

# Family Group Conferencing in child protection

## An evaluation

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*Family Group Conferencing (FGC) in child protection is a method of involving families in planning. This paper reports on a study undertaken in the Victorian child protection system, which examined (1) the extent to which the Victorian FGC program actually involves families in the planning process, (2) the extent to which FGC develops case plans which are appropriate, and (3) the extent to which FGC develops case plans which are sustained over time. Researchers observed 28 conferences and phone interviews were conducted with more than 100 participants including family members, staff members and representatives of non-government agencies providing placement and support services. The results suggest that FGC is more successful in involving family members in case planning than more traditional planning processes. Family members believe that FGC leads to more appropriate case plans which are more likely to be sustained. Child protection workers on the other hand believe that more appropriate case plans are developed in traditional planning meetings, rather than FGCs, and that case plans developed in traditional meetings are more likely to be sustained over time. Possible explanations for these findings are discussed, in particular that FGCs may be used for more difficult cases.*

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This paper reports on an evaluation of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) in child protection services conducted during 1997 and 1998 in Victoria, Australia. Family Group Conferencing was initially developed in child protection and juvenile justice in New Zealand in order to involve families more in planning processes. Since its inception in the late 1980s, programs have been introduced in many countries including Australia, Britain, Canada, the United States and Europe.

The process of FGC has certain key components (Hudson et al 1996; Marsh & Crow 1998). First, child protection staff refer a particular family for an FGC following discussion with the primary clients and other family members. An FGC convenor then contacts and talks to family members (including friends and representatives of cultural groups) who have an interest in the situation of the primary client (the child or young person who is the subject of concern by child protection authorities). The convenor (or perhaps the child protection worker) also talks to welfare professionals who have been or are likely to be involved with the family.

Each of these people is invited to attend an FGC meeting. The meeting is then divided into three stages. In the first stage the child protection worker presents to the meeting the 'bottom line' or the areas which are not negotiable – for example, that a child must live separately from his/her parents for a period of time. Professionals at the meeting are then asked to give information about their programs and the resources they can

offer to the family. The family members are invited to ask questions about the resources or any other issues.

The second stage is the family private time. The family members are asked to consider specific issues during the private time, issues which have been identified in stage 1. The family members are then left alone to decide on an appropriate course of action. Professionals may only participate in the private time at the request of the family.

The third stage again involves the family and the professionals, or at least the key professionals. At this stage the family's proposed course of action is presented to the meeting and discussed. The plan is then ratified by the convenor, although if the convenor feels that the plan is not consistent with the department's 'bottom line', it may be modified. Implementation issues are then discussed and the plan is documented. Following the meeting, a summary of decisions is sent to all participants and the plan is implemented.

### ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES

The strength of FGC appears to lie in its application of partnership principles.

It is becoming more and more apparent that effective practice in child protection involves working in partnership with families and clients (see Trotter 1999 for a review of research on this subject). FGC has the potential to involve families in this partnership approach, to teach families how to solve problems

for themselves and to develop plans which are more likely to be followed up by families. On the other hand it also provides the potential for families to further victimise the primary client/s. In other words it might lead to plans which suit the family members rather than plans which protect children (see Hassal 1996 for a more detailed discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of FGC).

### LITERATURE ON FGC

Two recent publications on Family Group Conferencing (Marsh & Crow 1998; Robertson 1996) point to the absence of major outcome studies on FGC. Robertson, for example, indicates that at the time of writing (1996) there had been no research done on the follow up of plans and/or decisions made at family group conferences.

Nonetheless Marsh and Crow (1998) do consider some outcome measures in the study reported in their book. The results are generally positive, suggesting that for the most part the FGCs in their UK sample developed plans which were agreed to by families and professionals, they were successfully implemented and children were better protected as a result. Unfortunately the Marsh and Crow study does not include a randomly selected control group and like previous studies does not give definitive information about outcomes in comparison to more traditional planning processes.

### PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS CONDUCTED IN VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

Similar positive results have been reported in evaluations of FGC in Victoria, Australia (Department of Human Services 1995; Swain & Ban 1997). Both studies suggest that family members and staff were generally satisfied with FGC. Swain and Ban (1997) also report that families and workers were more favourable towards FGC than the usual case planning processes. Again, however, these evaluations do not include control groups and follow up of decisions. Further, none of the studies in Australia or elsewhere have involved researchers observing private time – perhaps the most unique aspect of FGC.

Whilst the previous studies do therefore point to a number of advantages of FGC, much of the research remains inconclusive.

### AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

This paper aims to address three questions:

1. to what extent does the Victorian FGC program involve families in case planning?
2. to what extent does it develop case plans which are appropriate?
3. to what extent does it develop case plans which are sustained over time?

This paper reports on particular aspects of the study undertaken for the Victoria Department of Human Services, which focused on issues relating to the implementation of the program in Victoria, as well as the extent to which the aims of the program were being met. Interested readers are referred to the study report (Trotter et al 1998).

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### METHODOLOGY

#### The Agency

The project was undertaken in the Victoria Department of Human Services, the government department which has responsibility for child protection services. The department accepts referrals regarding child abuse matters, it undertakes initial investigations and it has responsibility for making decisions about whether further intervention is required and what type of intervention is to be offered. These decisions are generally made in planning meetings convened by senior staff at various stages of the intervention process.

### Procedure and sample

The project involved collecting data from several sources, including observation of FGCs and interviews with people who attended the conferences. The research staff completed questionnaires whilst they observed conferences, and interviewed staff and family members. The interviews involved a series of set questions about the FGC program. The data was subsequently entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for analysis.

The procedure was as follows:

1. Twenty-eight family group conferences across the state were observed by four researchers. The researchers observed the next five conferences (including private time) from the time the researchers were available in the four Victorian metropolitan regions, and the next one or two conferences in the five rural regions. In all, 20 metropolitan conferences and 8 rural conferences were observed. The population of Victoria is largely centred in Melbourne and the distribution of conferences reflects this.
2. Selected participants in the family group conferences which were observed were interviewed by phone within four months of the time of the conference. These participants included, where possible for each conference, two or three family members, one representative from a non-government agency and the child protection worker. In addition to asking about their views of the conference process and outcomes, we also asked family members and representatives from non-government agencies to make a comparison with previous child protection planning meetings they may have attended in the department.

For each conference which was observed, the next traditional planning meeting held in the same office was identified – in other words, the case planning meeting which is normally held. In contrast to FGCs, whilst parents would generally be involved in these meetings, they do not routinely

include members of the extended family, family friends, etc.

Twenty-four child protection workers who were involved in FGCs and 24 who were involved in other meetings were then interviewed by phone within four months of the completion of the conference. Four of those involved in the FGCs and four involved in other meetings were not contactable at the time of the follow up due to leave, illness, etc.

### Limitations of the study

This study sample is limited. It includes only 28 FGCs which makes generalisation of the results difficult. It focuses on short term outcomes with follow up after a period of only a few months. It also lacks a control group of families who have not experienced family group conferences. It could also be argued that its aims are limited. It does not attempt to address issues relating to the power dynamics within the conferences or the independence of the convenor, for example.

A number of comparisons are made between the workers' and family members' experiences of FGCs and previous planning meetings. The comparison with previous planning meetings is perhaps problematic. Some had occurred some time earlier and some had different purposes. Nevertheless the data is included because we believe it does give an indication of the views which workers and family members have formed about FGCs in contrast to previous experiences with the Department of Human Services.

In general the results need to be treated with some caution. Nevertheless, they do provide some interesting information. We have made use of t tests to consider whether or not the results relating to the key aims of the study may have occurred by chance. This is particularly useful given the small sample.

## RESULTS

### Does FGC successfully involve families in planning processes?

Our data strongly suggests that FGC is successful in involving families in planning. An average of almost seven family members attended each of the 28 conferences. Research staff who

observed the conferences (including private time) rated the extent to which the plan which was developed in the conference, was developed by the family members, and the extent to which it was developed by departmental staff. Research staff used a seven point scale for this rating: a rating of 7 indicates that the plan was developed entirely by the family members and a rating of 1 indicates that the plan was developed entirely by the child protection staff.

The research staff believed that the family members largely developed the plans. They gave mean ratings of 5.81 on the seven point scale for the family having developed the plan compared to 3.63 for departmental staff having developed the plan. The researchers also believed that the wishes of the family dominated the meeting (rating 5.50) rather than the wishes of the child protection workers (rating 2.48).

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*Families prefer FGC to their experiences of other meetings, they feel more involved, they are happier with the decisions and the outcomes.*

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### Family members

Family members indicated that they felt they were involved in the planning process. Sixty-four family members were interviewed an average of 66 days after their participation in the conference. They were asked to provide ratings on the seven point scale in relation to a number of questions. We also asked families to compare the FGC with the most recent other meeting they had attended in the Department of Human Services. Sixteen family members had previously attended meetings.

Family members:

- felt that the language used by professionals was easy to understand (mean rating 6.2 for FGC and 4.8 for other meetings);

- were satisfied with their opportunities to speak in the meeting for FGCs (6.6, 4.9);
- had a clear understanding of what happened in the FGC (6.5, 5.0);
- felt a part of decisions which were made in the conferences (6.1, 3.9);
- were happy about the decisions which were made (6.3, 4.1);
- felt that the FGC meetings had a sense of partnership (5.7, 3.9);
- felt that their contribution in the FGCs was important (5.8, 4.2).

Overall it is clear that family members felt involved in the planning process – more so than other departmental meetings that they had attended. Despite the relatively small numbers, the differences between opinions about family group conferences and other meetings is in each case statistically significant at the .05 level using the paired samples t test. In other words, these differences were unlikely to have occurred by chance.

Whilst mothers and fathers of the primary clients (n=14) were less positive about FGCs in general, they shared the view expressed by other family members that they were preferable to other meetings they had attended.

### Staff from non-government agencies

Similar views were expressed by the nineteen staff from non-government agencies who attended conferences and were interviewed within four months of the conference. Again we asked the staff from these agencies to compare the FGC to the most recent alternative planning meeting they had attended in the Department of Human Services. Fourteen of the 19 participants had attended a previous meeting in the department. The mean rating in response to the question *Did the meeting provide an opportunity for the family to be involved in decision making?* was 6.00 compared to 3.6 for other meetings. Again the differences between the two groups is statistically significant at the .05 level using the paired samples t test.

**Did FGCs lead to more appropriate case plans?**

Whilst it is clear that family members, staff from non-government agencies and the researchers believed that FGC was successful in involving families in the planning process, the data is less conclusive in relation to the appropriateness of the case plans which were developed. Family members were positive about the case plans, whereas staff members were less positive. (The notion of appropriateness, and the other terms, was left to the respondents themselves to define. If asked, the interviewers would use prompts such as 'do you think it turned out to be the best plan which could have been made in the circumstances?')

Family members rated the extent to which they were happy with the decisions which were made in the FGC at 6.2 compared to 4.4 for other meetings (again statistically significant within the .05 level using the paired samples t test).

Representatives of non-government agencies were also positive about decisions made in the FGC. The non-government agency workers rated the appropriateness of decisions made in FGCs at 5.0 (n=19) compared to other meetings at 4.6 (n=14), although the differences are not at statistically significant levels.

The project methodology involved comparing views of 24 child protection workers (CPWs) who participated in an FGC with views of 24 CPWs who participated in an alternative planning meeting. CPWs who participated in FGCs provided a mean rating of 5.5 in response to the question *Do you believe the plan was appropriate?* in comparison to CPWs in the control group who provided a mean rating of 6.6 for the appropriateness of the decision made at the (alternative) meeting they had attended. The differences between the two groups is significant at the .05 level using the paired sample t test.

The findings are therefore inconsistent in relation to this question. Family members were particularly happy with the decisions made and felt that they were better than decisions made in other meetings. Non-government agency

workers expressed a similar view. However, child protection workers felt that decisions made in other meetings were more appropriate.

**Were caseplans sustained?**

Again the findings about the extent to which caseplans were sustained are inconsistent. Family members for the most part felt that the plans were being implemented. Sixty-five per cent (40) responded positively to this question with 18 per cent (11) saying that the plans were not happening. Another 18 per cent volunteered that the plans were partially happening. Similar responses to this question were received from the staff from non-government agencies.

Child protection workers expressed a similar view with 70 per cent stating that the decisions were happening. However, 90 per cent of CPWs in the control group believed that the decisions made in other meetings were happening. In other words the child protection workers were more inclined to believe that plans were happening after other meetings rather than after FGCs. This is at statistically significant levels as illustrated in Table 1.

The findings are therefore inconclusive about the extent to which FGCs lead to caseplans which are more appropriate and more likely to be sustained over time, in comparison to other planning meetings. This is perhaps surprising given the positive responses by staff to FGC in terms of its capacity to involve families, and given the research support for partnership approaches referred to earlier.

The views of the workers about appropriateness and sustainability of case plans may, however, be explained

at least in part by the notion that FGCs involved more difficult decisions.

For example, FGCs more often involved decisions to place children away from the parents (11/24 or 46 per cent for FGC and 6/24 or 25 per cent for other meetings) rather than involving the extended family providing support to children at home. Developing appropriate plans which are sustained over time may be more difficult in these circumstances.

**CONCLUSION**

This study has limitations. In particular the follow up time, an average of about two months, is short. Further it lacks hard data outcome measures such as placement breakdown and notifications of further abuse. Nonetheless the study does involve a different approach to the evaluation of FGCs to those we have seen in the literature. Reference was made in the introduction to the lack of work done on follow up of plans developed in FGCs and to the lack of studies involving control groups. This study addresses both of these issues, albeit in a somewhat limited fashion. Further, unlike this study, previous studies have not accessed private time.

This study suggests very clearly that FGC conferencing is successful in involving families in the planning process. Families prefer FGC to their experiences of other meetings, they feel more involved, they are happier with the decisions and the outcomes. These findings are particularly positive when they are considered in the context of the increasing amount of research material which suggests that better outcomes are likely to be achieved when families are involved in planning processes (eg, HMSO 1995) and the correlation seen in a small number of studies in child protection and elsewhere between client satisfaction and positive outcomes (eg, Trotter 1996; LaSala 1997).

The evaluation is, however, inconclusive in relation to the appropriateness and sustainability of caseplans. Whilst families were positive about these issues, child protection workers felt that plans developed in other meetings were more appropriate and more likely to be sustained. The views of the workers might be

**Table 1**  
**Has action decided upon been happening? (Workers' view)**

	YES	NO
FGC	16 (70%)	7 (30%)
CONTROL	20 (90%)	1 (10%)
(chi square = 4.86 p <.05, Fischer's exact test, two tailed)		

explained by other factors. However, the results do suggest that further research in this area is necessary before any definitive conclusions can be reached.

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