and understanding her.

[13:28] Anita Weber

So one of the benefits is not only that they feel connected and feel like they belong to a group of people that share similar values and similar feelings. Is that as individuals, yeah, they're also seen and heard, and recognized for being who they are.

[13:43] Laurie Arrowsmith

That's right. And that there's no judgement. We talk about it.

[13:45] Anita Weber

Yeah, that's awesome.

[13:47] Laurie Arrowsmith

In this episode, we've talked about family meetings and how they might be useful. So if you think they could work in your home, give it a try. See how you go. If you feel this is hitting home for you, and you'd like to have more information about the groups that we run at ParentZone, Google Anglicare ParentZone for more information, or check the show notes where you are listening now.