Family Group Conferences in child protection

An NSPCC factsheet

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This factsheet explains how family group conferences can be used to facilitate decision-making in the child protection process. We describe how and why they are organised, what happens during the conference and who is involved at each stage.

The difference between a child protection case conference and a family group conference

If a child or young person has been identified as in need of protection, local authority Children’s Services are responsible for producing a child protection plan.

For that purpose, they will convene and run child protection case conferences, as required by the Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families (Department of Health, 2000). At these conferences, family members may attend, but the professionals are responsible for making decisions and drawing up the plan.

Family group conferences may be run alongside child protection case conferences to allow the wider family group (blood relatives as well as non-related significant family friends or neighbours) a greater input into the child protection plan.

The aim of the family group conference is to support families to find their own solutions to problems: the family members are the decision-makers rather than the professionals; the ‘family’ is the primary planning group.

Family group conferences may also be referred to as ‘family group decision making’ and they can be used in any area of family and child care practice, e.g. children in need and looked-after children, youth justice, and education.

Do family group conferences replace child protection case conferences?
Not all Children’s Services departments run or fund family group conferences as part of their child protection procedures, and they do not replace child protection case conferences.

Who organises family group conferences?

An independent coordinator (usually a professional recruited from local statutory and voluntary service communities) negotiates attendance and informs participants about the Family group conference (FGC) process. All members of the family are invited to attend, but in certain exceptional circumstances it may be necessary to exclude a family member, e.g. evidence of violent behaviour or incapacity due to mental health problems. Absent family members can input to the meetings in alternative ways, e.g. through letters or tape recordings.

Provisions made to accommodate specific needs

The coordinator has a duty to identify and address issues of race, gender and culture and to respond positively to any specific needs identified by the family. The FGC will be held in the first language of the family.

Any child or young person attending the FGC should be helped to identify a supporter, or advocate, preferably an adult from within their own social support network. The supporter may have an informal or formal role but must be a trusted adult chosen by the young person. Some FGC projects have identified problems with having an advocate from the family and have chosen instead to train independent advocates (Ashley and Nixon, 2007).

Who attends and what happens at the conference?

Only those professionals directly involved, or holding significant information, should attend the FGC. Information sharing takes place at the start of the meeting. The role of professionals in the FGC is to share information and knowledge about the child or young person and about services, resources and support that may be available. Families must be given the fullest information possible in order that they can make decisions that take account of professional concerns. This part of the meeting is chaired by the coordinator.

Unless the family request a particular professional to be present, they must then have private decision-making and planning time. At this stage of the meeting, the family must agree:

- a plan that meets the needs of the child/young person
contingency plans needed if the original plan is unsuccessful

how to monitor and review the plan.

The co-ordinator is available during this time if the family need clarification or further information.

Expected outcome

Once the family have agreed on the plan and resources have been negotiated, it is passed back to the referrer, i.e. the professional who originally referred the case to the family group conferencing service.

Even if there is need for further agreement or negotiation of resources outside of the meeting, the plan should be agreed in principle by the referrer. The only reason for not agreeing the plan is if it puts the child at risk of significant harm. Timescales and responsibility for specific tasks are agreed at this point.

The outcome of the plan is dependent on the family and the professionals working together, and keeping each other informed about progress and problems.

References


Further reading

Developing shared knowledge: family group conferencing as a means of negotiating power in the child welfare system.

Schmid, Jeanette Elizabeth, and Pollack, Shoshana

Practice 21(3), September 2009: 175-188.

Discusses the potential of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) for negotiating the complexities of power in child welfare. Argues that FGC allows a holistic, culturally connected, explicit, clear presentation of the professionals' information that creates space for families' knowledge and inhibits the use of information in an oppressive way.

Family group conferencing and child protection mediation: essential tools for prioritizing family engagement in child welfare cases.
Olson, Kelly Browne
Family Court Review 47(1), 2009: 53-68.
Examines how FGC helps professionals to focus on family and community strengths, encourages family engagement, and provides targeted case plans for families and timely, permanent placements for children. It explores how courts and agencies use these interventions to empower families to contribute to resolutions in ways that are not possible in traditional litigation processes. Discusses how these processes help children and families by providing forums where families are allowed to make informed choices and take an active role in creating plans for their future.

**Family group conferences.**
Marsh, Peter
Highlight 248, May 2009: [1-4].
*Calls for the extended family to be more involved in making child welfare decisions. Looks at the use of Family Group Conferences, family-led decision-making meetings in which professionals provide information to the family members to help them make a plan that is focused on the child. Considers the law and policy; research; involving the family; child protection, crime and education; plans; and, cost effectiveness.*

'Everyone started shouting': making connections between the process of family group conferences and family therapy practice.
Holland, Sally and Rivett, Mark
*This article evaluates the process of family group conferences focusing on communications between family members during the meetings. The results of this qualitative study are discussed in relation to similarities and differences between family group conferences and family therapy sessions. It suggests that family group conference coordinators could look at how to manage and prepare family members for the potential expressions of emotions and disclosures that might arise, something which successfully works in family therapy.*

Family group conferences: where next? Policies and practices for the future.
Ashley, Cathy and Nixon, Paul (eds)
London: Family Rights Group, 2007
ISBN: 1871515459
*A series of essays from policy, research and practice perspectives, aimed at providing practitioners, managers and policy makers with ideas on how best to deliver and develop family group conference practices. Chapters cover family decision making in a changing context; working towards an effective agency mandate for family group conferences; the provision of family group conferences for ethnic minority groups; families experiences; children and young people's participation; implementation, research and practice; practice developments; education and youth justice family group conferences; family decision making to plan for safety in domestic violence; and taking family group conferences forward at a local level.*
Research review: family group decision-making: a promising practice in need of more programme theory and research.

Crampton, David
This article reviews the literature on family group conferencing. It looks at the child welfare outcomes of family group conferencing, and which families are offered family group conferencing. It proposes future directions for practice and research and hopes to move the discussion of family group conferencing from a promising practice to an evidence based practice.

Children’s views of family group conferences.
Bell, Margaret and Wilson, Kate
This article describes research into the experiences of children whose families participated in the family group conference pilot project. The results showed that they mostly welcomed being consulted and having the chance to work together with their families on issues without the attentions of social services.

Family group conference toolkit: a practical guide for setting up and running an FGC service.
Ashley, Cathy, Holton, Liz, Horan, Hilary and Wiffin, Jane
London: Family Rights Group, 2006
ISBN: 1871515475
Toolkit aimed at anyone interested in family group conferencing (FGC) to act as a practical guide to assist agencies set up, sustain and develop effective FGC services. Comprises the following chapters: chapter 1 describes what FGC is, summarises its history and outlines key research findings. Chapter 2 sets out the legal and policy context for FGCs in England and Wales. Chapter 3 sets out key issues which agencies intending to set up an FGC service should address. Chapter 4 describes the responsibilities and tasks of senior managers, co-ordinators, service administrators, and advocates. Chapter 5 considers how FGCs have been applied to address different issues and client groups and chapter 6 provides answers to frequently asked questions.

Mainstream or margin? The current use of family group conferences in child welfare practice in the UK.
Brown, Louise
Examines the extent to which family group conferences have developed and become enmeshed into social work practice since their introduction into the UK by the Family Rights Group a decade ago. Presents the findings of two surveys undertaken in 1999 and 2001 which reveal the areas of practice within which family group conferences are being used, the size and capacity of projects, and why some councils are hesitant to adopt the model.

Promoting the participation rights of children and young people in family group conferences.
Horan, Hilary and Dalrymple, Jane
Describes the experiences of a Barnardos Family Group Conference Project
in Wiltshire, in order to identify the benefits of advocacy support. Argues that all children and young people involved in conferences should have the right of access to an independent advocate to empower them and allow them to participate.

Social workers' attitudes towards family group conferences in Sweden and the UK.
Sundell, Knut, Vinnerljung, Bo and Ryburn, Murray
Findings of a study which looked at attitudes towards and actual referrals to family group conferences amongst 219 social workers from 18 local authorities in Sweden and the UK. Results reveal an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards family group conferences in both countries.

Lupton, Carol and Nixon, Paul
Bristol: Policy Press, 1999
ISBN: 1861341490
Examines the nature and meaning of ‘empowerment’ in child welfare and protection, using the family group conference approach to decision making as an example. The empowerment potential of family group conferences is critically assessed and the implications for professionals, their agencies, and the children and families is examined. Contents: The dilemmas of empowerment; Partnership & empowerment in children’s services; Lessons from New Zealand; Empowering professionals; International perspectives; Empowerment in process; Assessing outcomes in child welfare; Empowering outcomes?; Conclusion.

Family group conferences: putting principles into practice.
Wiffin, Jane
The author, a Family Rights Group Policy Advisor, discusses the principles and practice of the family group conference. Also outlines the five stages in convening a family group conference: referral; preparation for the conference; the information giving stage; private family time; agreeing, reviewing and monitoring the plan.

Organisations

Family Rights Group
Advises parents and other family members whose children are involved with or require social care services.