Family meetings can solve family conflicts and foster kids’ moral development at the same time. By giving kids a voice in and shared responsibility for creating a happy family, we also strengthen our parental authority and leadership in the family. Successful family meetings have three parts: (1) achieving mutual understanding; (2) solving the problem in a way that’s fair to all; and (3) following through. A mother describes her first family meeting with James, 7, and Elizabeth, 5:

**Step 1: State the goal of fairness.**

Mother: James and Elizabeth, we’re having a problem with you two getting along. I’d like to talk with you about it and see if we can come up with a fair solution.

**Step 2: State the goal of understanding.**

Mother: First, I want you to understand how I feel about this situation, and then I want to find out how you feel.

**Step 3: State your view as parent.**

Mother: Kids, I get so irritated when I see the two of you fighting with each other. Then I start to yell at you, and everyone becomes upset. I would like to see the two of you try a little harder to get along.

**Step 4: Elicit kids’ feelings.**

Mother: I’ve told you how I feel. Now I’d like to hear each of your feelings.

James: Elizabeth always wants to do everything I do. She wants to sit in the same seat that I do, and she wants to play with the same toys. Sometimes she hits me.

Elizabeth: James punches me. He makes me cry. He won’t play with me. And I don’t like it when you yell, Mommy.

**Step 5: Restate kids’ feelings.**

Mother: James, you feel Elizabeth always wants to do everything you do. She wants to sit in the same seat that you do, and she wants to play with the same toys. Sometimes she hits you.

Elizabeth: James always wants to do everything I do. She wants to sit in the same seat that I do, and she wants to play with the same toys. Sometimes she hits me.

**Step 6: Have kids restate your feelings.**

Mother: Can you remember what I said about the situation?

James: You want us to try not to fight because it upsets everybody.

**Step 7: Brainstorm fair solutions.**

Mother: How can we make this situation better? Let’s make a list of things we can do that are fair to everyone.

**Mother’s commentary:** Together we came up with these possible solutions:

1. Don’t hit.
2. James should try to teach Elizabeth some of his games.
3. Mommy shouldn’t yell.
4. Elizabeth should try to find things to do by herself sometimes.
5. Everyone should say and do nice things.

**Step 8: Make a fair plan and sign it.**

We agreed on the following plan:

1. No hitting or yelling by anyone—Mommy, James, or Elizabeth.
2. James should play with Elizabeth at least once a day.
3. Elizabeth should try to play by herself sometimes.
4. Everyone should try to say and do nice things.

We all signed our agreement.

**Step 9: Plan a follow-up meeting.**

We posted our solutions on the frig. Next to that was a list for nice things said and done during the next two days. James agreed to record Elizabeth’s additions. We agreed to tell Dad about our plan and meet again in two days to see how we were doing.

**Step 10: Follow-up.**

We read the list of nice things people had said and done. We decided that everyone had indeed tried to be kinder.

Mother: James, I’m so pleased that you’ve included Elizabeth in your playing. I’ve had to speak to you only twice in two days. And Elizabeth, you are certainly trying to be nicer to everyone.

James: I’m glad you’re not yelling, Mommy. And Elizabeth hasn’t hit me.

Elizabeth: James played with me, and he let me sit in the bean bag with him.

The mother concluded:

Our home is happier now. We keep adding to the list of nice things we say and do for each other. Dad has also gotten involved. We’ll use this fairness approach to discuss other kid problems and even issues between my husband and me.

A fairness meeting can be brief. A 5-year-old wanted to play for 30 minutes with his older brother, while the older brother wanted private time. With parental mediation, they agreed to 15 minutes of joint play and 15 minutes of private time.

Consequences, if needed, can be built into the plan: Pick up your toys after you have been playing with them or lose them for two days; have the car home by midnight or lose driving privileges for two weeks. The main thing is that consequences be seen as fair.

Adapted, *Raising Good Children* by Thomas Lickona. Dr. Lickona is director of the Center for the 4th & 5th Rs. His other books include *Educating for Character* and *Character Matters*.