

STORY #2

"I'm Gonna Write it on the Agenda!"

(Ages of children in story: 7, 11, 12)

p. 269 in the book

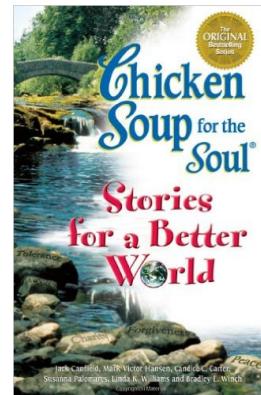
Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories for a Better World

Canfield, Hansen, Carter, Palomares, Williams, and Winch

Songs:

- ★ ✓ ♦ ☮ [If You're Angry & You Know It](#) (2:14)
- ∅ [It's Us Against the Problem, Not Me Against You](#) (2:46)
- ∅ [I've Got to Talk to Them](#) (3:01)
- ∅ [I'll Listen](#) (2:56)
- ★ ✓ ☮ [It's OK to Feel](#) (2:14)
- ★ ☮ [I'm Dealing with my Feelings](#) (2:50)
- ∅ [I Still Love You](#) (1:50)

★ ✓ ♦ ☮ [Bonus Resources found at CaringandCapableKids.com](#)



"Theresa, would you rather talk about this now or at the family meeting?" I asked.

"At the family meeting? Dad, give me a break!" she cried. And she stomped into the breakfast room to write "quit piano" on our family meeting agenda. This was all preceded by a mini-explosion as Theresa, then seven, was practicing the piano after school one day. She slammed her hands on the keys and shouted, "I quit!"

I stormed into the room, saying, "You can't quit. It's the beginning of the month, and we've already paid for all four lessons. Besides, my mother let me quit the piano, and I regret it. And furthermore, quitting is irresponsible behavior, and irresponsibility is not tolerated in the McGinnis household!" Suddenly, I heard myself ranting and stopped. That's when I caught my breath and put the question above to Theresa: "Would you rather talk about this now or at the family meeting?"

Thank goodness, at the time of the outburst, our family had been using this alternative forum for conflict resolution and decision making for about three years. We had found a workable alternative to my authoritarian outbursts, to my need to control family decisions, to the kids' sense of powerlessness. Since friends had introduced us to this decision-making mechanism, it had served us well. Not that we were doing our family meetings "perfectly," whatever that means. And not that we still didn't have outbursts like the one above. But Kathy and I had gotten in touch with our "nonnegotiables" and "bottom lines," and had articulated those to our three children. And now, we as a family had a way of correcting ourselves and mutually working through problems and disagreements.

Our children (now adults) convinced us of the truth of all this on a number of occasions. Perhaps the most memorable example and testimony to the value of family meetings happened when Tom, our oldest, was thirteen. One Sunday afternoon, he informed me that he was putting "cable TV" on the next night's family meeting agenda. When I told him he was wasting his time because we had decided only six months earlier that we couldn't afford cable TV, he said calmly, "Dad, let me worry about that."

The next night at dinner, which is when we had our weekly family meetings, Tom's "cable TV" was first on the agenda. When eleven-year-old David, as leader that night, asked him what he wanted to say about cable TV, Tom pushed his plate aside, stood, gathered some paper from the counter behind him, turned back to us and said, "Twenty-six reasons why our family should get cable TV."

What a shock! No one had ever written out a statement in five years of meetings; no one had ever stood, either. To give a sampling of his twenty-six reasons, he began with, "Mom and Dad, you value family togetherness. If we got cable with one of the movie channels, we could watch more movies together as a family." Next he stated, "You're concerned about the quality of the TV we watch. Well, I've researched the three movie channels and find that most of those X- and R-rated movies you don't like are on the other two channels. I think we should just get HBO. And you're concerned about how we spend our family recreation money. HBO and the works cost \$13.90 a month. David, Theresa and I are willing to kick in \$6 a month out of our allowances. That leaves \$7.90. I'm sure you realize that you go to at least one movie a month and pay \$4 each. If you would stay home that evening with your children and watch a cable movie instead, your \$8 and our \$6 each would mean we could get cable without spending any more family recreation money than we do now." He went on through his list of twenty-six reasons, then he sat down—and stared at Kathy and me.

Kathy looked at me, sitting there somewhat shell-shocked, and asked what I thought. I stammered at first, saying something like I couldn't think of any reason why not. Then David asked if we had a decision. Each one of us said we would be willing to try cable for a few months to see if it would work. Tom, with tears in his eyes, proclaimed, "This is the most emotional day of my life. This morning after the dentist pulled out five teeth, I thought I was going to die at school. But tonight, I've persuaded the family to buy cable TV. This is the most emotional day of my life!"

Kathy and I love to share this story, not because we are convinced of the value of cable TV, but because it convinced us of the power of the process of the family meeting. If a "recovering authoritarian" like me can do it, almost anyone can!

Not only did family meetings offer a corrective for an authoritarian father, it provided an outlet for an impulsive child. Contrary to the impression that family meetings may only work for highly verbal, well-behaved children, both Theresa and David were diagnosed with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), David's manifesting itself in volatile impulsivity. As a four-year-old, in the heat of rage, he punched out our dining-room window. At twelve, he destroyed his bike because it wasn't working as he wanted. So when I heard his full-volume outburst coming from the bedroom that he and Tom shared, I raced upstairs hoping to save the second story of our home.

David was storming around their room, cussing out Tom because he had apparently taken one of David's things. "I can't stand living with that *#@%&! I'm so ^%\$#@! angry, I'm gonna, gonna, gonna WRITE IT ON THE AGENDA!!!!!!" With that declaration, he stomped downstairs and into the breakfast room where he grabbed a pen and wrote "TOMMY! NOW!" on the family meeting agenda.

David had found a way of dealing with his issues besides punching out a window—or his brother. He was putting the issue on our family meeting agenda and calling for an emergency meeting that night. In our family, writing "NOW" after an item signaled that the person couldn't wait until the next regular family meeting and needed a resolution right away. We were so proud of David for being able to take this approach. Eighteen years later, as a thirty-year-old, David looked back on that episode as a real step forward for his ongoing efforts to channel his anger and impulsivity in constructive ways. I can't help but think how different the news headlines would look today if only all the angry people in our world would . . . could . . . WRITE IT ON THE AGENDA!

James McGinnis, Ph.D.

For more info on "Parenting for Peace and Justice" contact the **Institute for Peace and Justice**
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