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Who's the boss? ©Michael Grose 2009

"You CAN'T tell me what I can do! I'M the boss of ME."

Six year old Tania stood with her foot apart and hands on her hips as she stabbed out these words to her mum.

Quite a show of defiance!

The "I'm the boss of me" approach is great for kids who are at risk. It can empower them when they really need power.

BUT Tania's mum only asked her to get ready for bed. She didn't ask her to do anything that would put her at risk. Nothing reckless or dangerous – just getting ready for bed!

To put it politely, Tania was asserting herself but she chose the wrong forum to dig her heels in over (going to bed) and the wrong methodology (full-on defiance).

To be more blunt, Tania was acting like a little empress and was difficult to get along with. Her mum was tired and stressed after a long day and just wanted some peace but Tania wasn't going to bed without a fight!

While this may be a behavioural issue it also raises an interesting question about family leadership – exactly who is the boss in the family?

Who rules the roost in your family?

There is a lot of confusion around about this issue at the moment. **How much voice should I give my child?** is a common question I am asked. 'It depends.....' is my reply.

Families run well these days as **benign dictatorships** or **guided democracies**. Families are hierarchical by nature – always have been and always will be. Parents are at top of the hierarchy but your managerial style doesn't have to be seen the same as your parents.

"Do this and do it now!" may have cut it in the past and it may cut it with 'easy' kids but it doesn't cut it these days, particularly with challenging kids such as Tania. You have to be a little cleverer with your language. Cooperation is won, not demanded!

The best managerial style for families is one that tries as much as humanly possible to include kids in decisions that effect them BUT not all the time, not every decision, and only at according to their age and stage of development.

Let me explain. I once saw a parent negotiating with a four year old whether she should go to kindergarten that day. LUDICROUS! Going to kindergarten is a non-negotiable! How long a four year-old spends in the bath maybe up for a chat but only if it suits you as a parent!

We need to feel confident enough to assert ourselves when we need to but bring kids in when they are old enough and only then on certain issues.

Parents get themselves in an awful bind when they are not confident of their place in the family hierarchy.

The best way to give kids a voice in their families is by using regular family meetings.

This is a formal process that you can introduce gradually into your family that enables you to make the transition in leadership style from a **benign dictatorship** (where you tell kids what to do in the nicest possible way!) to a more **guided democracy** (where kids start to impact on what happens in their family).

You have a window of opportunity to introduce families meetings – you need at least one child five years or older and to do so before the majority reach adolescence when they become a little too cynical for such processes.

My own research found that those who conducted them well seemed to have less sibling fighting, and their kids were better equipped to make decisions as teens because meetings gave them a window into their parents' thinking. (Also it seemed their parents were more relaxed, but this was just an observation!)

Here are some key points to help you conduct successful family meetings:

1. **They must be regular.** Weekly or fortnightly meetings are ideal.
2. **They must be real.** While meetings should be fun they are not a game you play with kids. You must be able to live with decisions that are made so you must be realistic about what is discussed and decided upon.
3. **They should an agenda.** All good meetings need a chairperson and an agenda. Meetings are usually for one or more of four purposes:
 - a) Plan for family fun
 - b) Allocation of chores
 - c) Resolving conflicts between people
 - d) Discussion of family issues, procedures and routines.

4. **They need a chairperson who knows what they are doing.** This can be shared around after a time but parents need to start off chairing them.

5. **They should start with a pleasant activity** such as encouragement, a complement or catching up on what's happened. Setting the scene is important for successful meetings.

Family meetings are not for everyone. They take time, effort and some skill to get going and maintain but the benefits for parents and importantly, children, are huge and long-lasting. You need commitment and patience to make them effective. It helps if both parents are on the same wavelength, but one committed parent is enough!

I discovered when researching my book *Working Parents* the most effective parents in these busy time are those who 'work hard at family' and don't just leave things up to chance. They are proactive and put communication processes in place so that things happen.

Family meetings are one those proactive processes that savvy parents put into place to give their kids a voice in their family enterprise.

You can find out more about running family meetings at www.parentingideas.com.au