

Using Family Group Conferencing to prepare children for placement, for moves in care, and continuing contact with their original families - by Sally Palmer

Introduction to Family Group Conferencing (FGC)

FGC originated in New Zealand to address the over-representation of Indigenous children in foster care and jail. It is now included in Ontario's Child, Youth and Family Services Act. It is designed, in part, to address the power imbalance between family groups and child welfare agencies.

The family group refers to the child and their 'extended family group' as defined by the family group themselves. It includes people important in the child's life such as extended original family members, supportive people (neighbour, teacher), and prospective or current caregivers, if these are not part of the extended original family.

Leadership in the FGC is shifted from child welfare professionals to the family group which includes extended family, supportive people, caregivers, and the child. Structure is provided by a coordinator who is trained in leading FGCs.

The coordinator is expected by all participants to be impartial and holds no child welfare authority over the plan that the FGC develops. The coordinator prepares all participants prior to the conference, chairs the first session of the meeting, and organizes a leader from the family group for the second session. This is the private time in which the family group develops a plan for the child's care and brings their plan back to the total group. During private time, the family group works toward a decision about: keeping the child at home; initial placement; a move within care; access to family members; return home; and possible supports to the original family or caregivers. They also seek offers of support from members of the family group to ensure that the plan will be successful. When the family group has formed a plan for the child, they meet again with the coordinator and others from the initial session to tell them about the decisions they have reached in the private family time to address the reasons the child welfare agency is involved. At this point, child welfare professionals may question the plan and suggest modifications.

The third/final session is when the final decision is made by all participants, either to accept the family group's plan or modify it to meet the agency's concerns. Following this, the coordinator records and distributes the plan developed during the conference to all participants.

The role of child welfare professionals is to provide information to the family group about why the agency is involved and to invite the family group to develop a plan to address the safety concerns. During the final session, the child welfare professionals confirm that they accept the plan developed in the meeting as addressing the initial concerns and agree to implement the plan.

Stages of supporting child's involvement in FGC

The coordinator prepares the child for FGC by explaining the reason and process for the conference: asking the child what they want their family to know and how they would like to share this during the conference. If the child would like assistance in putting their thoughts together, the coordinator and the child decide who is the best person to help them.

The coordinator prepares a support person from the child's own network to focus on the child during the conference if the child agrees to have a support person present. The support person helps the child to express their thoughts and feelings, ensures a respectful reception for the child's input; and can move a young child to another room when needed. The coordinator provides a flexible location for the conference, as well as childcare when needed, so the child can move in or out as needed.

The coordinator role is complete after putting the Plan into final form and distributing it to all participants who were present at the conference. The child welfare worker is responsible for implementing the plan which includes regularly reviewing it with the family group to ensure it is current, relevant, and achievable. The group can reconvene for a follow-up FGC when the plan needs revisions.

Potential benefits of FGC to children and families....

...In Understanding Their Story

During the process of planning for a child it's important to bring together those involved in the child's life to help piece together the child's story.

The experience of having all these people involved in the conference demonstrates to the child that all participants are concerned about them and want to support them.

It is valuable for the child to be present when decisions are being made by those who care about them, and to have the opportunity to participate actively in these decisions, and ask questions.

While a child may not be able to return to their family of origin, the process can help fill in understanding of who was part of their story, and at an FGC the family can be encouraged to provide pieces of the story that may have been missing.