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# An Introduction to Family Group Conference

# Introduction

## The Background to Family Group Conferences

The concept of Family Group Conference originates from New Zealand and is grounded in the Maori culture. During the 1980's the Maori people began to express their concerns regarding the practices of the Department of Welfare (Social Services).

### *They highlighted in particular: -*

1. Disproportionately high numbers of Maori children in care.
2. Heavy over representation of Maori families on Social Worker caseloads.
3. A need to challenge the placement of Maori children with white European families.
4. Virtually no Maori Social Workers.
5. Institutionalised racism.

The Department of Social Welfare had asked the Maori Advisory Unit to present a report on Social Services. Their findings confirmed that the service was mono-cultural and that institutional racism resulted from this, Wilcox et al, 1991<sup>(11)</sup>. The report made thirteen recommendations all of which were accepted by the government. The State, faced with the challenge, had to broaden the definition of the family in line with Maori traditions and culture and in doing so developed a unique way of working with families, which was unprecedented. A process then evolved that sought to hand power back to the families and work in a more culturally sensitive way. It facilitated family decision-making and became known as 'Family Group Conference'.

So successful was this concept, which worked on the principles of parental responsibility and partnership that it was written into New Zealand law in 1989. Social workers found that by using this model it significantly reduced the number of children being received into care, cut down on legal proceedings and children being placed on 'Orders' and it provided extra protection for children deemed to be at risk.

Other countries such as Australia, Canada, Sweden, South Africa, France, USA, Holland and England quickly adopted the process. Each country remained true to the original model making only slight adaptations to suit it's own particular cultural needs, legislation and resources.

### UK Development

The 1989 Children Act (England & Wales) like the New Zealand Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989 has some similar principles which underpin and inform the development of how Social Workers interact and work with children and families. The UK programme like its counterpart focused on these principles:

- ◆ Safeguarding children and promoting their welfare;
- ◆ Parental responsibility;
- ◆ Partnership;
- ◆ Family support;
- ◆ Contact between the child and the family;
- ◆ Reuniting children with their families;
- ◆ Respect for race, culture, language and religion.

The Act sought to minimise, where possible, the use of legal

proceedings in family life and attempt to, “strike a balance between the rights of children to express their views on decisions made about their lives, the rights of parents to exercise their responsibilities towards the child and the duty of the state to intervene where the child’s welfare requires it”, The Children Act 1989<sup>(2)</sup>.

The challenge for Social Services was how to achieve a safe balance of partnership and parental responsibility whilst protecting the child from possible or further risk. Services were developed to support the child within the home environment, Family Support Workers, HomeStart, Family Centres, etc. In most cases the family are neither consulted or had requested these services with the result that there is little change in the family circumstances and in some instances a greater dependency is created.

Family Group Conference was debated in the early 1990’s as an alternative and progressive way to work with families. The successful outcomes in other countries demonstrated that this radical approach had potential. Initially eight local authorities and voluntary groups piloted the scheme with Hampshire, Essex and Wiltshire taking the lead. Careful study of the model was made and then adapted to fit with the culture and legislation. In 1997/98 three hundred Family Group Conferences took place throughout England, Scotland and Wales. Over 60% of Local Authorities in the UK now use the process as part of their strategic approach when working with families.

## The Model

A Family Group Conference is a structured decision making meeting made up of 'family' members. 'Family' is determined broadly, to include the child/ren, parents, extended family and even significant friends and neighbours to the family who may not actually be blood related. This group of people are given 'private' time to reach a plan to facilitate the safe care and protection of a child or children in need. The professional is involved in information giving at the beginning of the process and in the assessment of the plan following a decision. All professionals are excluded from the private time, which is attended by family members only.

Family Group Conferences are used to make plans for children in a number of different contexts: Child Welfare, Youth Offending, Education Welfare, Domestic Violence, Children as Young Carers, Foster Breakdown, Adoption etc. There would appear to be no particular area of work where this process is unsuitable. Some areas such as; Child Protection and Youth Offending have used the process extensively, whilst others such as; Education Welfare, Adoption and Adult services are still at the exploration stage.

## Principles

The principles that underpin the Family Group Conference process are: -

- ◆ The child's interests are paramount.
- ◆ The child should have the resources made available for his/her voice to be heard.
- ◆ The child's views, feelings and solutions are as valid as the

adults participating in the process.

- ◆ Children are generally best looked after within their families. Services should seek to promote this wherever possible.
- ◆ Working in partnership with families is beneficial for children.
- ◆ Families have the ability to make rational and sound decisions about their future and the future of the children involved.
- ◆ Given the right environment and the correct information, families instinctively know what is best for the child/ren.

The Children Act 1989 strongly reflects these principles and provides the impetus for using Family Group Conferences in practice.

### **Key Elements**

*There are five defining features of the Family Group Conference process:*

- 1 The Family Group Conference is the primary decision making forum for the child.
- 2 The Family Group Conference is made up of as wide a network of family members as possible (including grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, parents, child, family friends who may know the child but are not blood relations).
- 3 An independent Co-ordinator facilitates the involvement of the child, family network and professionals in the Family Group Conference process.
- 4 The family should always have private time at the Family Group Conference to produce their plans for the child or young person.
- 5 The Family Group Conference plan should be agreed and resourced unless it places the child at risk of significant harm.

## **The Process**

There are five stages to a Family Group Conference; each stage of the process has equal importance. No stage should be ignored or treated with less validity than another.

### **Stage One - Referral**

The professional or the child and family can request a conference. When speaking to the family about the process it is important that the principles and elements are conveyed fully.

The referrer is vital to the success of the Family Group Conference process and they must think about their role in the Family Group Conference and be willing to invest positive time and energy into the process.

*A referral meeting may be beneficial to clarify:-*

- ◆ Reasons for referral.
- ◆ Expectations/anxieties.
- ◆ Roles and responsibilities.
- ◆ If the referral agency is willing to accept a Family Group Conference plan, (unless it places the child at risk of harm).
- ◆ How the Co-ordinator and referrer will work together, communicate and resolve difficulties that may arise during the Family Group Conference.
- ◆ Where the Family Group Conference will occur in relation to other processes (e.g., Child Protection Conferences, legal proceedings, school suspension).
- ◆ Whether there are any issues of danger for the Co-ordinator or family members.

### **Stage Two - First Contact**

A decision will be taken as to how the first contact with the family will take place.

When contact is made the Co-ordinator in consultation with the

child and their immediate carer identify the family members who they would wish to attend the meeting.

Contact is then made with all the identified members of the conference and a time, date and venue convenient to the family is agreed.

The Co-ordinator then makes contact with the referrer.

*The family at this stage need to understand the: -*

- ◆ Reasons for the Family Group Conference, including who requested it;
- ◆ Importance and value of their involvement and contribution;
- ◆ That the process (within the five defining features) will run in a way that suits them;
- ◆ What the key stages of the Family Group Conference will be.

### **Stage Three - Information Sharing**

The Co-ordinator welcomes the family members ensuring that the physical requirements have been dealt with adequately before commencement.

The Co-ordinator has the right to exclude individuals if absolutely necessary. The grounds for doing so should be explicitly stated (proven likelihood of violence or too drunk to contribute, etc).

*Once people are ready it is then time to: -*

- ◆ introduce individual group members, Co-ordinator and professional
- ◆ clarify the process
- ◆ discuss the ground rules, i.e. confidentiality, respect for self and others' views, etc
- ◆ Reinforce that this is the family's meeting and that the process is flexible so that it suits the family.

Having welcomed the family and made the introductions it is important to share information next. *This is done by: -*

- ◆ **The professional** - information is shared in a clear, jargon-

free manner. All relevant information must be provided to the family, without this they cannot make an informed decision.

*The professional will need to voice his/her:*

- Concerns;
- Family Strengths
- What the family need to think about
- Resources available to the family
- What cannot be agreed (e.g., a child cannot live with someone who may place them at risk).

### **Stage Four - Private Family Time**

At this stage the Co-ordinator and the professionals withdraw leaving the family to discuss and plan in private. *There are three basic tasks, which the family need to complete:-*

- ◆ To agree a plan that meets the needs of the child/young person.
- ◆ To agree a contingency plan.
- ◆ To agree how to monitor and review the plan.

The Co-ordinator should be available during this time if the family need any clarification or additional information.

*The family should be aware that:-*

- ◆ they have as long as they need;
- ◆ they can come out at any time;
- ◆ food and drink can be provided by the Co-ordinator;
- ◆ once they agree a plan the Co-ordinator can help them write it up.

### **Stage Five - Agreeing and Recording the Family Decision**

This final stage is vitally important both to the family and to the agency. What it does is define the outcome of the Family Group Conference for the child.

The Co-ordinator invites the family to relay their plan helping to clarify and understand each point. *S/he will then:* -

- ◆ Write each point on a flip chart in front of the family using their own terminology, language and phrases.
- ◆ Check that all members agree to the plan or that there is a majority consensus.
- ◆ Identify parts of the plan that will need agency agreement and resources.
- ◆ Establish who will monitor the plan to make sure it is working.
- ◆ Record the plans for review, and the contingency plan.
- ◆ Having completed this task the Co-ordinator will then invite the professional to comment on the plan and if it is acceptable to the agency.

**NB** The Family Group Conference model, as developed in the UK, states that the family's plan should be agreed providing it does not place a child at risk of significant harm.

### **Monitoring and Review**

The Family Group Conference model states that responsibility for monitoring the plan lies with the family group, the referrer will continue to work with the family and will monitor the family plan also but the lead must remain with the family. This is important because in order for the family to feel a sense of ownership they must also feel that they have some responsibility. There will, of course, be professional monitoring which will be part of the plan. The level of this monitoring will depend upon the nature of the original referral. There will be differences between the level of monitoring in a child protection case and in a request for family support services. Making decisions about this will be part of

casework planning and supervision.

Within the Family Group Conference there is an automatic review procedure usually within a three-month period. It should be possible for all those involved (family members and professionals) to call a review if the plan is not working, requires updating, or if anyone has new concerns to highlight. This should be made clear at the outset. It is particularly important to state when it is not acceptable to hold another family conference.

# PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE GUIDELINES

The following Principles and Practice Guidance are intended to let families know what they can expect from a Family Group Conference. They are also an important guide for agencies offering or working with Family Group Conferences, to enable them to check that they are providing families with a good standard of service. The **Principles** set out what families should expect. The **Practice Guidance** describes how the principles will be met.

## **Principle 1**

**Families have the right to clear, appropriate information about the Family Group Conference process**

### **Practice**

- a) Families must be given clear information about what a Family Group Conference is and why they have been offered a Family Group Conference
- b) Families must be informed about timescales and possible delays
- c) Information must be available in a way that meets the needs of the family
- d) All family members invited must be told who they can contact if they have any questions about the process and about how they can make a complaint

## **Principle 2**

**Families have the right to be involved in the planning of the meeting**

### **Practice**

- a) Where possible, coordinators should reflect the local community and families will be offered a coordinator who speaks their language and who has an understanding of the way religious beliefs, cultural traditions and other lifestyle issues influence how the family operates
- b) A coordinator who is independent will work with the family to arrange the Family Group Conference. 'Independent' means that they have not and will not be involved in making any decisions about the child
- c) The meeting will take place at a time, date and place agreed with the family
- d) Adults and young people will need to consent to information held by agencies being shared at the meeting
- e) The coordinator will work with the family and young person to decide who needs to be at the meeting
- f) The family will decide what language will be used at the Family Group Conference, with interpreters provided for the others present as needed
- g) The coordinator may decide to exclude individual family members from the meeting if there are concerns that their presence would be a risk to anyone's safety

### **Principle 3**

**Family members have the right to be acknowledged as decision-makers in the Family Group Conference process**  
**Practice**

- a) The agency that referred the family for a Family Group Conference must be clear about what decisions, if any, they may be unable to support and must give reasons for this

b) The child or young person and any other family member who requires it will be offered someone to help them make their contribution throughout the process. This person may be called an advocate or supporter, and may be someone within the family network or someone outside the family. They will not be someone who is able to make decisions about the family

c) The family must be given relevant, factual and jargon free information about the agencies' concerns and the resources available

d) Parents must be given written information about the agencies' concerns at least 24 hours before the conference

e) Reasonable travel costs and other expenses will be paid for family members who need it

f) Family members will have the opportunity to share their concerns and have their questions answered before and at the meeting

g) Family members unable to attend for any reason will be supported in contributing in other ways

#### **Principle 4**

#### **Families have the right to private family time and a supportive and safe environment to make plans Practice**

a) Families must be given time to meet on their own without the coordinator or staff from agencies being present

b) The coordinator must ensure that there is a suitable area and time allocated, with appropriate refreshments, for the family to make decisions

c) Childcare provision should be available if required

d) The coordinator will work with everyone to enable them to make a plan that meets the needs of the child

## **Principle 5**

**Families have the right to have safe plans agreed and resourced**

### **Practice**

a) The referring agency must agree to support the family's plans unless it places a child at risk of harm and must provide reasonable resources to make it happen

b) All family members and agencies who attend the conference will receive a copy of the plan within a stated time. The plan will include details of what resources the family needs and how the proposals in the plan will be carried out and monitored

c) The family, referring agency and coordinator will agree how the plan will be reviewed and whether a follow-up review should take place, and who will be responsible for making this happen

d) Every effort should be made to respond to the family's plan at the meeting. Families will be informed who will give them a written response, and when and how, if the plan or some of the resources cannot be agreed at the conference

e) Agencies whose support is required to carry out a plan should respond within ten days to say whether they can provide the support requested and, if necessary, how long this will take to provide

## **Principle 6**

### **Families have the right to be involved in the development of Family Group Conferences**

#### **Practice**

- a) All families will be offered the opportunity to give their opinion of the service they have received
  
- b) Where possible, families will be kept informed about changes made as a result of their comments
  
- c) Families should have the opportunity to have contact with other families who have used the service
  
- d) Families who have attended a Family Group Conference should have the opportunity to be involved in developing policies and practice about Family Group Conferences

Adapted from the; FGC, Principles and Guidelines, Family Rights Group 2003

## **Referral Criteria**

**Below are just some guidelines for consideration when making referrals**

1. A child or young person under the age of 18 years, or 19 years if they have a disability, who needs a plan or decision to be made about his/her welfare, care or protection, i.e. any vulnerable child at level 2 or above of the ACPC/Family Support Framework
  
2. Simpler solutions such as single worker/agency/school support have failed to resolve the problems
  
3. The young person (if over 7 years old) and/or their immediate carers acknowledge there is a problem and are interested in considering a FGC to help resolve it.

4. There is at least one, and preferably several, family members or friends outside the immediate household who could be approached to come to the FGC

5. There is an active case worker who can:

i. Provide good information for the family about the young person's needs and difficulties; what will need to be included in the plan to meet agency requirements; what will happen if these concerns are not addressed; what resources are available to the family to help them resolve the difficulties.

ii. Attend the FGC to provide this information.

iii. The agency will support the family and the family plan post conference.

6. The referrer's manager is in agreement with the referral and will

Support the family's plan providing it does not place the child at risk.

**A Family Group Conference should NOT be considered where:**

- There is no family or friends
- There is multi-generational abuse
- There is a risk to people
- There is serious conflict within the family

\*Where there has been **domestic violence** the Co-ordinator will decide, in conjunction with the victim and relevant professionals, whether a FGC is appropriate and who should be invited.

**What kinds of situations are suitable for a Family Group Conference?**

Family Group Conferences could be considered in the following situations;

**Where the child/young people is known to Social Services**

- when plans are being made for “children in need”
- when children are referred to the Family Support Team
- when there is a request for accommodation
- when children in public care have their reviews and there are issues about family contact; permanent placement or return home
- when Care Plans are being made for children who are on the Child Protection Register
- when young people are leaving care at 16+

**Where the child/young person has problems with their education:**

- with poor school attendance where the Education Welfare Service is becoming involved
- for behaviour problems and/or learning difficulties such as when an Individual Education Plan is being prepared
- for exclusions/re-integration such as when a Pastoral Support Programme is produced
- whenever a child is about to be excluded - fixed term/permanent
- when the re-integration process is being planned

**When the young person is at risk of criminal activity/or anti-social behaviour:**

- where a young person has been referred to the Youth Inclusion and Support Panel (YISP) to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour
- where a referral has been made to the Family Intervention Team
- where a young person is being considered by the Positive Action Coordination Unit to prevent an ASBO (Anti-social Behaviour Order)

- where the Youth Offending Team thinks a FGC would be useful - either a restorative justice one involving the victim, with a welfare emphasis

**For children/young people with disabilities or mental illness:**

- when a plan or decision is needed because of problems arising from learning disability
- serious illness or physical disability
- sensory impairment
- Developmental delay/Portage scheme involved

**In special circumstances and where there are difficulties which are affecting the young person's welfare/progress because of:**

- Bereavement/family breakdown
- English as an additional language
- Being young parents
- Being young carers
- In households where the carer(s) is/are under stress which may affect the young person's health and development.

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