Risk and Resilience in Agriculture

Managing Anger Through Effective Family Meetings

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"Buddha likened anger...to reaching into a fire to pick up a burning ember in our bare hands with the intention of throwing it at someone. Before the injury is done to another, it is done to ourselves." –Stephen Levine (1979, p. 60)

Sadly, violence in Colorado and the United States usually is addressed after the fact—in courts, prisons, hospitals, and morgues. The cost of our reactive approach is high—the U.S. has the highest rates of incarceration and youth violence in the world (State Health Department, 1994). Many Coloradans believe that violence is inevitable.

Colorado State University Cooperative Extension does not believe violence is inevitable. We believe that violence is a serious, yet preventable public health issue.

By providing research-based anger and conflict management strategies where the seeds of violence first germinate—in our homes and in our families—we can reduce and prevent violence. We also believe that ongoing good communication between families can decrease violence and increase family satisfaction.

Research-Based Information

Given the moral crisis of our times, finding effective ways parents can enhance moral reasoning in their children and adults is a crucial task (Stanley, 1978). Experiences that enhance moral reasoning include situations that encourage cognitive restructuring, role-taking opportunities, participation in groups that are perceived as fair or just, and exposure to the views of others different from one's own (Kohlberg, 1969; Stanley, 1978). As a young person grows both in awareness that others' viewpoints and feelings are different from one's own and in the capacity to see one's own behavior from others' perspectives, so too does the young person's moral development grow (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971; Selman, 1975; Stanley, 1978).

A review of four computer databases over the past six to 30 years (1967-1996) found 17 articles on family meetings or family councils. Two studies were found with empirical evidence of positive family changes as a result of participating in parent training programs that included family meetings (Stanley, 1978; Wantz & Recor, 1984). Parents who participated in a six-week two -hours per week Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) program (Dinkmeyer and McKay, 1989) reported their children's behavior improved significantly Wantz and Recor, 1984).

The changes in parents and adolescents were even more impressive in an experi-mental-control group study in which two experimental groups met for 10 weekly, two-and-one-half-hour sessions and received training in conflict resolution and the use of family meetings (Stanley, 1978). Parents in both experimental groups significantly increased their equalitarian attitudes toward family decision making. Families improved their effectiveness in collective decision making. The group that included both parents and adolescents showed greater improvements on most variables measured. Families became more democratic in the ways they established rules and resolved conflicts. They improved their communication, were more effective in solving problems, and increased their egalitarian family relationships. Finally, adolescents who participated in the training significantly improved their scores in moral reasoning, and the results continued for at least nine months afterward (Stanley, 1978).

For those who want to be more effective at enhancing moral reasoning and at managing their anger long before it turns into violence, an excellent way for families to communicate, thus reducing anger and conflict, is through regular family meetings. Regular family meetings are times to promote family harmony by providing a safe time and place for making decisions, for recognizing good things happening in the family, setting up rules and distributing chores fairly, settling conflicts, and pointing out individual strengths.

Some families are ready for self-directed enrichment and problem solving like that recommended in this fact sheet. Other families first need family or marriage therapy because their situations are too troubled to be worked out without professional assistance. To help assess whether your family is ready to try family meetings, consider the following questions: Are we as parents committed to using words and communication to solve problems as a family? Can we as a family discuss issues and differences without screaming, yelling, and fighting? Do we at least sometimes listen to and hear one another's viewpoints? If you answered yes to most of these questions then read on and experiment with using the steps below. Otherwise, ask your friends for the names of therapists who are effective at assisting families who have situations similar to yours. Look in the yellow pages of your telephone book under counselors and make an appointment to seek the professional assistance your family needs.

If a formal family meeting does not seem workable in your family at the present time, work toward this end by planning to eat meals together, using this time to share the day's happenings and celebrating successes of family members. Involve the whole family in the planning, rather than having just parents plan for holidays, vacations and weekend outings. When a controversy develops with another family member, have a discussion.

Use good problem-solving skills. Identify the specific problem you want to solve with them and talk about the possible ways to solve the

problem. Talk about the pros and cons of each and come to an agreement about the best solution. When this way of problem solving feels comfortable, gradually involve other family members in brainstorming possibilities and their pros and cons. Compliment children when you hear them solving their problems using the skills you have taught them.

When your family is ready, begin planning more formal meetings. This forces you to set aside time to be together and to look at your life and what is working and what is not. Begin with an attitude of openness and acceptance rather than one of dominance or control. Be flexible. The meeting place and length can vary. At first, plan fun activities that involve all household members. "Let's have a family meeting soon to talk about your birthday. Is Sunday after supper a good time for you?"

Set a date and time when all family members can participate. An elderly family member living in the home may also be invited. Invite all family members, but don't require them to be present. The consequence of not being present is that their view will be missing as the family makes decisions that may affect them.

As soon as children can use words, they can participate. Especially with young children (e.g. ages 2 to 6), keep the family meeting as short as 10 to 20 minutes, gradually increasing the time. With older children, decide ahead how much time to spend depending on the agenda. Many families find it valuable to schedule meetings for the same time and place weekly or every other week. The key is to design the meetings to fit the family. Intergenerational families with adult children sometimes find it more useful to have monthly family meetings with their length determined by the complexity of the topics to be discussed. By holding family meetings regularly, it is easier to keep them balanced

with both celebrating happy times and solving family problems. Discussing one or two problems per meeting usually is a good limit to set.

Tips for Successful Family Meetings

The purpose of a family meeting is to foster open communication among family members. It is a safe place where everyone is free to say what they think and feel as they cooperate in making decisions and solving problems. A structured meeting helps this to happen when a family has decided they are ready for it.

Meet at a regularly scheduled time. Begin and end on time. Guard meeting times and encourage high commitment by keeping them a high priority.

Rotate meeting responsibilities, e.g. leader, secretary, and timekeeper. Treating all members as equals provides all family members with practice at problem solving. Encourage all to be good listeners. The original leader should be an adult family member who believes in equal rights and democratic relationships. The leader starts and ends the meeting on time and helps the family develop the rules that are then followed. Examples of rules that families have developed include: only one person speaks at a time; the rest listen well enough so they can repeat back to the speaker's satisfaction what they say and how they feel. The leader makes sure all points of view are heard.

The leader also keeps the communication focused on one topic at a time and ends the meeting on time. Toward the end of the meeting, the family decides who will be the leader, secretary, and timekeeper at the next meeting. Some families choose to have a secretary who keeps minutes recording decisions and agreements. The secretary also can record activities of family members and deadlines on a calendar that is posted for all to see readily. The next meeting can begin with a re-cap by the secretary. The minutes can be a family journal that is kept to look back on in

later years. The roles of leader and secretary can be rotated among the adults until everyone feels at ease with how to conduct an effective family meeting. Then these roles can be rotated among younger children as well.

Encourage all family members to participate. In the context of a safe environment, family members can express their opinions—even when different from the rest of the family's—without punishment or retaliation. Show lots of love. Some parents are just beginning to experiment with shifting from an authoritarian to an authoritative parenting style (DeBord, 1996: Maccoby and Martin, 1983). They sometimes feel more comfortable in initial family meetings limiting open discussion to smaller issues with less serious consequences when children make mistakes. Parents who find themselves in such a position are encouraged not to worry too much and let logical consequences of less serious actions speak for themselves. Isn't it better that a child learn from a $5 or $15 mistake with money than to wait a few years and have to learn from a $1,000 or $2,000 mistake?

Discuss one topic and solve one problem at a time. "The problem we want to solve today is _____. I suggest we devote _____ (minutes/hours) to this issue. Is this agreeable?" (Later the family can renegotiate more time if necessary.) If the leader notices the discussion moving off track, he or she might say: "That sounds like an issue we may want to discuss at another time. But for now the issue we're here to discuss is _____." As the leader notices someone interrupting the speaker, he or she might say: "Excuse me, _____. We want to hear your opinion—it's important to us. Could you hold it until _____is finished talking?"

Use I-messages and problem-solving steps. For information about how to create I-messages, see Dealing with Our Anger" (Fact Sheet 10.236). For "Problem-Solving Steps," see the third in this series entitled,

"Dealing with Couples' Anger" (Fact Sheet 10.238).

Summarize the discussion to keep the family on track and to focus the discussion on one issue at a time. Summarize the current agreement as necessary. Be aware of nonverbal and verbal indications that someone is uncomfortable with something.

Make decisions by consensus. Consensus is defined as communicating, problem solving, and negotiating on major issues until no family member has any major objections to the decision—all can live with the decision. Autocratic decision-making allows one person to decide; democratic allows the majority to decide. Neither of these two options works well in families where people live and work and play side by side daily. Those family members who do not feel heard may sabotage the individual and majority decisions. Decisionmaking by consensus incorporates the major needs and wants of all, making possible effective communication, problem solving, anger and conflict management.

Once you think you have a family agreement to a point that no one has any major objections to it, check it out to see if you have reached consensus. "What I'm hearing us say we can all agree to do is _____." Does anyone have any major objections?" If so, talk and negotiate some more.

If things get "too hot to handle," anyone can call for a break. Take a break for perhaps 15 minutes, or whatever time is needed before meeting again.

End with something that is fun and that affirms family members. Enjoy a family tradition, a bowl of popcorn with a good television program, or a game that includes all family members.

Remember, just as family members grow and change over time, so too do the rules and guidelines for holding family meetings. If children want to do something that seems like

a mistake, rather than lay down the law or forbidding it, discuss it. Raise some of the issues or consequences that may have been overlooked. If the matter is not too serious, it might be a good learning experience for them to handle the natural consequences, especially if parents can teach in a coaching rather than a blaming manner. Children are more apt to learn to make good decisions if they have full knowledge ahead of time and then assume responsibility for both poor and good decisions.

To evaluate your family's progress, assess how well the children are taking more responsibility for problem solving. Are some family members beginning to feel closer? Is the trust level increasing a little? Noticing small positive changes is a good way to encourage continued progress. Slagle (1985) offers additional practical ideas for conducting effective family meetings.

If after meeting a few times, you find your family is one of those busy families who just cannot seem to find time when all members can get together and talk, adapt the steps in this fact sheet. Consider starting your own alternative family meeting. Perhaps you prefer to keep in touch with your spouse and children individually on how they are doing and what decisions that need to be made alone and which need to be made together. Stopping periodically to discuss decisions that relate to all family members and scribbling dates on the calendar and talking on the run may be the best you can do under the circumstances.

The key to successful family meetings is to be flexible and use what works to help your family ride the ups and downs of family living and to maintain your family's resiliency or ability to bounce back after experiencing a stressful event. Families that know how to adapt well to inevitable changes tend to have higher marital and family satisfaction levels.

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