



Family Group Conferencing in Child Welfare¹

Della Knoke

This information sheet describes Family Group Conferencing and summarizes key findings of evaluations that have been conducted in a number of areas across Canada and the United States.

What is Family Group Conferencing?

Family group conferencing (FGC) is a process that brings families together to make decisions or resolve disagreements. In child welfare, FGC aims to enable families to develop effective service plans that safeguard children and promote their welfare. FGC defines “family” broadly to include people related by blood including the immediately family, extended family, as well as people who have significant relationships with the family or child.

FGC originated in New Zealand and is based on family-based decision-making traditions used in Maori culture. In 1989, New Zealand extended the use of FGC to all children who were considered to be in need of care and/or protection by incorporating FGC into Child Protection legislation. FGC has also been implemented in Canada and the United States, as well as in many European countries. The New Zealand model has been adapted in some jurisdictions and may be referred to as Family Group Decision Making.

What are the principles behind FGC?

FGC is a family-driven process that is defined by a number of principles:

- The child and family have the right to participate in decisions that affect them.
- Families have strengths and resources that they can draw on.
- Child safety and well-being are enhanced by strengthening families and their networks of support and through shared responsibility for child welfare.

- Through collaborative problem solving, families can resolve issues and develop plans that keep their children safe and well cared for.
- Solutions developed by the family are more likely than those imposed by professionals to respect and preserve children’s bonds to their families, communities and cultures.
- Families are more likely to respect and adhere to plans that they develop than those imposed on them by professionals.
- To encourage trust and open dialogue, discussions that occur during FGC are confidential, except where disclosure is required by law (e.g., necessary for the child’s safety).

When is FGC used in child welfare?

FGC can be used whenever planning for or making decisions about the care of a child. For example, FGC is frequently used to develop service plans to address child welfare concerns about child safety and well-being; to identify services and supports that are needed to help families care for their children; to decide where a child will live; to develop plans for reunifying children in foster care with their families or relatives; and to identify supports for children in care or those who are leaving foster care as young adults.

Some jurisdictions exclude particular types of cases such as those involving sexual abuse and domestic violence.² Other jurisdictions include these types of cases but under specific conditions and with some modifications to the process. For example, when domestic violence has been a problem in the family, the FGC process can build in extra supports, schedule “check-ins” and provide the option of stopping

the conference at any point to ensure that victims feel safe. In cases involving sexual abuse, some jurisdictions will limit the use of FGC to cases where the non-abusive caregiver and family are supportive of the sexually abused child.

Who participates in a FGC?

A FGC typically includes a child's family, child welfare workers and professionals from community agencies who are involved with the family or child. The child whose care is being discussed in the family conference may attend the meeting or some parts of it. Involving children in the process provides the opportunity for children's views to be considered in developing a plan and in decision-making. Children not attending the meeting may ask someone to express what is important to them on their behalf.

What does FGC involve?

FGC is a process that involves three phases: the preparatory phase, the meeting, and finalizing the plan. An FGC coordinator, who may also be referred to as a facilitator, coordinates and oversees the process. The FGC coordinator is an impartial person who has no "stake" in the family's plan; he or she does not work for one participant and does not have the authority to accept, reject or alter the family plan.

Preparing for the FGC

The FGC coordinator does a substantial amount of preparation and coordination before the family meeting. The coordinator works with the parents, and often the child, to decide who should be invited to the FGC and explores concerns they may have about the meeting and any of the potential participants. Preparation for the meeting also involves deciding on details of the family meeting such as how family traditions and preferences will be built into the process. For example, the meeting may include prayers, having a meal together and/or other ceremonies or rituals that are important to the family. The coordinator prepares potential participants on what to expect and what issues need to be addressed. Participation in the meeting is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time. The coordinator also contacts the professionals involved with the family to organize their attendance at the meeting.

The meeting

Presenting the issues

Once the coordinator has reviewed the process and purpose of the meeting, child welfare workers

present to the family, community members and professionals the issues related to the child's care that have to be resolved or decided in the FGC. Other service providers may also share information. Family members are encouraged to ask questions.

Family Time

In the next phase of the FGC, family members are given "private family time" to discuss what they heard and develop their own plan to meet the child's needs. The family is asked to identify resources and supports that are needed to effectively implement their plan. In some jurisdictions, families are asked to develop two plans; one is the plan to be implemented and the second is an alternate that can be adopted if they have problems implementing the original plan.³ No time limit is imposed on the family meeting which can last anywhere from a few hours to a full day.

In the New Zealand model, all professionals including the FGC coordinator are excluded from participating in family time, unless the family requests the coordinator's presence.⁴ In other jurisdictions, one or sometimes two FGC coordinators remain with the family during private family time to facilitate discussion, answer questions and/or help the family record the plan.

Presenting the plan

Once the family plan is developed, child welfare workers and other professionals rejoin the family meeting to hear and discuss the proposed plan. Professionals can ask questions, make suggestions, or request clarification. They may be asked to commit to providing services to support the family plan. The child welfare worker has responsibility for making sure that the proposed plan addresses concerns about the physical and emotional safety of the child.

Finalizing the plan

Jurisdictions vary in the ways that plans are finalized. In some jurisdictions, the child welfare worker who attends the conference has the authority to approve the plan, which allows the family to start implementing it. Others require approval by a supervisor or sometimes the court before the plan is adopted. The family and child welfare workers may be encouraged to get legal advice before they finalize the agreement. Additional meetings may be scheduled to finalize the plan and make modifications.

Once the plan is approved, everyone who was at the conference typically receives a copy of the plan, which specifies what everyone has agreed to. In general, the delegated child welfare

worker is responsible for checking that the plan is implemented as outlined and assessing how well it is working. Plans often also identify family members who will help with monitoring. Plans cover a specified period of time (e.g., six months) and their effectiveness is typically reviewed by child welfare workers before extensions are granted.

How does FGC differ from child welfare mediation?

FGC and child welfare mediation have several common features. Both assign an integral role to the family in making decisions about a child's care. Both emphasize open communication and provide opportunities to hear and discuss different perspectives. In addition, both use collaborative problem solving to reach consensus about how to meet the children's needs. There are two salient differences: First, mediation can involve extended family members but it is not a necessary part of the process. Second, in FGC the service plan and the process through which it is developed are family-driven; child welfare workers and other professionals typically do not become involved in creating the plan. In contrast, mediation assigns to parents and child welfare workers shared responsibility for generating solutions and aims to help them reach agreement about what should be done.

Is FGC beneficial?

A number of evaluations have been conducted to assess whether FGC achieves its objectives. Most evaluations have assessed participants' experiences and the adequacy of family plans immediately after the FGC. Some conducted follow-up assessments to examine how well plans are implemented and how well they address child welfare concerns.

Participants' experiences

In general, evaluations assess the experiences of three groups of participants: family members, professionals and children. When reporting on family experiences, evaluations typically combine feedback from parents with feedback provided by other family members. Similarly, child welfare workers' views of the FGC process are often combined with feedback of other professionals.

Family members

Evaluations consistently indicate that the vast majority of family participants were satisfied with the plan and found that FGC was a positive experience. Parents and other family participants reported that they had

a better understanding of child welfare concerns, had the opportunity to express their views, felt their views were respected and that they were treated fairly by professionals.^{5,6} In addition, family members reported having a greater sense of ownership and greater commitment to the plan.⁷ Some evaluations reported FGC improved family communication and provided opportunities to reconnect with and gain support from family.^{8,9,10} Extended family reported that they had more opportunities to help the parents and child.¹¹

Some families reported that the FGC process can be stressful. For example, in Huntsman's review of FGC research,¹² one in four family members felt that disagreements during the family meeting became hostile or aggressive.

Professionals' experiences

Across jurisdictions, the majority of the professionals who were involved in FGC have also reported positive experiences. For example, professionals reported that FGC enhanced family cohesiveness, promoted communication and better understanding, and/or mobilized support for the family and child. In addition, in some evaluations professionals reported that they had a better understanding of the family's situation after the FGC and that relationships between child welfare workers and families were less adversarial.^{13,14} In general, evaluations indicate that up to three-quarters of professionals were satisfied with FGC, which is slightly lower than the level of satisfaction reported by family members.

Children's experiences

Children who participate in an FGC reported a range of experiences. Some evaluations found that children's experiences tended to be positive. For example, many children reported that they felt connected and cared for, safe and happy with the process when their feelings and perspectives were heard and influenced the outcome.^{15,16} However, evaluations also indicate that some children found the process to be stressful.^{17,18} Disagreements among adults during private family time was identified as one source of distress in some children. In addition, some children felt inhibited to express their views or that they had little influence, particularly when the outcome of the FGC differed from the outcome they wanted.

Adequacy of family plans

Evaluations typically found that three-quarters to almost all of the plans that families developed were approved, indicating that they were judged to adequately address child welfare issues and concerns.

The plans were described as creative, comprehensive and often outlined in detail the specific goals of the plan and resources needed for effective implementation.^{19,20} The resources that families listed generally included a combination of family supports and services provided by community-based agencies, including child welfare agencies.

Implementation

Approval of the family plan marks the end of the formal FGC process but it is the first stage in a process that aims to mobilize supports. Families often reported that they received enhanced support from family members and community agencies once the plan was implemented.^{21,22,23} For example, extended family increased the amount of practical support they provided by calling and seeing parents and children more often.²⁴ In addition, most families felt that child welfare agencies provided the support agreed to at the FGC meeting.

Other evaluations found that a substantial portion of family plans fell short in their implementation.^{25,26} Sometimes child welfare workers did not provide the level of support specified in the plan, or extended family members did not honour the commitments they made in the agreement. In addition, when community resources such as treatment services were specified in the plan but were difficult to access, follow-through was hindered and families were less likely to view themselves as better off.²⁷

Child Maltreatment Outcomes

Few studies examined the impact of FGC on child welfare outcomes and many did not include a comparison group. Based on available research, it is unclear whether FGC reduces the likelihood of subsequent child maltreatment. One study found that families who participated in FGC had less child welfare involvement (e.g., fewer reports of child abuse and neglect, fewer children were removed from the home), improved safety in the home, and fewer incidents of domestic violence 12 to 13 months after the FGC.²⁸ Other studies also found lower rates of child welfare involvement, compared to rates generally found in child welfare.^{29,30}

However, other studies have found that families who implemented service plans developed through FGC were as likely or more likely to be reported for child abuse or neglect.^{31,32} Findings indicated that re-reports were often made by child welfare workers but extended family members were also more likely to report a concern in FGC families than in comparison families.³³ It is possible that FGC

families are under greater scrutiny when monitoring is undertaken by both extended family and by child welfare workers, which may increase the chances that child maltreatment, and the circumstances that put children at risk of maltreatment, will be noticed and reported. Some of the differences in rates of reporting may also be related to differences between the families that receive FGC and those that did not. For example, one study that reported higher rates of re-reports for FGC families found that they also tended to have more serious problems.³⁴ Another study found that FGC families were more likely to have problems with child neglect,³⁵ which is a form of maltreatment that tends to be chronic.

Summary

FGC is a process that brings together families and the people who work with them to make decisions or develop service plans to address children's needs for safety and well-being. FGC aims to enable families to solve problems by creating space for them to work collaboratively, and with the support of child welfare and community agencies.

Evaluations have found that most family members and professionals felt that FGC was a fair and helpful process that mobilized resources within the family and community. The vast majority of family plans were approved by child welfare workers, which indicates that they were judged to adequately safeguard the safety and well-being of children. FGC broadens families' circles of support by drawing on the assistance that family and community agencies are willing to provide. Families that participated in FGC often received more support than families whose service plans were developed using standard approaches. However, the supports identified in family plans were not always implemented as intended. Building follow-up family conferences into the FGC process, for example three or five months later, has been recommended to help the family assess their progress and identify whether and when it is necessary to change course.

It is unclear whether the FGC process and the plans that are developed reduce the likelihood of subsequent child maltreatment. Studies that rely on reports to child welfare can be problematic. Reports do not mean that maltreatment actually occurred and the use of reports fails to take into account the "detection bias" that FGC families may experience as a result of the enhanced monitoring. Additional research is needed to more fully assess the longer-term benefits of FGC for children and their families.

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About the Author: *Della Knoke* has a PhD in social work and is a public servant.

Suggested citation: Knoke, D. (2009). *Family Group Conferencing in child welfare*. CECW Information Sheet #77. Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work.

CECW information sheets are produced and distributed by the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare to provide timely access to Canadian child welfare research.

The Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare (CECW) is one of the Centres of Excellence for Children's Well-Being funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policy of the CECW's funders.

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