Family Group Conferencing

Aim and Purpose

What are Family Group Conferences?
A Family group conference is a decision making and planning process that focuses on the welfare of the child or young person. They are a mechanism that enables the formal systems to work in partnership with informal family and community systems, recognising the knowledge and expertise of both the family and informal systems and professional systems.

Family group conferences put families in charge of the decision making; the process strengthens families and respects and affirms each family’s unique cultural experience.

Family group conferences operate very differently from existing decision making mechanisms that tend to be dominated by professionals, tend to take away the responsibility for decision making from families and the community and can discourage the participation of the family. Family group conferences make sure that power and responsibility is more evenly shared between the family/community (informal) and professional/agency (formal) networks.

When to use Family Group Conferencing?

Family Group Conferencing has and is being used in different contexts; family support, education, rehabilitation of children who have been looked after, requests for accommodation, in addressing anti social behaviour, addressing domestic violence, children with disabilities, youth justice and child protection. Family Group Conferencing can be used in most situations and stages in the process of working with a family; as a preventative measure or early intervention, where there is conflict, difficulty or problematic behaviour and there is a need to produce plans for the child or young person or where there is an important decision to be made about their lives. Within the Youth Justice context, the victim(s) are also invited to attend the meeting (with a supporter if desired) and the action plan often contains an element of reparation.

Using Family Group conferencing within Action for Children

Family Group conferencing is a planning and decision making process that can be used effectively because the process:

- Enables families to plan and take control of their lives
- Puts the child at the heart of the discussion
- Gives the child a voice (in a variety of ways; by attending the meeting, use of an advocate, written letters etc)
- Supports the sharing of clear honest information and concerns with the family
- Makes the family aware of the ‘non negotiable’ and the ‘bottom line’
- Clarifies the roles & responsibilities of all involved
- Identifies resources and shortfalls in resources
- Is solution focussed
- Is a family strengths based model

Fitting in with the model and flow of work

Family group conferencing fits well with the model of work undertaken within Action for Children.
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it provides a method/process by which:
- The family are engaged meaningfully
- All agencies can share complex information and be honest and open with families regarding their concerns
- The family has to face up to the difficult challenges and their responsibilities

Evidence Base
Family Group Conferences were developed in New Zealand in 1987 and have been used in the UK since 1992, there is a considerable amount of evidence from research that FGC’s are an effective way of bringing families together to make a decision about the welfare of a child(ren).

Key messages from Research1:
- FGC’s are effective in reducing re-offending and achieve high levels of victim participation.
- FGC’s have significantly improved outcomes for children where there are concerns about attendance, bullying and behaviour problems with half of schools making positive comments about the effect of the FGC on the young person, family, home-school relationships and their own understanding of their behaviour.
- A greater proportion of children attend their FGC’s than attend child protection conferences and most value the experience and their ability to take part in it.
- Most adult family members are very positive about the process
- There is a higher rate of attendance by fathers and father figures at FGC’s than at statutory meetings
- FGC’s make more use of family and community resources than plans made at meetings which are dominated by agencies.
- Families produce plans that agencies agree to support in the great majority (over 90%) of situations.

FGC’s produced plans which were assessed by social workers as having prevented children going into

References; Messages from UK Practice and Research – Edited by K Morris & J Tunnard
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public care in 32% of cases; prevented court proceedings in 47%; and made no difference in 21% of cases

There are 5 steps within a Family Group Conference

Step 1: The Referral
- There is agreement between family members and staff from an organisation that a plan needs to be made for a child or young person, the family are informed that they will be a major part of the decision making process.
- An independent co-ordinator is appointed to work with the family to set up the meeting

Step 2: Preparation for the Meeting
- The co-ordinator in conjunction with the child, young person and immediate carers identifies the family network which can include close friends and professionals who will be invited to the Conference.
- The co-ordinator discusses with the child/young person how they may be enabled to participate in the conference and whether they would like a supporter or advocate in the meeting.
- The co-ordinator sends out invitations and agrees with the family a venue, date and time for the conference
- Family members and friends invited to the conference will be contacted by the Co-ordinator who will let them know what the meeting is about and discuss any worries or concerns they may have
- The co-ordinator liaises with the referrer and other relevant agencies to ensure family members have appropriate information about the issues, what is the ‘bottom line’, what is and is not acceptable in terms of a plan for the child/family and what services are available that could assist the family.

Step 3: The Meeting

A. Information giving: This part of the conference is chaired by the Co-ordinator, everyone is introduced and the co-ordinator explains the FGC process and ground rules. Staffs from agencies tell the family the reasons for the conference, and share information they have about the child or young person and family, about the services, resources and support that may be available and what action will be taken if the family cannot make a plan or the plan is not agreed.

B. Private Family Time: Staff and the co-ordinator are not present during this part. The family members have time to talk among themselves and come up with a plan that addresses the concerns raised by the staff.

C. Agreeing the plan: The co-ordinator and referrer rejoin the family to hear the family’s plan. Any services or support from the agencies needed to make the plan work are discussed. The plan should be agreed by the referrer unless it places the child or young person at risk of significant harm. Where professionals are concerned that the Plan does not satisfactorily address all the safety issues then the family can be asked to reconsider the plan. Everybody decides how they will check if the plan is working and what they will do if it is not working.
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**Step 4: Implementation**
- All parties then implement their parts of the plan within agreed timescales and communicate and address any concerns that arise.

**Step 5: Reviewing the Plan**
- A review Family Group Conference or other meeting is often arranged to review how the plan is working and make new plans if necessary.

**Principles underlying good practice**
Clear principles underpinning Family Group conferencing practice have been developed to let families know what they can expect and provide guidance for agencies to enable them to develop and deliver a high quality service:

1. Families have the right to clear, appropriate information about the family group conference process
2. Families have the right to be involved in the planning of the meeting
3. Family members have the right to be acknowledged as decision makers in the family group conference process
4. Families have the right to private family time and a supportive and safe environment to make plans
5. Families have the right to have safe plans agreed and resourced
6. Families have the right to be involved in the development of family group conferences

The recently launched FGC Toolkit, November 2006, describes how an FGC aimed at addressing anti-social behaviour is likely to have an agreed ‘behaviour contract’ worked out between the family and the referring agency, prior to the FGC and this must be included within the Family’s plan. This is the ‘bottom line’ that must be addressed in the FGC plan. The family decision making then allows the family to identify what they need to do themselves and what resources they need from agencies in order to address the anti-social behaviour.

A summary of the key features of FGC’s that address Anti social behaviour can be found in the new toolkit launched by the Family Rights Group. They include:

- Families still choose whether to engage with the FGC process, it is not compulsory
- Independent FGC co-ordinators set up the meetings. This is particularly important as most of the families have a long history, which is not always positive, with local agencies.
- The young people are offered an independent advocate. They help young people provide information and their views for their FGC and are a key factor in shifting family and agencies attitudes towards the young people. This is sensitive and skilled work.
- Flexible and creative ‘back to school’ packages are negotiated with school staff on the day and put into action immediately.
- Parenting classes are available that include issues the family itself has identified as needing work e.g. ‘we want to learn how not to shout at each other all the time’
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- Multi agency commitment to putting the plans into action, this is monitored closely by the family support workers
- Identifying the education personnel with case responsibility for an excluded child prior to the FGC is important so someone with access to resources can attend

Analysis

The benefits of Family Group Conferencing:

- Shifts responsibility to the family rather than agency(ies)
- Families gain a better understanding of the agencies’ concerns, available resources and options.
- Builds partnerships between the family, community and services
- Is a decision making process providing a forum for the family to come together
- Transparent accountability for all involved
- Engages agencies in clear planning process
- Children have increased contact with members of the extended family and feel listened to
- Results in clear decision making processes and an agreed plan

The Risks of Family Group Conferencing:

- Professionals will not engage or participate which could result in a negative experience for the family
- Insufficient time/resources not committed to allow for good preparation - hearts and minds work.
- Potential muddle/lack of clarity over the fit with other local procedures e.g. child protection, eviction.
- Funding is not sustainable

The Team

The basic requirement is to have:

- A lead person that can develop and manage the FGC service. This person will have experience in co-ordinating FGC’s, will be trained as a Family Group Conferencing Co-Ordinator and able deliver an effective FGC service. An important part of their role will be to develop the service, deliver hearts & minds training and prepare/train other practitioners who will be involved in FGC’s. Depending on the size of the service to be provided this person may also be a practitioner and co-ordinate FGC’s.

- Depending on the size of the service, it is usual to recruit a pool of sessional co-ordinators in addition to the lead FGC co-ordinator. This enables the recruitment of a team with mixed skills, different backgrounds, ethnic/cultural diversity, and geographical spread across the patch etc. The ability to provide service continuity and reliability at times of sick leave, annual leave etc is also an advantage.

- Administrative support is necessary for an FGC service. The number of hours required varies with each project and will depend on the number of conferences to be delivered.
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**Evaluation**
Projects could over time compare the outcomes of cases where FGC is used with those cases where FGC is not used.

**Critical Success Factors to consider:**

- **FGC will not embed unless there is agency mandate; FGC** needs to be embedded in the local strategy, structure and systems with a culture that demonstrates the values that underpin FGC. Staff at all levels who are going to support, finance, refer and participate in FGC need to understand and support the philosophy.

- **Allow sufficient time for preparatory hearts and minds work** To deliver an effective family group conferencing service it is vitally important to undertake preparatory ‘hearts and minds’ work to ensure that agencies and key professionals are ‘on board’ and understand the principles behind FGC. The model is a fundamental shift in traditional approaches to childcare planning and decision making and practitioners and managers in all agencies need to see a value to the changes demanded by using FGC’s. NCH experience elsewhere in the Country found that considerable time (12-18 months) was needed to move from the idea stage to the practice stage. During this preparatory time the Family Group conferencing lead needs to work with key professionals at all levels (practitioner - middle managers - senior managers) to ensure they understand and are committed to the principle of the family as the decision maker.

- **A multi agency steering group and support is vital.** This will help with the development of the work, contribute to the planning and implementation, ‘spreading the word’, engaging all parties in training etc.

- **Think through the local fit with systems/procedures/practice for planning for children?** There needs to be a clear link to other Local procedures, including Child Protection, Looked after Children, Homelessness protocols etc.

- **Budget adequately for staff time and funding for appropriate training and continued support for the co-ordinator(s).** Currently, most co-ordinators undergo a 3 day training course, the cost of this if undertaken with the Family Rights Group is approximately £450-£500. (2009-figures)

**Securing sustainable funding**
*This is significant in managing expectations and informing development plans.*

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Report Author Maureen Nuttall
Title and Directorate Strategic Manager Supporting Families
Email address maureen.nuttall@actionforchildren.org.uk
External dial tel. no. 07714 524848

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