

Family Group Conferences

Purpose, Values and Processes

Context

Following the creation of the Family Group Conference (FGC) in the New Zealand Children, Young Persons and their Families Act in 1989, interest developed around the world about this innovative approach to child welfare, child protection and youth justice. Most developments involved exploratory projects to test the decision-making methodology in local settings. Success in using FGC with statutory work with children led to an interest in applying the approach in voluntary cases and across service boundaries, such as adult mental health; adult domestic violence; and the care and protection of the aged.

A European Network incorporating the countries of the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Nordic countries and The Netherlands was formed in 2003. Other continental European countries joined the Network as projects spread. Concurrent developments in North America resulted in the need there for a common definition of the process that would aid understanding of the FGC and enable accurate classification of family engagement practices as FGC for the purposes of funding application; research and evaluation; and training and education. The American Humane Association led the work on achieving a common vision, assisted by its international and national collaborators and partners.

At the 2011 European Network meeting in Utrecht, hosted by Eigen-Kracht Centrale of the Netherlands, a call was made for a unifying common statement about the FGC in the European context. It was agreed that initially, a statement would be modelled on the American Humane statement of the FGC in Child Welfare, and distributed through the Network for discussion before the 2012 Network meeting.ⁱ

FGC Purpose

Persons living in households are nested in a broader family group - those to whom they are connected through kinship and other relationships. Agency decision-making practices that are planned and dominated by professionals and narrowly focussed on households can deprive persons of the support of their family group, and also deprive agencies of key partners in providing services.

FGC recognizes the importance of involving family groups in decision-making about their members in need of care or protection or whose well being is threatened. In the FGC process, a trained coordinator who is independent of the case brings together the family group and personnel from the referring agency to create and carry out a plan to safeguard the person or persons concerned. FGC processes position the family group to lead decision-making and agencies agree to support FGC plans that adequately address agency concerns. Referring agencies also provide information about, and organize services from, governmental and non-governmental providers to assist family groups formulate and implement plans. FGC processes are not conflict resolution approaches; therapeutic interventions; or forums for ratifying professionally crafted decisions. Rather, FGC processes actively seek the collaboration and leadership of family groups in crafting and implementing plans that support the care, protection and well being of the person or persons referred.

FGC Values

The values associated with FGC include

- Persons have a right to maintain their kinship and cultural connections throughout their lives;
- Individuals belong to wider family and community systems that both nurture them and carry responsibility for them;
- The family group, rather than an agency, is the context for care, protection and well being resolutions;
- Family groups know their own histories and they use this information, along with that provided by professionals, to construct thorough plans;
- Active family group participation and leadership is essential for good outcomes for members of the family group, but power imbalances between family groups and agency personnel must first be addressed;
- Family groups are entitled to the respect of the state, and the state needs to make an extra effort to convey respect to those who are poor, socially excluded, marginalized or lacking power or access to resources and services;
- The state has a responsibility to recognize, support and build the family group's capacity to protect and care for its members; and
- The state has a responsibility to defend family groups from unnecessary intrusion and to promote their growth and strength.

FGC Processes

FGC processes are carefully crafted and managed to ensure fidelity to FGC values and to ensure that these values drive practice. The following five components are critical to supporting exemplary practice in FGC.ⁱⁱ

An independent (i.e. non-case carrying) coordinator is responsible for convening the family group meeting with agency personnel. When a critical decision about a family member or members is required, dialogue occurs between the family group and personnel of the agency making the referral. Accepting an independent coordinator charged with creating an environment in which transparent, honest and respectful dialogue occurs, signifies an agency's commitment to empowering and non-oppressive practice.

Agency personnel recognize the family group as their key decision making partner, and make time and resources available to convene this group. Providing the time and resources for coordinators to seek out family group members and prepare them (along with agency personnel) for their role in the process signifies an agency's acceptance of the importance of family groups in formulating effective plans.

Family groups have an opportunity to meet on their own to work through the information they have been given and formulate their responses and plans. Providing family groups with private time enables them to apply their knowledge and expertise in a familiar setting and to do so in ways that are consistent with their ethnic and cultural decision-making practices. Acknowledging the importance of this time and taking active steps to encourage family groups to plan in this way, signifies an agency's acceptance of its own limitations as well as its commitment to ensuring that the best possible decisions and plans are made.

When agency concerns are adequately addressed, preference is given to a family group's plan over any other possible plan. In accepting the family group's lead, the referring agency signifies its confidence in, and commitment to, partnering with and supporting

family groups to provide for the care, protection and well being of their members, and to building the family group's capacity to do so.

Referring agencies support family groups by providing the services and resources necessary to implement a plan agreed between the family group and the agency. In assisting family groups to implement plans, agencies uphold the family groups' responsibility for their members and contribute by aligning agency and community resources to support family groups' efforts.

ⁱ Mike Doolan has arranged this initial adaptation, with permission of the American Humane Association.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Doolan, M. (2007). Duty Calls: The response of Law, Policy and Practice to Participation Rights in Child Welfare Systems. *Protecting Children*, 22(1), 10-19.