

Family Group Conference



Principles and
practice guide booklet



This booklet has been designed as guidance for children, young people, families, kinship network and professionals who will be involved in the family group conference process.

Family group conference is a process designed to facilitate family communication and decision making.

Every family is unique with its own culture, personalities, personal dynamics and history. All families come up against problems from time to time. Some difficult situations involving children can be sorted out with the help from relatives and friends with support from appropriate services.

The decision makers at a family group conference are the family members/kinship network and not the professionals. Together they plan and decide how to resolve the situation. This empowers families to make the best plan possible for their children.

Mission Statement

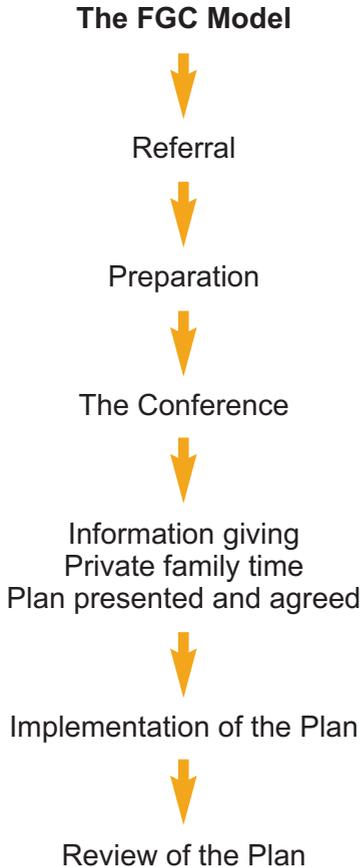
Lancashire Family Group Conference (FGC) service aims to ensure children and families are empowered to be central in making agreeable safe plans and decision for their future.

FGC co ordinators aim to offer and facilitate a transparent process by providing a neutral platform for negotiation for service users. This allows families to make informed and responsible decisions regarding their children's future care. By develop solutions to their current problems within their family/kinship network.

The FGC Co-ordinators are trained and accredited by Family Rights Group and are members of the National Family Group Conferencing Network.

The principles and practice of our intervention sits within the legal framework and the policy guidance of Lancashire County Council and Family Group Conferencing.

Family Group Conference Model - How it Works



The key steps involved in holding an FGC are as follows:

STEP 1 THE REFERRAL

- There are concerns about a child's welfare that meet the local authority's criteria for referral to the FGC.
- A person with Parental Responsibility (PR) agrees to the referral and to the sharing of information and signs consent form.
- An independent co ordinator is then allocated to the family.
- A preliminary information meeting is held between referring social worker and co ordinator.

STEP 2 PREPARATION

- The co ordinator organises the meeting in conjunction with the child/young person and those with PR or immediate carers, identifying who is in the family network for the child. This can include close friends.

- 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 supporter/ advocate will then meet with the child/young person in preparation for the meeting.

- The co ordinator meets with members of the family network, discusses worries or concerns, including how the meeting will be conducted, and encourages them to attend.

- The co ordinator liaises with the referrer and other relevant agencies to ensure family members have appropriate information about:

- > the child welfare and/or protection issues which need to be considered at the FGC. This includes identifying any bottom line about what is/or not acceptable in terms of a plan for the child from the referrer's perspective;
- > services that could assist the child or family.

- The co ordinator negotiates the date, time and venue for the conference, sends out invitations and makes the necessary practical arrangements.

STEP 3 THE CONFERENCE

• Information Giving

This part of the meeting is chaired by the co ordinator. They will make sure that everyone is introduced, that everyone present understands the purpose and process of the FGC and agrees how the meeting will be conducted. Including, if considered helpful by those present, explicit ground rules.

- The referrer gives information to the family about:
 - > the reason for the conference;
 - > information they hold that will assist the family to make the plan;
 - > information about resources and support they are able to provide;

- > any child welfare concerns that will affect what can be agreed in the plan (eg that the child must not have contact with a particular person); and
- > what action will be taken if the family can not make a plan or the plan is not agreed.

The child/young person and the family members may also provide information, ask for clarification or ask questions.

- Private Family Time - The referrer and the co ordinator are not present during this part of the conference. The family members have time to talk together to come up with a plan that addresses the concerns raised, identifying resources /support to make it work.
- Plan and Agreement - When the family has made their plan the referrer and the co ordinator rejoins the family to discuss and agree the plan, addressing any unrealistic expectations and resource issues at this time. Additional time can be given to the family to realign the plan.

- It is important to ensure that any child present has a clear understanding of what is decided and that their views are understood.
- Timescales, arrangements for monitoring the plan and a review date will be agreed at this point.

STEP 4 IMPLEMENTATION

- It is essential that all parties implement their parts of the plan within agreed timescales and communicate and address any concerns that arise.

STEP 5 REVIEW OF THE PLAN

- At the review FGC we will reflect the implementation and effectiveness of the plan and make any adjustments or change the plan if necessary.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE GUIDANCE

The following Principles and Practice Guidance are intended to let families and professionals know what they can expect from a family group conference.

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, co ordinators should reflect the local community and families will be offered a co ordinator 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 co ordinator 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 co ordinator 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 co ordinator 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 social worker 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 concerns and resources available.
- d) Parents must be given written information about the 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 co ordinator or professionals being present.
- b) The co ordinator 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 co ordinator 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 social worker must agree to support the family's plan unless it places a child at risk of harm and must provide reasonable resources to make it happen.
- b) All family members and professionals 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 social worker and co ordinator will agree how the plan will be reviewed. A follow up review will be offered, confirming a date and time.
- 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) The professionals 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.



Heres what the research says

- There is a higher rate of attendance by fathers and father figures at FGCs than at statutory meetings, such as child protection conferences. (Ryan, 2000; Marsh and Crow, 1997; Holland et al, 2003).
- FGCs successfully engage the wider family in making plans for children. (Merkel-Holguin et al, 2005).
- Families make safe plans for children (Marsh and Crow, 1997) with a number of studies reporting reductions in re abuse rates for children who have attended an FGC, compared with those who have not. (Merkel-Holguin et al, 2005; Judge et al, 2000; Lupton and Stevens, 1997; Marsh and Crow, 1998).

- FGCs reunite children with their families more securely. (Marsh and Crow, 1997).
- FGCs increase the likelihood of placement with the extended family when a child cannot remain with birth parents. (Merkel-Holguin et al, 2003).
- FGCs reduce the time children spend awaiting permanency decisions. (Merkel-Holguin et al, 2005).
- FGCs produced plans which were assessed by social workers as having prevented children going into public care in 32% of cases and prevented Court proceedings in 47% and made no difference in 21% of cases. (Smith and Hennessey, 1999).
- Children feel that FGC's have increased contact with family members (Holland et al, 2003).
- FGC's are effective in reducing re-offending and achieve high levels of victim participation (Essex County Council and Police, 2002).
- FGC's have significantly improved outcomes for children where there are concerns about attendance, bullying and behaviour problems (Hayden, 2004; Crow, 2001) with half of schools (in the study) making positive comments about the effect of the FGC on the young person, the family, home-school relationships and their own understanding of their behaviour (Crow, 2001).
- FGC's help create a general move to increased 'normality' in children's behaviour and reduce the sense of 'burden' for both parents (statistically significant) and teachers, as measured by Goodman's strengths and difficulties questionnaire (Hayden, 2004).

Legal Framework

Human Rights Act 1998

Children Act 1989

Every Child Matters Children Act 2004

Data Protection Act 1998

Children and Young Person Act 2008

Adoption and Children Act 2002

Policy Context

Public Law Outline (Para 12 and 13 April 2010)

Work with the family to consider wider family placements where children cannot remain safely at home with parents before the issue of care proceedings.

Care Matters White Paper (2007)

The government's commitment to expand capacity to deliver Family Group Conference (Chapter 4).

Family and Friends Care Statutory Guidance DCSF (draft 2010)

Clear statement stating Local Authorities should ensure that they have arrangements in place to offer family group conferencing as a means to engage families at an early stage.

Working Together to Safeguard Children (April 2010)

References to working with wider family members and the use of family group conferencing in safeguarding procedures as set out in the new version.



The aim of a
Family Group Conference is to
give families and their children/
young people a central role in
decision making.

**For more information
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