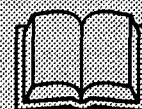# book reviews

Family group conferences

Edited by Joe Hudson, Alison Morris, Gabrielle Maxwell & Burt Galaway   Federation Press, Leichardt, 1996

Over the past five years, family preservation and reunification programs have been in vogue. This book explores the recent development of family group conferences which aim to centrally involve families in decision-making processes within the juvenile justice and child protection systems.

Research is presented in the text from a number of diverse settings, including New Zealand, Australia, England, Canada and the United States. All the chapters emphasise the key philosophical assumptions that underlie family group conferences: respecting the integrity of the family unit, including the extended family, by focussing on strengthening families and community supports; sharing power and creating opportunities for parents to feel responsible for their children and themselves; and showing sensitivity and respect for families' cultures.

The potential positives of this process are obvious. Most of us who have worked in the child protection system are familiar with long-term wards of state who have spent their whole childhood fantasising about the prospect of reuniting with their real mother and father. To be sure, many of these mums and dads were unable to look after themselves, let alone their children. But there is considerable research evidence to demonstrate that too often little attempt was made to place children with available grandparents, extended family, or older siblings.

Moreover, so often these children experienced considerable 'systems abuse' whilst in care. In addition, the experiences of the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children stand as an overriding reminder of the need to place indigenous children within their own culture.

The editors acknowledge that evidence on the outcomes of family group conferences remains sketchy. However, research from New Zealand and Australia suggests that families have actively participated in conferences, that out-of-home placements have decreased, and that kinship placements have increased.

All this is for the good. However, overall this book is written in an ideological vacuum, and lacks any serious critical analysis. As the chapter by Hassall acknowledges, family group conferences were developed in New Zealand as a central part of the strategy to transfer responsibility for social services from the state to individuals and families.

Unfortunately, none of the contributors to this book question why it would not be more effective to provide adequate universalistic supports and services to all families before they fall into the protective and corrective systems.

My second concern is that fewer out-of-home placements does not necessarily coincide with greater safety for children. I can think of many child protection cases where grandparents and extended family colluded with abusive parents. Placing children with such carers does not necessarily ensure that the parents in any way address their parenting deficits, whether violence, substance abuse, or psychiatric disability (Cashmore & Castell-McGreggor 1996: 133-135; Gelles 1996: 126-129 & 148-151).

A further question relates to the extent to which family group conferences go beyond the procedures of normal, well-organised case planning procedures. At least in Victoria, child protection workers are obliged to involve all interested extended family members in decision-making processes. I can personally think of many cases where aunts and uncles and older siblings took on temporary care of young children whilst the parents were seeking help for various illnesses or incapacities.

Having said all this, it is possible that family group conferences are more likely to contribute to positive family-based outcomes, particularly for indigenous and minority groups, than traditional case planning meetings. However, I am yet to be convinced that such conferences have any more than a marginal role to play in meeting the needs of most children in the protection and care system.

REFERENCES

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Gelles, Richard 1996, *The Book of David: How preserving families can cost children's lives*, Basic Books, New York.

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