Essex Restorative Justice
Family Group Conferencing

Education and Early Intervention Projects: An evaluation of the first year
An Essex Children’s Fund Initiative

Essex Restorative Justice Family Group
Conferencing Service

Education and Early Intervention Projects:
An evaluation of the first year

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Foreword

Tracey Chapman, Elected Councillor: Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Youth

I am delighted to provide the foreword to this publication.

Restorative Justice Family Group Conferences (RJFGC) have been developed in Essex over the past four years, initially within the area of Youth Crime working with Young people who offend and the victims of their offences.

The Research and Evaluation of the Youth Crime Project demonstrated the success of this intervention in reducing crime committed by the most serious and persistent young offenders, helping them to become better citizens, and in giving victims a real voice in the Justice process. However, it also highlighted the factors that can contribute to young people’s anti-social and offending behaviours: bullying and victimisation; fixed-term exclusion and permanent exclusion from school because of behavioural problems; non-attendance at school and truanting; behaviour in the community which is on the fringes of offending and coming to the notice of the police; and being a victim of a crime.

With funding from Children's Fund Essex the RJFGC have now been able to offer intervention at an earlier stage in children’s lives that allows families to come together, pool their resources and tackle those underlying issues in order that better outcomes can be achieved.

As with Youth Crime the Education and Early Intervention Projects are multi agency partnerships. Essex Police, Learning Services, Corporate Services, Community Safety and Youth Offending Services have, with the voluntary Agencies of Victim Support and Brentwood Catholic Children's Services, united their efforts to ensure that delivery of the service does not only meet the needs of children, families, communities and neighbourhoods, but also that it meets National and Local Government objectives. As a project it therefore works with the Children’s Trust in Braintree, and the Countywide Children and Young Peoples Strategic Partnerships.
What is clear from the emerging results of these new initiatives is that this is beginning to happen. Parents and families are being empowered to exert their responsibilities and, where necessary, to work with both voluntary and statutory agencies in order to get their children back on the “right road” and help them to a brighter future that brings benefits, not just to them, but also to the neighbourhoods and communities in which they live.
Acknowledgements

I should like to thank:

The Family Group Conference team manager, the co-ordinators and the administrative staff for all their help in providing information for this evaluation and in enabling me to access family members and professionals.

The parents, children, and professional participants who agreed to be interviewed and who gave up their time to give their views.

My colleagues within the Research Team and in particular my manager Gay Leggett for their helpful comments in relation to this study.
Executive summary

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the first year of two Family Group Conference projects for 8-14 year olds in Essex, funded by the Essex Children’s Fund. One of the projects (Early Intervention) was aimed at preventing further offending behaviour among young offenders, or in diverting pro-offenders. The other project (in Education) was school focussed, and concentrated on addressing bullying in schools and in reducing the risk of permanent exclusion. The projects commenced in June 2003.

An evaluation was commissioned by the County Manager for the service in order to provide evidence of the effectiveness of the projects for both the FGC service in Essex and the funding agency: the Essex Children’s Fund. The research took place between January and September 2004 and gathered data on cases whose FGCs took place between June 2003 and July 2004.

The evaluation included both qualitative and quantitative elements, and consisted of an analysis of feedback forms completed immediately or shortly after the FGC by adult family members, children, and professionals who participated; in-depth interviews with a sample of parents and children both before and after the FGC; and in-depth interviews with referrers / school based respondents in order to provide information on the child’s longer term progress following the FGC in relation to the reasons for the referral. In addition members of the FGC team were given the opportunity to reflect on their work over the course of the year.

The main findings were:

- satisfaction with the FGC process was high among family members who participated - 65% of those completing feedback forms would recommend someone in a similar position to attend one.

- the majority (over 90%) of family members completing feedback forms felt that they had been given enough information beforehand, and the majority were happy with the time and place chosen.

- 100% of adult family member respondents felt that they and the young person concerned were treated fairly at the FGC, and 70% felt that they were listened to “very well”.
• over 90% of the professional participants agreed that the agencies had co-operated well together, and over 95% were comfortable in their role and felt that communication was good at the FGC.

• almost 70% of the professional participants who completed feedback forms agreed that the FGC was beneficial for the child in the short-term (within one month) and 60% agreed that the Conference had empowered the family to find their own solutions – the remainder were uncertain or did not know.

• positive outcomes in the short-term for the children included increased self-esteem and the opportunity to apologise and take responsibility for their actions. Young victims were able to express how they felt, which was seen to be beneficial by the professional participants.

• in relation to outcomes in the longer-term, (on average 7 months post FGC) an analysis of eighteen completed cases suggests a clear improvement in the child’s behaviour that led to the referral in approximately 45% of the cases, based on the judgement of school representatives.

• in 90% of the cases where the prevention of permanent exclusion was one of the FGC aims for the child this was achieved as a long term outcome, suggesting that the FGC intervention, in addition to input from school and Pupil Referral Units, had a preventative role in this respect.

• benefits in terms of improving communication between home and school, emotionally supporting the family, and linking the family with other resources that could help them were noted by both family members and professionals as outcomes following the FGC intervention.
Areas for good practice that emerged from this evaluation included:

- the need for the co-ordinator to undertake thorough preparatory work before the conference, including face-to-face meetings with all parties.

- the value of cases being referred to the FGC projects at an early stage when there are problems with the child, rather than as a last resort. This is an area that needs addressing with referrers, in particular schools, in order to encourage them to refer children earlier.

- the need for FGC co-ordinators to work in close partnership with a range of colleagues from other agencies but in particular from within Education.

- the need to decide who should provide follow-up after the FGC to encourage all participants to keep to the agreed plan, and for how long it should continue.
Lisa’s story (this name has been changed to protect anonymity)

Lisa had been an outgoing and happy child who had enjoyed Primary School, however when she moved up to Secondary school she started to be bullied by a group of older pupils, and by one girl in particular. Lisa’s mother could see that there was a problem, and went up to school on numerous occasions to try to sort the matter out with the help of members of staff, but without success. Lisa was becoming increasingly unwilling to go to school, and often disappeared soon after registration in order to avoid the taunts and intimidation of other pupils.

Lisa’s mother could see how anxious and unhappy her daughter was becoming, and things eventually came to a head:

“It was horrible...I was sat here and an ambulance drew up. Lisa had taken an overdose. Lisa tried to kill herself. So I phoned up Education. I went absolutely...as you can imagine...I was devastated I said, one, taking an overdose is bad enough, but two, something’s got to be done, and if something isn’t done that hasn’t been done before I’ll get the police and everything involved. It’s got to stop, because how many other girls are going to go through the same thing? They send a woman out to see us – she was the EWO, and she was the one who mentioned the family group conference. And then we had someone called [the independent co-ordinator].

Lisa: “He helped me a lot...He used to come round and talk to me about all the stuff that’s being going on at school an’ that, and he told me if I want he’ll do a family group conference and if I don’t [want to] he’ll help me anyway.”

Mum: “at first he spoke when I was there as Lisa... used to just curl up in this chair here in a ball and hid her face if anyone come round...she just wouldn’t communicate. She wouldn’t talk to anybody, wouldn’t go out. [The co-ordinator] broke the ice eventually as he kept coming round and wasn’t going to give up; he was going to keep talking to her. Then she knew she could trust him...

“And he spoke to her, and he spoke about it, about the ‘dos’ and the ‘don’ts’. We were worried about having a family group conference because we knew we would have to come face to face with the bully. I was like......yeah, something’s got to be done. She’s got to see what she’s doing. But then again my other view was...putting Lisa in that spot........something that she’s been scared of for so long.....in the room, facing it.”
Lisa: “I just said straight out “no!”...[The co-ordinator] said that I could write something down. He had heard that I was quite good at writing poems, and he said why don’t I write a little poem or something to explain to [the bully] how I was feeling? So I wrote a poem down...He said it didn’t matter as long as I had something writ down.”

Lisa’s mother and a number of her number went to the family group conference:

Mum.” there were quite a few of us, and we actually came face to face with the girl. I have to be honest. As a parent, facing her was so hard. What Lisa has been through and what the others have been through...She was very highly-strung, very aggressive............... She denied it at first...and she kept defending and she kept arguing about what’s been happening at school. And I sat there and listened to it all. And I got up and spoke.... and then [the co-ordinator] said that Lisa would not attend because she was frightened, and the girl just laughed.

“She kept denying it, and I thought, “this is not going to happen, because no matter what we say it’s going to go in one ear and out the other”. And then [the co-ordinator] said that Lisa’s poem had to be read out.... I started reading it out, and it was like...there was this big tough girl standing in the corner with all this... with all this mouth, and after reading Lisa’s poem it was like this frightened tiny little girl who just suddenly had got emotions, ended up extremely upset, got up and said “I want to see Lisa and I want to say sorry.

“The poem was allowed to be read out without any interruptions. Afterwards [the co-ordinator] said, “How do you feel?”. She said that she felt bad, and it was then that she admitted that there was a problem and she didn’t realise that Lisa had been so upset. I went in with the opinion that I don’t like this girl for what she’s done.... but my opinion completely changed. ... She got so emotional and I thought, “No you’re not such a big girl after all are you?

“And then the girl said that she wanted to see Lisa face to face and I said “I don’t know” and she said, “I have to say sorry”. That’s all she kept saying – she wasn’t nasty, but she said she had to say sorry, as she didn’t realise how bad Lisa was feeling. We made arrangements and I said I would have to talk to Lisa first......I got back here, and said to Lisa what had happened at the meeting, and said that the girl wanted to speak to her. And Lisa absolutely went mad!”

Lisa: “They came back here and my Mum was saying that [the girl] wanted to come to the house to speak to me, and I just screamed “no!” and ran. And my Mum grabbed me and said “she wants to say sorry” and I was just panicking....and [the girl] come running in. I just sat on the sofa and curled up. And she just looked at me and said “sorry”.
Mum: “Me and her mum went into the kitchen and that was really hard. But she did say sorry, and she did cuddle her, and they both ended up in tears. Having this family group conference I think it just brought everybody together, and everybody knew what was going on. People don’t know what was going on. The girl’s parent, she was really shocked.

“The school have to know exactly what was going on because …emotionally they don’t know what Lisa’s like. They see her for a split second at registration and then she’s run. What they see is a child who’s gone to school – a naughty child – who can’t be bothered to go to school and who’s done a runner. They don’t see the emotional side – they don’t see the hurt, the pain, what’s going on. You’ll get the slap, the kick, that sort of thing, but the emotions and the name calling and the abuse, the mental abuse, they didn’t see it. But I live with her and I watch her going from there down and down and down, and I see the changes in her – I’m with her 24/7. They needed to face her, to know exactly what’s going on.”

As a result of the family group conference a safety plan was devised for Lisa, which enabled her to attend school at flexible times, but also to feel secure. The family and the school are working closely together to help Lisa re-integrate into school, whilst still being sensitive to her concerns around bullying and feeling safe. Six months later the situation is very encouraging:

Mum: “I have to say, to this present day [the girl] has kept her word. Not only has she stopped bullying Lisa, but she went to a meeting at school of all her ‘gang’.. and told them all to leave Lisa alone because of what they were putting her through. And I think that was amazing..........To this day we’ve had no problems. If she sees Lisa she speaks to her – she’s very polite. ..... Lisa’s still not in school full-time, but we’re working on it.”

When you remember how you felt before, how different are things now?

Lisa: [laughing] “very different! I feel a lot better.”

Mum: “She is smiling a lot more now.”
I just can’t take no more

I do not want to write this
Cause I don’t know what to say
All I know is I feel sad;
   Every single day.
I do not like to go to school
   It makes me feel so low,
What have I ever done to you?
Why do you hate me so?
You are a very pretty girl
And you have lots of mates,
But I do not have anyone
   Cause everybody hates.
   I know that I am ugly
   And my brother is insane
But everything that he’s done wrong
   We always get the blame.
You call me names that really hurt
   And I don’t have no pride
   And every time that I see you
   I have to try and hide.
   I know that I am skinny –
   You call me anorexic; you call me scum.
You don’t know how I feel inside
   You make me want to run.
Your brother used to be nasty,
   But he’s fine now I can tell,
   But you just won’t leave me alone;
   You tell me that I smell.
I want to scream; I want to shout;
   I want to rant and rave.
I want to treat you like you do me,
But I know I'm not that brave.
Sometimes you are so cruel
You make me cry and cry
And I wish to God that I could leave
And go away and die!
I hate going to school each day -
I want to be with my mum at home –
And I'm begging you with all my heart
Please, please leave me alone.
I know I'll never be as good as you,
And I'll never be as cool,
But I've tried to be brave and ignorant
So I could stay and go to school.
But you turn everyone against me,
And I don't know what to do,
Please don’t call me no more names,
I'm begging, begging you!
I know my mum talks to your mum,
And I guess you'll deny everything I've said,
But I know the truth, and so do you;
You've broke my heart and messed my head!
I know you'll laugh and take the piss,
And you'll probably smack my face,
But I just can’t take anymore,
I'm fed up with the Human Race.
Whatever my brother has done in life
Is his fault, can't you see?
So why do we have to pay the price?
Why are you blaming me?
I know I'm not an angel;
I'm stupid, I'm ugly, I'm thick,
And now that I've tried to kill myself,
    I know people think I'm sick.
But you just do not understand
    About the pain I feel inside.
No one knows how many nights
    I've cried and cried and cried.
The school don't care or listen,
    Sometimes it makes me yell
And I feel I can't trust anyone,
    And tell me, who do I tell?
So I just go on and take each day
Hoping things will change, you see,
But no one else could ever know
    This pain that's killing me.

Mum, please don't get upset about this poem,
    It has nothing to do with you;
I know that you all love me,
    But you've got so much to do.
And Jade, please don't get angry,
    I'm just telling you the score.
Please don't hit me or call me names,
Cause I really can't take no more.
    I have to say this now,
I can't hide it anymore:
    I will never ever find the life
That I've dreamed about before.

“Lisa” aged 13
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Introduction

In 2003 the Essex Restorative Justice Family Group Conferencing Service was given funding by the Essex Children’s Fund to run two projects which met the objectives of the Fund and which were targeted at children in the 8-13 age group. These were:

a) Family Group Conferencing - in Education

b) Family Group Conferencing - Early Intervention

The aims of the two projects, as stated in the application to the Essex Children’s Fund, were as follows:

Education project

- to promote better outcomes for children at risk of failing to reach their educational potential and who are at risk of being drawn into offending behaviour, or who are offending, because they are not attending school or are on the brink of exclusion from school.

- to address bullying in schools via advocacy and mediation with the victim and perpetrator, involving their respective families and support networks, to negotiate and agree plans that will re-integrate and rehabilitate all those who have been affected.

The children, their families and support networks and other stakeholders will be involved in planning to

- achieve positive change

- identify safeguards against risk factors

- achieve rehabilitation and reintegration into education and the community

- re-build relationships

- prevent offending / re-offending
Early intervention project

- to make amends for wrong-doing
- to understand how their behaviour affects others
- to give explanations for behaviour
- to stop offending
- to be rehabilitated into the community
- achieve positive change and fulfil their potential
- to give victims a voice
Research commission

Following the commencement of the two projects in the summer of 2003 the Essex Social Care Research Team was commissioned by the County Manager for Essex FGC service to undertake an evaluation of the two Children’s Fund projects. The research proposal was agreed by the Research Governance Steering Group in January 2004 and looks at the first year of the two projects.

The Family Group Conference Model and related research

The Family Group Conference model broadly follows a number of stages. A referral is made, it is agreed that it meets the criteria, an independent co-ordinator is appointed and is responsible in conjunction with the child and immediate family for contacting and inviting wider family and relevant professionals, arranging the venue, preparing participants and writing the information-sharing report before the meeting, chairing the meeting. The FGC begins with information-sharing, and is followed by a private family time where the family draw up their plan. The participants can then meet together again for the family to share the plan. The restorative justice element of Family Group Conferencing includes time for victims or their supporters to share their feelings, and for perpetrators to offer explanation and apology.

Crow (2000, 2001) evaluated the use of family group conferences in education within Hampshire, looking at the process, the content of the plans, short, medium and long term outcomes. The main findings of their study were that satisfaction with the process was generally high and the majority of participants were satisfied with the plans made. Looking at outcomes at six months Crowe found that the presenting problem improved in 52% of the cases, was the same in 28% and worse in 20%. It was found that the FGC may have had a role in preventing deterioration in behaviour, and other benefits were also noted such as changes in the young person’s confidence and attitude to school, improvements in home school relationships, and a greater understanding of the home situation.

Previous research of the outcomes of FGCs in the wider context, for example within child protection, and for children on the brink of care has been conducted, for example Judge, Mutter and Marks (2000) in Essex, Holland et al (2003) in Wales. Judge, Mutter and Marks for example found that one year or more from the first FGC 6/10 families had a plan which was felt to be still holding, and that family commitment to the plan was strong in 80% of cases. There was also strong satisfaction expressed with the FGC process.
Research methodology

The aim of this research was to evaluate both the Family Group Conference process and the outcomes from the point of view of all relevant parties (referrers, the child and family members, other professional participants and FGC co-ordinators). A mixed method approach was employed, gathering qualitative data from participants by means of either face to face or telephone interview, and more quantitative data from self-completion questionnaires.

The initial research brief was to follow cases that were referred to the project, interviewing parents and children shortly before and then approximately one month after the FGC, and then obtaining longer term outcomes from the parents and referrers / school staff. Referred children were to be assessed on a self-esteem scale before and one month after the FGC, to see if the FGC had led to any observable change in self-esteem.

It was anticipated that there would be in the region of twenty referrals for both FGC projects in the first three months of the research, however it was found that the number of referrals was smaller than predicted. Because of this the methodology was adapted to also include outcomes data from parents and from referrers / school staff for cases which had led to an FGC in the preceding seven months (June 2003-January 2004) – before the research commenced.

The evaluation of outcomes

The evaluation of outcomes in the field of social care is a complex issue as one seeks to determine whether a particular outcome for a family or individual is ‘successful’ or not. In the case of a Family Group Conference intervention one must consider by whose point of view success or otherwise should be judged; there are, after all, different views; the child’s, the parents’, the FGC worker’s, the referrer’s, and these may not always agree. The criteria for ‘success’ can be at different levels, for example should an outcome be considered ‘successful’ only if positive change has been observed following the FGC or also if the situation has not deteriorated? The child may not have been permanently excluded, but his or her behaviour may not have got any better.

Another point to consider is at what point in time a judgement should made regarding the outcome of the FGC intervention. The immediate or short-term outcomes of the FGC process (within the first month for example), may well be different from longer term outcomes, for example over six months. As more time elapses after the FGC, other influences in the child’s life will invariably influence the outcome. As Crowe (2001) comments:
“Even if agreement can be reached on whether to categorise an outcome as positive, negative or neutral, it is even more difficult to know the causal factors that lead to that outcome, and how far it can be attributed to the FGC.”

In any child and family’s life many changes can occur – a change of teacher or of school, changes in friendship groups, moving home or parents splitting up. There is also the natural maturation that occurs as children grow older, and 'grow out' of certain behaviours. These factors need to be considered when making a judgement about the effect of the FGC intervention on a child and family.

The aims of these Family Group Conference projects were to work with the child, their family and other stakeholders to

- achieve positive change
- identify safeguards against risk factors
- achieve rehabilitation and reintegration into education and the community
- re-build relationships
- prevent offending / re-offending
- to make amends for wrong-doing
- to understand how their behaviour affects others
- to give explanations for behaviour
- to be rehabilitated into the community
- achieve positive change and fulfil their potential
- give the victim a voice
The evaluation looks at

- process issues: preparation for the FGC, the conduct of the FGC, and follow-up
- the extent to which the outcomes fit within these project aims
- the extent to which there is an observable change in the behaviour / attitude of the child that led to the referral
- the extent to which the individual family plan (if one was agreed) has been followed
- other outcomes in relation to family functioning and relationships.
Data collection methods

Feedback forms

Essex FGC service has undertaken a considerable amount of previous research on satisfaction with the FGC process (see Smith 1999, Judge and Mutter 2002) and has in place a range of feedback forms, which are given out immediately or shortly after the FGC to the children, adult family members, and professionals involved. These feedback forms ask for feedback from professionals and family participants on the preparation for the FGC, the meeting itself, and the immediate outcomes. These forms were used again in the evaluation of the Children’s Fund FGC projects, the data being entered onto the SPSS data analysis package and analysed.

Feedback forms from 39 professionals relating to 20 FGCs between June 2003 and July 2004 were analysed in addition to 33 feedback forms from adult family members and friends relating to 15 FGCs between June 2003 and April 2004. 15 feedback forms completed by child participants were also analysed.

The professionals who completed feedback forms shortly after the FGC were predominantly school staff, but feedback was also received from social workers, education welfare officers, police officers, YOT workers, personnel from the special needs and psychology service, the voluntary sector, a housing association, CFCS and Connexions. The majority had participated directly in the FGC, with a small percentage having some involvement with a participant but not participating in the FGC itself.

A copy of the forms used is can be found in Appendix I.

Interviews with parents and children

In order to gain more in-depth feedback on the FGC process, the role of the co-ordinator, and outcomes following the conference, in-depth interviews were undertaken by the researcher with a number of parents and children who were referred for an FGC. There were in most cases face to face, although a number of telephone interviews were also undertaken. These interviews were in the majority of cases tape-recorded and then transcribed.

The researcher provided the FGC team with information sheets about the research and consent forms for parents and children. These were given to the independent co-ordinators who were asked to share them with referred families prior to an FGC taking place, and ask for the participation of the families. Where agreement was given, the researcher then made direct contact with the family and agreed a convenient time to visit them. Every effort was made to
contact the families approximately one month post FGC, however the length of time after the FGC that parents were interviewed was not exactly the same in each case, partly because of intervening school holidays, and partly because some interviews had to be cancelled and re-arranged. The researcher as part of this evaluation interviewed seven parents and nine children, in two cases post FGC only, and five cases both pre and post FGC.

An attempt was made to measure any changes in self-esteem in the children as a result of the FGC intervention. A self-esteem card sorting activity was devised using self-esteem statements from standardised instruments, the intention being that children visited by the researcher both before and after the FGC would complete it. However it was not always possible for the researcher to see all the children both before and after the FGC, and this limited the usefulness of the self-esteem activity. Graphical material with cartoon characters was designed to help the younger children express their feelings about the FGC process, however as they were not available at the outset of the research and were most suitable for the primary age group they were not greatly used in this research. They will however be a valuable resource for any further research that the FGC service wishes to conduct on the views of children who participate in conferences.

Interviews with referrers / school representatives

Interviews were undertaken by the researcher with those who were involved in referring children to the FGC projects during the course of the first year, who participated in the conference, and/or who could provide information on the child's progress in school since the FGC intervention. The interview schedules can be found in Appendix II.

The interviews were predominantly by telephone and were recorded and transcribed, but one face-to-face interview was also conducted. These professionals were contacted by the researcher between April and September 2004 in relation to conferences that had been held during the first year of the FGC projects: June 2003 to June 2004. A chart of the time elapsed between the FGC and the outcomes feedback received from referrers / school based staff is presented below. All feedback is at least 2 months after the FGC and in the majority of cases it is 6 months or more, therefore providing evidence of outcomes in the longer term. Outcomes information about eighteen cases where FGCs took place between June 2003 and June 2004 was obtained from school staff / referrers – these being all the cases within that time frame for which outcomes data of two months or more was available.
Outcomes questionnaire for parents

An attempt was made to obtain outcomes information from families who had had an FGC in the first half of the year by sending them a postal self-completion questionnaire. This questionnaire concentrated on what the parents had wanted the FGC to achieve, to what extent the family plan was still being followed, and what changes, if any, they had noticed in their child since the FGC. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix IV.

Nine questionnaires were sent to families, of which three were returned.
Findings

Analysis of the Family Group Conference Process

Preparation for the conference

Good preparation for the conference by the co-ordinator is essential, and many comments were received on this matter, both via the completed feedback forms and through personal interview with family members and professionals. The view of the large majority of respondents on the subject of preparation prior to the Conference was positive, as is highlighted below.

Views of adult family members

There was positive feedback from family members regarding preparation as the results from the feedback forms revealed:

- just over 90% felt that they had been given enough information about the meeting beforehand
- all the family member respondents agreed that it had been made clear to them that participation in the FGC was voluntary.
- all the family member respondents also agreed that the FGC was held at a suitable place
- all respondents but one felt that the time chosen for the Conference was suitable.

Views of children

15 children’s feedback forms were returned, although it was not possible to know who had completed it – an aggrieved child, a non-aggrieved child, or a sibling. Nevertheless, the children reported experiencing a range of emotions before the meeting. One third of the children said they had felt happy beforehand, with a small number of others reporting that they felt angry, scared, worried or confused beforehand.

The children who were interviewed by the researcher before the FGC took place took a fairly positive attitude towards the meeting, and had been well prepared for it by the co-ordinator. All the children interviewed agreed the co-ordinator had listened to them carefully before the
conference, tried to understand their views, and had explained what would happen at the
conference. The co-ordinator had a key role to play in preparing the child for the meeting, for
example being encouraged to decide they wanted to invite, and in preparing their own
invitations.

**Views of referrers /professional participants**

The views of referrers and other professionals on the preparation for the Conferences were
generally very positive, with the Co-ordinators demonstrating good liaison with participants
prior to the meeting, and thorough preparatory work in most instances, as the following
comments illustrate:

“Good liaison beforehand with FGC convener”

“I was very impressed in the preparation and the way it was conducted”

“The FGC worker had put in a good deal of very thoughtful work in her preparation.”

The skills of the co-ordinator in relation to work done prior to the conference were highlighted
by this referrer’s comments:

“With [the child] everything went right, and I think it had a lot to do with the co-ordinator. …X
was extremely good....came and talked to me about the best way to approach the family. …X
emphasised [to mother] that it was independent. ...X was very very skilled..... X got in there,
got them involved, sold the idea to them, convinced [child] it would be useful, got Mum fully
involved.... X’s role as co-ordinator was crucial because we couldn’t have passed first base
without that - and the fact that it is independent, that was the thing.”

Here the work done by the Co-ordinator in getting alongside the family, stressing the
independence of the service, and understanding the situation thoroughly was clearly
influential in obtaining a positive outcome.

There were a number of suggestions for good practice which came to light as a result of
feedback from professionals involved in the process, for example ensuring that all participants
were aware of how long the conference was likely to take, and /or allowing enough time. The
issue of who should attend or be invited to attend, and how to get a balance between family
and non-family participants was one that concerned a small number of professionals. In some
cases it was felt that the conference would have benefited from other agencies attending, for
example an EWO, or school representative. However there were one or two other comments
from other professionals who felt that the conference would have benefited from fewer professionals attending, and a greater number of family members.

Ensuring that both family members and professional participants approached the Conference with a positive, forward-looking and problem-solving attitude was also highlighted as an important area for the Independent Co-ordinators in their preparatory work. It was recognised that there needed to be an openness to hear the views of other participants, and that Conferences worked best when the atmosphere was constructive rather than accusatory.

**The Family Group Conference and how it was managed**

**Views of adult family members**

Family members who completed the feedback forms shortly after the conference took place had the opportunity to comment on how they felt the meeting had gone. The results are presented below:

- all the adult family members /supporters who completed feedback forms shortly after the FGC felt comfortable at the meeting, and were able to ask questions throughout it.

- all but one of the adult family respondents (97%) felt that they had been given enough information to make a family plan in a way that they could understand.

- the majority (70%) of the adult family respondents felt that they were listened to “very well” during the meeting, and one quarter (26%) felt that they were listened to “quite a bit”.

- all the adult family respondents agreed that both they and the young person concerned were treated fairly during the meeting

- in relation to who should or should not have attended the FGC, and at what points a number of comments were received. One family member felt that someone should not have attended the private family time who did, and several family respondents felt that particular people should have attended the first information-giving part who were not there. In the latter case these people were relevant professionals such as educational staff, who were not in attendance.
Adult family members commented positively using the feedback form on the benefits of the conference, for example describing the meeting as

“Interesting”,

“Very informative and useful”,

“A good way of communicating”

“Excellent”.

Almost 65% of the adult family /supporter participants who gave feedback would recommend someone in a similar position to attend a Family Group Conference. They commented positively on the whole FGC process, in particular the opportunity to bring different people involved with the young person together, for all sides to air their views, and gain a greater understanding of the situation:

“Everything is set out clearly. You have the right to view all aspects. Most of all the people are all there to help”.

“It enabled everyone to discuss the problems and come up with a solution.”

“Because what took place was a discussion as to how best to help X and Y, rather than a group of professionals dictating things to people they don’t really know.”

“Very informative and useful, bringing various agencies together and have having discussions how each can help the client. “

Some family respondents appreciated that opportunity the FGC gave them to make a plan to help the child:

“I feel that it helped us to get to grips with the needs for X and to initiate a plan to help him.”

“Helpful, good support and plan.”

Not all family participants were satisfied with the conduct and outcome of the FGC however, as this comment illustrates:

“I think he [the child concerned] must have felt he was on trial. It seemed to me that everybody told him his faults but he could not answer in the way he would like to. ...No-one really wanted to listen to his side. His head went down on the table, I knew he had given up”.

______________________________________________________________
The interviews with parents, which were held after the FGC, were valuable in gaining further details of how the conference went. All the parents that were interviewed felt that the conference had been worthwhile and of benefit to the child, and in most cases agreed that they were amicable meetings. One interviewed parent did however comment that the conference had *been “very, very emotional”* for her, because of other family members that were present.

**Views of children**

The children who completed the feedback from immediately or shortly after the FG expressed a range of emotions during the FGC. Some felt comfortable and OK, some even happy and important. However a number felt a range of other emotions: shy, angry, nervous, sad, worried, scared, confused, stupid, embarrassed and giggly. Although this is only a relatively small number of respondents, it does show that there is no consistent reaction to a family group conference by children. For some children it is clearly not a pleasant experience. Given the nature of restorative justice, it is not surprising that some children will feel uncomfortable and challenged by the situation.

- the majority of the children who completed the feedback form agreed that it was up to them if they took part, however two were unsure. All but one of the children who responded understood why they were having a meeting – one was unsure.

- all those children who responded agreed that they were listened to, and that their feelings and questions were taken seriously.

- all but one of the child respondents felt that it was made clear to them what would happen as a result of the meeting

Half the children (7/15) who completed the feedback form felt happy about who was at the FGC (47%). Although no children felt scared, four felt worried, and four felt a mixture of emotions. This was also highlighted by one of the children who were interviewed after their FGC, who said that he had felt scared, confused and worried. Given that the FGCs could include victims of their offending, adult figures of authority such as teachers, and family members it is perhaps not surprising that some felt these emotions.
The following comments were received on the feedback forms from children, and reflect the generally positive feelings that the children had about the meeting, and their aspirations for the future:

- "just hope it all does all right"
- "I think I have made an improvement because I'm having loads of help by [the co-ordinator], Dad, brother, teachers, PRU. I think I will cooperate."
- [I feel] "happy"
- "hope it will be worth it. [I want a] Happier life."
- "a waste of time"
- "the meeting was good and helpful and I will try better."
- "I think it helped think about the problems he's been causing for Mum and for the school" (relating to brother)
- "the meeting went really well and showed good things about me"
- "I think that it might happen. If it does I will [be] very happy and glad."
- "that it will all go alright and it will be ok."

The majority of the children who were interviewed by the researcher after the FGC felt good about the meeting because of the positive feedback they received from other participants. One child was disappointed that a particular teacher could not attend the FGC, but was pleased that the teacher had written a supportive letter, which had been read out at the conference.
Views of professional participants

Views were received from professional participants both from the feedback forms, and from interviews with the referrers or other key school staff. Overall, feedback on the FGC itself was very favourable, particularly among participants from outside the education system who were new to the concept of restorative justice family group conferencing.

- **The environment**

  The physical environment of the family group conference was commented on positively by several of the professional participants who completed the feedback forms, noting that

  “The environment was good, both physical comfort and ‘feeling’

  “Comfortable and welcoming”.

  “Thanks for the refreshments!”

- **Partnership working**

  The ethos of multi-agency co-operation and partnership working was another positive aspect of the FGC process, commented on by a range of professional participants.

  “All co-operated and acted in the best interests of the children.”

  “It is obvious that multi-agency work is the way forward”.

  One participant from an agency involved in youth and community work praised the commitment to it “as a partnership thing” and noted that the way the FGC was conducted by the Co-ordinator was true to the family group conference ethos, which was all about working it out together.

- **Communication**

  The opportunity for different parties to express their views was an important aspect of the family group conference, and was viewed positively by the professional participants when it was managed well, as these comments illustrate:

  “[The child] saw it as an opportunity to get a lot of what he felt was an aggrievement off his chest... [It was] a safe and secure way of criticising everybody, and then we found out what the reasons were for him refusing [school].”
Agencies co-operated well together
Communication was good
I was comfortable in my role in relation to the FGC
The meeting went well.

% agreed/strongly agreed

“It was useful for the family to express negative views that they felt strongly about.”

“A worthwhile meeting with good all round input from all the parties.”

“All given opportunity to express opinions.”

The value of Family Group Conferencing in addressing the needs of parents as well as children was recognised, as this comment from a referrer illustrates:

“I would go down that road again [having an FGC]. They are an effective tool for addressing everyone’s problems, not just the young person but Mum’s and Dad’s as well, because they can get left out of it, and end up picking up the pieces when the wheels fall off”.

Favourable views were expressed by most of the professional respondents in relation to how agencies co-operated, how well the meeting went, and their role in the meeting as can be seen by the responses in the chart below.

The majority of the FGCs were seen as positive meetings, for example being described as “remarkably amicable”, and “non-threatening”. However, several professionals who were involved in the process raised the issue of professional vulnerability during an FGC.
As one referrer commented: “It’s no good a co-ordinator perhaps glossing over, with the professionals as well as the family, the fact that it could get quite…quite tricky……………..To go to a family group conference you need to be open. I wasn’t sure I wanted to put myself in the position of being open to criticism from the X family, or from [child] himself, and I felt I might be personally attacked……… I felt we were being hauled over the coals really unfairly.”

In another FGC one of the professionals attending felt under personal verbal attack by family members and their supporters, and was unhappy with the role of the co-ordinator in managing the situation. This negative experience made this particular professional, who had previously been highly committed to the concept of family group conferencing, wary of future involvement.

The role of the Independent Co-ordinator in preparing all participants before the conference regarding the purpose of the meeting, and in managing the dynamics of the group was seen as pivotal to a successful meeting.
**Short term outcomes**

As can be seen in the table below, the majority of professionals who returned feedback forms agreed that the FGC was beneficial to the child, that it empowered the family to find solutions, and that the child understood the effect of his actions. (The forms were completed immediately after the FGC or shortly afterwards, therefore related to outcomes in the short term.) However a number of the professionals were uncertain of the effect of the FGC on the child and family, and the responses reflect this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The child understood the effect of his actions as a result of the FGC</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FGC empowered the family to find solutions.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FGC was beneficial for the child.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments on the feedback forms from professionals on the effect of the FGC related both to the immediate impact of the meeting on the young people, and any behaviour or attitude change shortly afterwards. The comments recorded by the professional participants show that the Family Group Conferences were a valuable experience for some of the young participants, helping them to accept responsibility for their actions and understand the impact of their behaviour on others. The FGC was also an opportunity for some of the children to be given positive feedback from adults who knew them well, thereby improving their self-esteem and confidence. Where the FGC had a restorative justice element there was clear evidence that the intervention met a number of the aims of the project, namely to make amends, give explanations for behaviour, give victims a voice and re-build relationships.

The following comments illustrate some of the immediate benefits of the FGC intervention that were observed:

“Raised student's self esteem. Had a voice. Avoided permanent exclusion. Gained place at PRU. (Pupil Referral Unit)”

“He showed remorse and spoke very positively afterwards having given him time to reflect.”
“She got an enormous self-esteem boost receiving praise from all the important people in her life at one go. Her manner has been pretty positive on the whole since, on the two occasions I have seen her. She was initially upset, but recovered.”  “Intervention …… led to young person moving back home, reduced risk of re-offending and risk to herself. FGC raised her awareness of the impact of her actions on others. My view is this was a very positive experience for the young person”.

“Conference was helpful in pointing out the consequences of actions, effect on victim and family members.”

“As young as he was, [child] seemed able to understand the proceedings and was attentive throughout. He took it all in his stride.”

“Young person already made change re: stealing. Was upset at upsetting Mum during conference.”

“Young person seemed very enthusiastic about having a mentor. Accepted his poor behaviour and seemed to want things to change.”

“Young person seemed to find the conference helpful.”

“The young person had the chance to fully realise the implications of her actions and to apologise. It gave her a chance to find new ways to cope with life.”

“I feel that the YP will start to think about their actions and who they associate with and what impact it has.”

The respondents were not always able to state a clear positive outcome shortly after the conference, but rather their hope of one in the longer term:

“The young person was not really able to grasp the impact of his action on family, but always able to say what he thinks people want to hear from him.”

“I am unsure as to whether [child] will make an effort to make things work. He will require close attention for some time to come, to ensure he can adjust to returning to school in mainstream.”

“Not sure really. I hope it does have a positive impact, after all this must be the aim of such a meeting!”
“I think time was an issue for the young people. Although there would be benefits for them in the long term they were obviously keen for the FGC to end.”

Impact on the victim

In a number of cases the FGC had a restorative justice component and included a young victim or victims, although they did not always choose to attend. As one of the aims of these Family Group Conference Projects was to give victims a voice and the opportunity to receive an explanation and apology for the offending behaviour, feedback on the impact of victim was gathered. The professional participants were asked in the feedback forms to comment on the effect of the conference on the victim, if applicable and the following responses were recorded:

- “victim did not attend but was able to express her feelings through liaison with YOT victim support worker.”
- “victim did not attend but accepted a letter of apology.”
- “made it plain what she felt, which was beneficial.”
- “the aggrieved young person was able to express her thoughts clearly and would have been enormously encouraged by the nice things said about her.”

Six families were interviewed face to face shortly after their FGC took place (between 4-6 weeks) and five of these were also interviewed shortly beforehand. It was therefore possible to compare their initial aims and expectations of the conference with the outcome shortly afterwards. (It was possible to see the children in 4 of the 6 interviews). All the parents felt that the experience had been worthwhile, and were optimistic that they could make the family plan work, although there were some difficulties emerging for some.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aims of parent pre-FGC</th>
<th>Aims of child pre-FGC</th>
<th>Outcome (4-6 weeks post-FGC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“A happier life for the children. I just want to get the kids’ heads straight.”</td>
<td>“To help me and [sibling] control our behaviour in school.”</td>
<td>“Yes, it’s going well!” However progress is slow in getting support in place at school from Connexions. Regarding children’s behaviour “There are minimal changes at the moment...they have a long way to go”. Still involved in fights however has not been excluded. Children feel more secure. Mum is happier in herself, and feels that she is no longer shouldering the burden by herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To enable her child to be more confident and to calm down. To reduce the angry outbursts, and for Mother to have help. Mother also feels that child would be better off at another school.</td>
<td>“To stop being bullied”.</td>
<td>There was agreement that a change of school was necessary and this was arranged. Child is much calmer and happier since his move.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have him back in school full time and to be able to walk away when there is trouble. Mother wants the matter of child not being in school sorted out quickly and also wants to see him progress more at school. “Although he’s done some good work he still falls backwards and he still needs support to help him, like kind of guide him.”</td>
<td>“I just want to be in school full time with my mates instead of doing an hour and a quarter each day”</td>
<td>The aim of returning to full time school was not achieved, however Mother feels more confident to manage her children “He knows I won’t accept any garbage of him, and I think everyone is happier knowing that they can’t get away with things”. She is pleased with his progress on the alternative schemes – “he is doing really well.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of parent pre-FGC</td>
<td>Aims of child pre-FGC</td>
<td>Outcome (4-6 weeks post-FGC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We want [child] to get the help he needs - he needs help. ....He needs help with his behaviour which I can’t do. He needs help with ...his temper.</em></td>
<td><em>I don’t want to do Italian any more.</em></td>
<td>Child still getting into trouble at school and difficult to manage at home. Still waiting for the offer of a mentor to be realised. Mother visited by a social worker but not found helpful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To keep child in school and on a full time timetable. <em>His attitude’s got to change as well, towards school.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>No temporary exclusions since the FGC. As a result of the FGC involvement, a behaviour incident at school was successfully resolved without resorting to an exclusion, and improved communication with the school was reported. Child reported that he had been temporarily taken out of classes he didn’t like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get an apology from the school. <em>For the children to be able to go back to the school, feel relaxed and that no-one’s going to be on their back. There’s other issues, about his behaviour in general.</em></td>
<td>To feel ok in school again</td>
<td>They succeeded in forming a plan and child and siblings are trying to keep to it. Child feels happier about going into school now. An apology was not received from the school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the benefits of the FGC intervention from the point of view of the parents who provided feedback through questionnaires and / or interview were as follows:

**Having someone to listen to them**

Parents appreciated having a listening ear from the FGC co-ordinator, and in particular for the children, as these comments illustrate:

“Now there is a third party that they [the children] can talk to....they have really opened up to [co-ordinator]”

“He chats to [the co-ordinator], she’s the go-between. She’s on the same side as him.”

All the children who were interviewed spoke positively about the co-ordinators, felt that they were easy to talk to, and got on well with them.
Acting as a go-between /mediator

The ability of the co-ordinators to act as a go-between between the family and the school or other agency was commented on and appreciated by the parents, particularly where it was felt that communication was a problem. The co-ordinators were supporting parents in meetings, representing their views and opening up the lines of communication:

“[the co-ordinator] was like a mediator, it was like a link that I had between her and the PRU....If there was anything going on I could phone X up and he would do his best to answer my problems......Nothing was too much trouble really.”

“When we'd gone [to school before] I've always felt that we're the naughty people - you know, they talk down to us. But I felt that because I had that support there......it was totally different. Things they were saying were going to happen, it ain't happening. 'til [the co-ordinator] come. As soon as X come on scene, it just totally changed! X has been like a basic go-between really, getting the school and us in one room. To me it is that they know there is an outsider there, looking in, so they had best be doing things.”

In one particular instance the FGC also provided the opportunity for mediation between adults within the family where there were communication problems, allowing them to discuss issues involving the children in more formal and neutral territory.

Providing information and co-ordinating support for the family

The co-ordinators played a vital role in linking the parents and children up with other organisations or people who could support them, for example making referrals to Connexions, to CSV, to local youth clubs and parenting groups, and to agencies who could offer counselling and mediation such as the Brentwood Catholic Children’s Society. Parents commented on how useful they found this:

“All the support they [the co-ordinators] have sorted out for us is excellent.......I have nothing but praise for them.”

“[The co-ordinator] has done a lot for me. X has been here nearly every week, has explained everything, tried to get every bit of help I can possibly need.....X is a really nice person, and has really tried hard.”
Accessibility / follow-up

The parents valued co-ordinators who were easy for the family to contact and who were available when it was needed. The issue of when the co-ordinator’s role ended emerged during the research, as some parents felt that this had not been made clear to them, and wondered why the co-ordinator had not been in touch following the FGC. However, other parents who were interviewed had been clearly told by the co-ordinator that their role was not to provide long-term support, but that they could be contacted if they felt that a review FGC was necessary:

“She did everything quick, she would phone up and see how everything was, in between. She told me ‘that’s it’, but if there are any problems or he changes then I can give her a ring.”
**Longer-term outcomes**

As in the research by Crow (2000), a ‘honeymoon’ period was found to occur in several of the cases in the first couple of months following the FGC. Interviews with parents within the first 6 weeks after the FGC, and feedback from school staff show this trend. However it was found that initial improvements in behaviour and attitude by the child were not always sustained in the longer-term. The following section looks at outcomes an average 6 months post FGC for 18 families that had had an FGC (see chart in Methodology section for detail of time between FGC and long-term outcomes data).

**Changes in presenting problem**

Purely in terms of whether improvements were noted by school staff in the presenting problem for which the children were referred, the results were as follows. This data is taken from telephone or face-to-face interviews with school based staff (see appendix for interview schedule) and included a qualitative judgement of the child’s progress, and information where applicable on the frequency of fixed term exclusions before and after the FGC intervention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presenting problem</th>
<th>Improved / no repeat of behaviour</th>
<th>No change, or deterioration in behaviour / attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour in school/home</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour in school and attendance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour in school, pro-offending outside school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 18 cases studied, there were 8 where there was a noticeable reduction in the behaviour of concern that led to the child’s referral, as judged by the referrer or member of school staff who knew the child well.

The studies below illustrate some of these cases:

In this case the child had a close relationship with his family, however difficult circumstances in his home life had affected his behaviour at school, leading to incidents of non-co-operation
with staff, aggressive incidents with other children, and non-attendance. As he spent more time out of school he was mixing with the wrong crowd, which was a concern to his family and to school. Fixed term exclusions were proving ineffective and there was a risk of permanent exclusion.

The family plan was for the child to spend two terms at the Pupil Referral Unit as a preparation for re-integration into school, he would try to keep out of trouble, and a family member would offer support with homework. The Family Group Conference enabled the child to hear how much his family and the school cared for him, and he was able to express the reasons for his behaviour in a safe, supportive environment. His family were committed to the plan, and the co-ordinator followed it up for some time after the conference. The referrer commented that:

“X went to the Pupil Referral Unit. He shone, he grew.... he just blossomed within that environment. He loved it. After 2 terms at PRU he returned to mainstream school. He's re-integrated really well, no fixed term exclusions...which is almost a miracle. No confrontations, no incident reports received whatsoever.”

In the following case the referral was for a restorative justice FGC in order to deal with of a range of problems including non-attendance at school, poor relationships with the child’s peers, and theft. Almost five months after the Family Group Conference was held there was evidence that relationships between the mother and child had improved, and that there was also a clear improvement in the child’s relationships with pupils at the school and in self-esteem. A school representative commented that:

“Behaviour in school has improved I would say 100%....There has been no repeat of the behaviour that led to the referral. [child’s] attitude towards school has been a lot better as well - a lot more positive. There has been no repeat of the truanting. Incidents of [child] falling out with students have declined markedly, [child] is happy in the school, happy in classes, got a good core friendship group.”

The child in the following case had been involved in bullying at school, truanting, and stealing outside school. The family plan was to provide peer mentoring at school, get the child back into a school routine by beginning and ending the school day on time, and to offer help to the mother on the form of a parenting group, and leisure activities for the other siblings.

Nine months after the Family Group Conference that was held, the school reported that the child was benefiting from getting involved in a youth organisation and having a weekly one to
one session with a counsellor at school – both of which resulted from the FGC. It was “without a doubt” a positive outcome for the child from the school's point of view:

“\textit{She is a lot more confident. \ldots She is spending a lot more time in school.}”

However, feedback from the family ten months post FGC revealed that there were still some difficulties at home in terms of the child's attitude and behaviour towards the mother, and some incidents of fighting at school. The main dissatisfaction appeared to be that not all the promises of help given at the FGC were fulfilled to the satisfaction of the parent.

In the case described below the FGC resulted in a significant positive change in the life of a child who was bordering on criminal activity, getting involved outside school with older children who were getting into trouble, and who was getting the reputation for being out of control both in and out of school. The co-ordinator managed to engage with the parent who had previously been ‘anti’ any involvement with professionals from Education or Social Care agencies, and got her fully committed to helping her child. The aim of the plan was to refer the child to the Pupil Referral Unit for two terms and also deal with other issues such as the health of the child. The comment from the referrer was as follows:

\textit{“We got him into the Pupil Referral Unit. His attitude changed\ldots. His learning picked up. And he integrated back into school really well\ldots. He hasn't had any fixed term exclusions [in the 5 weeks since coming back to school]\ldots. It's a really good result. He's just one of the crowd now. [the FGC was] a huge, huge success”}

Feedback from the parent 10 months after the FGC was that the plan was still in place, there were improvements in her child's attitude and behaviour at home, and at school he was “\textit{a lot better}”.

The child in the following case was at risk of permanent exclusion from school as a result of violent behaviour towards both pupils and staff at the school, and criminal damage. The child, who had a mild learning difficulty, was unable to cope with the demands of school and his resulting frustration was leading to his violent outbursts at school and at home. He exhibited low self-esteem, was bullied and reported that he had no school friends. The FGC confirmed the view of school and parent that a change of school was required, and this was achieved with the help of the FGC co-ordinator. The feedback on the new school three months post FGC was that:

\textit{“He is really loving it there \ldots. it was like a dream come true for him.” (referring school).}
Feedback from the parent seven months post FGC was that her child was still getting on well, with no fixed term exclusions. He was reported to be getting on well with reading, had made friends and was much more confident.

In this final case study the child was referred to the FGC service as a result of criminal damage outside school and general disruption and bullying within school. The school had over the previous three years tried a variety of options to help the child who has learning difficulties as well as behavioural problems, including a one to one teaching system. Referral to the FGC was an alternative approach, which ran alongside the efforts already being made.

Feedback from the school two months post FGC was that the child was responding much more positively, for example having two fixed term exclusions in that time whereas pre-FGC they were occurring on a weekly basis.

“X was my number one child for exclusion, but he's dropped down the premier league a bit now... It's been a lot more positive since the meeting...it has been probably the best half-term he's ever had in this school.” (Head teacher)

In relation to reasons for the child’s improvement the head teacher commented that “I think also it’s something to do with maturity. I think as he’s got older I think he’s realised the implications of some of his actions, not all of them, but I think he’s certainly improved. And whether the family group conference was the turning point for that, or the start of things beginning to happen, again I think that’s very hard to measure.”

Other changes in the child’s life, such as becoming part of the local football team’s Centre for Excellence, and going to Art Therapy sessions once a week run by CFCS were also seen to have a positive influence on him – regarding the art therapy his mother said to the Head teacher “I don’t know what he talks about in these sessions. He won’t ever tell me. But he always comes out bouncing and feeling good about himself.”

The feedback obtained from the child’s mother four months post FGC was that the child’s behaviour and attitude at home were getting better, although there were still bad days. Improvements at school were also noted, “but still some outbursts”. According to this feedback a family plan had not been agreed, although it was felt that the family’s original aims (for the school to be able to cope with keeping him in school rather than excluding him all the time) were partly met.
In a minority of the 18 cases for which longer term outcomes data was obtained, the school-based respondents were still concerned about the situation and felt that the FGC process had not made a significant difference.

Looking at the cases the following factors emerged as being likely:

- chronic family difficulties / parenting problems which require long-term support
- low support for the FGC process from the wider family, and in particular lack of support from father
- parent and or child not willing to change
- FGC used late in the day as a ‘last resort’

Concerning one of these cases the referrer reported that:

“There was no change of heart from child. You never felt that the action plan was ever going to get anywhere….child just sat there and said ‘I don’t give a toss really’…. He didn’t want to be there…..He was permanently excluded…..To my knowledge he’s exactly the same as he was before”.

It was known before the FGC that permanent exclusion was the school’s decision, and the FGC concentrated on making a plan to find alternative education and in making referrals to other support agencies. However the lack of commitment of the child to changing his behaviour was clear.

A lack of commitment by the child in a separate case that was described by one of the professional participants in a similar vein, as follows: “I think almost he’d got to the point where he’d made up his mind that nothing was going to change before he came to the meeting.” In this case the situation regarding attendance had deteriorated after 3 months and legal avenues were being considered.

In the case described below it was clear that the child’s school and other agencies had tried a range of interventions to deal with the child’s behaviour which included truanting, arson, stealing, bullying, lying, vandalism, and trouble with police. Low family support and previous difficulties engaging with the child were factors in the case that made it particularly difficult. Although the school and other agencies undertook the actions they agreed in the family plan in order to prevent permanent exclusion and re-integrate the child into the school, no
improvements were observed. In the six months following the FGC the child was excluded on several occasions from the specialist unit he had been referred to, and there continued to be concerns about the child’s psychological state.

In the following case it was clear that the children and parent were not able to sustain their side of the family plan in to the longer term, and problems around school behaviour remained 6 months after the FGC as this comment from a school representative illustrates:

“We’ve involved behaviour support, family liaison, restorative justice, we’ve tried to involve social services, we’ve got education welfare involved....just about everybody you can think of we’ve tried! The child has had several exclusions now [there had been none prior to the FGC]......I think it [the family plan] worked for a little bit at home, but then it soon wore off and things just escalated and got worse and worse.

Issues around family functioning and the influence of older siblings were apparent in this case, highlighting the difficulty of creating change without long-term follow up and support for the family.

**Positive outcomes within the family, and in relationships**

In several of the cases it was clear that the intervention of the FGC service had been beneficial to the family irrespective of whether or not there were long term improvements in the child’s behaviour. Here, for example, the FGC service had had a very positive effect on the dynamics of the family, and in improving the child’s self-esteem:

_The impact that [the FGC workers] have had at home, and building bridges at home with members of the extended family has been very good......The work that they did with regard to [child] and the family and improving [child’s] self-esteem was very beneficial._

In another case the FGC intervention resulted in the mother completing a parenting course and in the children attending a Summer School in the summer vacation. The comment from the member of school staff was that “She [the child] can talk to her mum a lot more now. I think it helped get a lot of things in motion. I don’t think they would have happened like that without the FGC.”

In several other cases there was evidence that the intervention of the FGC service had resulted in a change in attitude by the mother regarding her parenting. One referrer noted, “Mum made a real effort. She wanted to change for him [her child]”.

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As has been previously noted, improved communication and understanding between the parent/s and school was a positive outcome in some cases, and this was found to be sustained in the longer-term, with school staff noting that the FGC had been beneficial in improving dialogue.

The prevention of permanent exclusion and re-integration into Education

One of the aims of the Education project was the prevention of permanent exclusion, and in 11 of the 18 cases studied this was one of the aims of the referral. The feedback on longer term outcomes revealed that in two of these eleven cases a permanent exclusion had taken place following the FGC, however in one of these cases it was already decided upon by the school before the FGC was convened. Therefore it can be seen that in nine of the ten cases (90%) where the prevention of permanent exclusion was one of the aims, this was achieved.

In some of these cases the children had been placed in a Pupil Referral Unit on a short-term basis in order to facilitate their re-integration back into full time school, or they were involved in alternative schemes which were not school based, such as work experience. For one young person a change of school was part of the plan to avoid permanent exclusion, and this was successfully achieved.

With these children the approach was multi-agency, with input from the school and the FGC service and often other agencies such as a Pupil Referral Unit, or Connexions. Although it is not possible to say to what extent the FGC intervention had had a role in preventing permanent exclusion, the results are encouraging, and meet one of the main aims of the project.

The family plan

Feedback was not obtained from all the 18 families that were studied on the extent to which their family plan was still holding long-term, however, feedback from Education representatives provided some information in this respect. They could provide data on what they and other agencies had done as part of the family plan, and were sometimes able to comment on what the child and family members had or had not done.

When the family plans were examined it could be seen that in almost all cases the agencies involved, and in particular the school, fulfilled their part of the family plan by putting in place particular programmes for the child or in referring the child to another agency. Where feedback on the child’s progress was obtained and it was clear that the plan had not been followed, this was in most cases attributed to a lack of commitment on the part of the child to
change his or her behaviour. In some cases it was also felt by school respondents that a lack of commitment by the parent/s was also a contributory factor. Instances did occur where the family plan was thrown off course by unforeseen events in the child’s life, irrespective of the input from family, the FGC service, school or other agencies.
Follow up

This evaluation has highlighted the need for the families who have had FGCs to be followed up for a period of time after the family plan has been agreed, to offer support and help all parties to keep to the plan. There appeared to be a lack of clarity among a small number of professionals and parents as to whether this was the role of the FGC co-ordinator or not, and it appeared that some co-ordinators were providing support to the families post-FGC whereas others were clearer about their involvement ending after the FGC. The two quotations below illustrate cases where the involvement of the FGC service continued after the Conference:

“I don’t know whether [the co-ordinator] was supposed to, but one of the reasons that everything did go through was that [the co-ordinator] did follow up the action plan afterwards. [The co-ordinator] made a constant effort to keep ring and going and checking…” [referrer]

“They’ve participated at things like the various core group meetings and things so their involvement has continued beyond the restorative justice, and worked on improving relationships within the family. I would say that it’s still going on and the input’s still there…….They’ve been very helpful and done more than I would have expected in certain circumstances.....Where she [Mum] has not been able to make some of the appointments that Social Services have tried to offer for her, the FGC has tried to either help with transport or alternative arrangements. I think they’ve still got a role to play in the next few months really, to try and keep the improvement going.” [school representative]

These comments from a member of staff at a school who was involved in a conference highlight the need to clarify the role of the FGC service on the matter of follow-up:

“I don’t know exactly where the Family Group Conference thought their role ended, but it certainly dwindled off and I was … I suppose my understanding, I don’t know what the family’s understanding is; my understanding is that the Family Group Conference was going to sort of keep in touch with us and the family and sort of carry on, in a way, leading the project management where we simply don’t have the time to. So I was … faintly disappointed I suppose, that that didn’t seem to happen.”

There was a sense that it did not really matter who did the follow up, so long as someone did:

“Even if you’ve got a school that’s prepared to do the follow up, if it’s not the independent co-ordinator, but somebody has got to be in there and making sure that the family is supported in
following through the action plan, otherwise the apathetic family are going to do the thing they do with all things and just let it go.” (referrer)
Reflections from members of the Family Group Conference Team and Restorative Justice Family Group Conference Board

This section of the report gives an opportunity for key members of the FGC team and the Project Board to reflect back on their experience of the work of the two Projects over the year, and to consider the achievements, challenges, and learning points arising from the work.

The issues raised in these contributions highlight and support the messages coming from family members and professionals from other Agencies through this evaluation, in particular:

- the challenging nature of Restorative Justice Family Group Conferencing for children, adult family members, and professionals involved with them.

- the importance of commitment to the process from all concerned: the co-ordinator, the child and family, and Agencies who are offering support.

- the vital role of the independent co-ordinator in engaging all participants, planning effectively, and working with professionals from other Agencies to help them fully understand the unique nature of Family Group Conferencing

- the opportunity FGCs create to give all participants a voice, and to increase others’ understanding of their feelings and wishes.
Christine Dale, County Team Manager, Essex Restorative Justice Family Group Conference

The Education and Early Intervention Restorative Justice Family Group Conference (RJFGC) projects are, in some respects, a development of the Youth Crime RJFGC project, which is now in its fourth year. What we know from the Youth Crime Research and Evaluation is that the issues we are attempting to address in Education and Early Intervention RJFGC are issues that contribute to the causes of crime, and other anti-social behaviours, committed by children and young people that ultimately lead them to a position of social exclusion. We also know that the RJFGC in youth crime has been successful in its aim of engaging families in decision-making and planning that will prevent their child from re-offending, and that promotes their reintegration and social inclusion.

The hope has been that, by means of an earlier intervention, families and networks of support can divert children from anti-social behaviours, the risk of offending, and social exclusion, and help them toward a more fulfilling future in which they are able to achieve their potential and be part of, and take part in, their communities and neighbourhoods.

The research and evaluation of the Education and Early Intervention projects is really heartening because it shows that for the majority of children and their families that have taken part in an RJFGC, the experience and outcomes have been positive. I know from those meetings that I have attended that they can be challenging for all the participants, especially the young person; it is not easy for the young to start to see that the way they have been behaving has been harmful to others. But, what has been so good to witness is the transformation that the process, culminating in the meeting, allows.

In one such meeting the problem of communication was perhaps the biggest issue. Communication between home and school, and school and home, was not good. Because of this there was lots of misinterpretation and misunderstanding of what was being said and done by parents and school, and of course the child was in the middle.

For schools this can be a most frustrating situation as, for the most part, they want to do their best for the child. For parents it is the same. The common ground is therefore “the best interests of the child”. Through the RJFGC process lines of communication have been opened up and misunderstanding and misinterpretation has been addressed. The result is that good plans have been made in “partnership”. What has also resulted is that the young person has seen people coming together to help, has heard and been heard, has begun to understand what harm has been caused, and can start to make changes, trust that they will be helped, achieve goals and believe in themselves.
Another issue that is hard to address is that of bullying and victimisation. Often, because of the school's and parents’ desire to protect, the victim can be unwittingly re-victimised and become socially isolated.

A very early referral to the Education project was such a case. A senior member of the School management team expressed concern that strategies they had put in place to support a teenage girl, were in fact keeping her in a vulnerable state. For example, coming in to school a bit later and registering at the office meant that she was not actually with her class at times of the day when notices were read out, when there was a chance to catch up on and share news and when socialisation can take place. Again, being accommodated in the quiet area during break times, or in the study area in lesson times, all meant to protect, actually served to maintain the girl in a socially isolated and vulnerable position. What was really needed was to engage the young person and her mother in an “information sharing” meeting that would enable them to understand, and empower them to make decisions. With their support network and the help of school a plan was made that included a re-integration support package for the young person, and support for mum to help her to help her child.

In a similar recent case work was also done with the perpetrators of the bullying, offering the same opportunities to plan for change, with supports in place that will allow achievement of goals and changes to be sustained. In addition to this the process facilitated a restorative conversation between victim and perpetrator, from which a plan was made that allowed the perpetrator to make amends to the victim and the victim to return to school that was fully supported by the school.

Engaging, enabling and empowering all participants and stakeholders are at the heart of RJFGC. The research and evaluation shows that this is being achieved in the majority of cases. However, it also shows that we still have to work harder at this. For some, particularly professionals, the process has been challenging and one they have felt uncomfortable with. This is an issue that other research in FGC processes across the world has highlighted. How the individual professionals respond to family meetings, when family are at the helm so to speak, may depend on individual experiences, or how they feel about their position in their organisation, or how they prefer to practice, or that the FGC is just a totally new experience and way of working, or for any other number of reasons. This is probably an issue worthy of research in its own right. But, and in the meantime, what it means in practice is that attention must be given to the needs of all participants, and acknowledgment given that for some professional practitioners RJFGC is not an intervention for them. What remains crucial is that
negotiation and agreement is reached so that young people and families who might benefit from an FGC are not excluded from the opportunity.

Finally, as with my experience in the initial Youth Crime RJFGC, I have been really excited by what has been achieved. The next challenge will be to build on the success, keep consulting with service receivers to identify what we can do better, and keep promoting what we do so that we can extend capacity.
Greg Moss, F.G.C. Independent Co-ordinator

As a retired police officer that has worked within a Justice System, which is mainly adversarial, it is easy for me to understand why many professionals are sceptical of Restorative Justice Family Group Conference (RJFGC) being a successful means of early intervention. Without personal first hand involvement it can be viewed as a soft option with very little benefit. In practice this is not the case; it being highly intrusive for the family and young person during the preparation period as well as often being highly demanding emotionally during the conference stage for many of the participants.

Is FGC a successful means of early intervention? Undoubtedly YES is the answer in the majority of cases. However engagement with and by the Young Person is a critical factor within the process. When this first hurdle is overcome there is no limit to the success that can be achieved by the Young Person and their family, supported as necessary by professionals.

Also key to the process is a commitment to the process by those engaged in the role of Co-ordinator. In my view if that commitment is not there then the chances of success diminish. Also, whilst appreciating that strategic thinking is critical to driving the process, there must be more emphasis on Practitioners having easy access to Services in order to resolve practical issues and support the family’s plan. Examples of this would be Drug Rehabilitation Programmes and Job Experience Opportunities - in practise these are not always readily available to the Young Person when needed.

Finally, I feel that there is a need to educate and spread the benefits of RJFGC to individuals who are still reluctant to embrace such thinking, despite their organisations strategically supporting the Initiative. In particular I would identify Education and Policing as two such Areas. For some colleagues within these areas the RJFGC process can seem challenging and consequently they can be reluctant practitioners. The learning for Independent Co-ordinators is that professionals are properly prepared for participation in the process and understand fully the principles, values and process of RJFGC.

In conclusion I reiterate that having been fortunate enough to actively participate in the Process for the last two years I know it works and is one of the most effective means of intervening early and helping the Young Person and their Family to a brighter future.
Gill Holland, FGC Independent Co-ordinator

I came to the FGC after working in education for several years in roles that supported children with behaviour difficulties. During this time I attended many meetings that were intended to help both the child and the family to make some changes that would avoid permanent exclusion.

To illustrate how I think the FGC process can help families and young people when facing a permanent exclusion I have compared the process of a typical Pastoral Support Plan with a typical FGC.

Schools are encouraged to welcome the input of families and work jointly with young people and their families in solving problems. It seems to me that the FGC in education really does give the family the same status as that of the school and professionals. If it is the family difficulties that are having a negative impact on the young persons behaviour in school it is important to give them an opportunity to make their own plan to address some of these difficulties. Just looking at the young persons behaviour within the school without addressing the needs of the family will have little impact on that behaviour. The FGC in education does bring families and school together in a forum that is safe and productive for all.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pastoral Support Plan Meeting</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>FGC</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Called at schools convenience and request</td>
<td>It is often mothers who get called regardless of work or family commitments. Fathers are frequently not involved.</td>
<td>Can be called by anyone concerned including family, young person or professional.</td>
<td>Does not have to rely on busy, stressed head of year to call meeting. Can be called earlier while the situation is still recoverable.</td>
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### Pastoral Support Plan Meeting

**Planning is generally done within the school with possible involvement of Senco or Behaviour Support Staff as well as Head of Year. Family or young person has little involvement at this stage although there may be observation of young persons behaviour.**

<table>
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<th>Outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>The perspective is entirely of the behaviour of the child within the school. There is often little understanding or sometimes even worse assumptions made, about the home or family life that may be having an impact on the young persons behaviour.</td>
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<th>FGC</th>
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<tr>
<td>Period of planning would include meeting with young person, significant family members including father. Extended family may also be met and discussions around possible causes but also suggestions for possible solutions occur. Meetings are arranged to suit family's commitments. Meetings and discussions with any professional working with the family or young person. Explaining their role at the FGC, collating information and perspectives on causes of behaviour and also offers of strategies and resources that will be brought to FGC.</td>
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<th>Outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>During the preparation ideas, strategies and possible resources are discussed. This gives the Co-ordinator further ideas of different people to invite to the Conference. All those invited to the Conference will have an understanding of the different perspectives and will have time to think about possible solutions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pastoral Support Plan Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meeting held in school often cramped meeting rooms, no refreshments and time very limited. Parent and child often kept waiting outside while professionals meet before and after the meeting. No rules or guidelines are discussed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pastoral Support Plan Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Targets and objectives set are all school and behaviour related and is a list of what the child will do with some reference to parent's role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up meetings are held at school convenience and time bound.</td>
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</table>
Sally Langa, FGC Independent Co-ordinator

Having worked outside and now within Family Group Conference, I’ve had the privilege of experiencing the FGC process both from an outsider’s perspective and also from an insider’s perspective. One of the FGC’s crucial points of departure is the presumption that all families have strengths. As a Practitioner, aligning myself with this presumption implies that my role is therefore, to help and support families to identify, recognise and utilise these strengths.

Family Group Conference is about working with families rather than on them, which allows them to maintain their autonomy and have a voice in issues that matter to them.

With regards to the process itself, I would mention three key things that I have found to be of outmost importance. The first thing is the PLANNING. As with most things, the foundation is often one of the determining factors for the success or effectiveness of the finished product. In FGC, it is critical that the Pre-Conference preparations are done thoroughly and in-depth, to ensure that the Conference has the intended effect/outcome. The time and effort invested at this stage are often evident at the implementation stage.

Another important factor is the ROLE OF THE CO-ORDINATOR. As the person facilitating the whole process, it’s important that the Co-ordinator has a clear understanding of what the issues are, from all perspectives. With this understanding, Co-ordinators are enabled to use their role and the process as catalysts for some important family changes.

Lastly, ONGOING REFLECTION AND EVALUATION has been proving very useful. As a Co-ordinator, constantly engaging in this not only contributes to improving the quality of the Service, but it also helps to identify any deficiencies and obstacles. This identification leads to even better planning and execution of future Conferences.

With regards to the effectiveness of FGC as a method of intervention, I would say that this is a very effective intervention mainly due to:

- its approach of empowerment, inclusion and consultation
- recognition of families’ uniqueness and diversity, (one size does not fit all)
- being solution focused
- working with families rather than at them.
- encouraging autonomy rather than dependency.
The built-in Review Process provides an opportunity for all involved to assess the progress, which also provides evidence of where the process has been effective. Therefore, the conclusion that the process has been effective in individual cases is often based on some measurable proof.

As a Co-ordinator, saying that there are no obstacles would be unrealistic. The key is how a Co-ordinator deals with these without losing focus of the important tasks at hand.
David Iles, Head Teacher of Richard de Clare Primary School, and member of the Restorative Justice FGC Project Board

I was invited to become part of the Management Group for the project because I have done a lot of work on relationships and emotional intelligence in school. I am quite evangelistic about these things; I strongly support them. In a nutshell it’s really simple; I support them because they work.

At school level we operate restorative justice across the school as part of a relationships policy rather than a behaviour policy. We use it to teach children the skills they need to resolve conflicts themselves without recourse to punishment regimes or the need to involve other people. We find it works in terms of having a longer-term effect, which the standard sorts of sanctions and rewards just don’t impact in the same way.

The restorative justice approach (within the school) has had an impact in terms of reducing bullying and racism. We have also used restorative justice – not directly ourselves – but we have become engaged in restorative justice conferences for ex-pupils who have gone on to Secondary school. There have been a number of occasions where pupils who used to be with us have moved on to secondary school and encountered difficulties within weeks, to the point where they are threatened with permanent exclusion or are not attending school, bullying. We have advocated family group conferences in terms of pulling in support for the child to get them back into school and operating in school, and in one case restorative conference over a quite serious incidence of bullying. I have seen long term benefits for these pupils – in one case a pupil who only lasted a few weeks initially is now back in school on a daily basis, when there was a serious likelihood that he wouldn’t be staying at the school.

It is empowering the family to have some control over their destiny, rather than have agencies and people - however well meaning – doing it for them. Ultimately [within a restorative justice family group conference] we have the family saying what they would like to happen, and everybody else trying to accommodate that, which is a very different situation to having the school saying “these are the conditions by which we will let him back in”. It’s a whole different feel to it.
Restorative justice does involve quite a culture shift and quite a lot of work. It involves a change in attitude. It involves handing over power to parents and pupils......that can be very scary and intimidating for teachers and head teachers. Looking at it from the parents’ point of view all too often they are families that have things ‘done to them’. All of a sudden it becomes a true service: “what do you actually need and how can we help you achieve that?”
Steve Tutton, Head of Community Safety Department, Essex Police, and Member of the Restorative Justice FGC Project Board

I am part of steering group and also a trained restorative justice practitioner.

Essex Police supports these restorative justice family group conference projects as they complement a holistic response to improve outcomes for young people (proactive Essex Police Youth Strategy). There is conclusive evidence that bullying and victimisation in schools can lead to offending behaviour later in life, both in the short term and in adulthood, where it may present as issues of domestic violence. There is a strong correlation between school exclusion and offending behaviour, both because of opportunity and also because of reduced life chances for the young people involved. There is under reporting of crime by victims of bullies, and the family group conference restorative justice schemes offers a solution without the necessity of police intervention.

I feel that these projects have been very effective in meeting their objectives [achieving positive change, rebuilding relationships, rehabilitation, preventing offending or re-offending, preventing permanent school exclusion] within the schools that have embraced the approach. I would like to see the process mainstreamed, to offer solutions to all schools in Essex. I would like to look for opportunities to integrate the approach within the ‘Children’s Trust’ model, possibly by mainstreaming through combined children's services.

A difficulty of the approach is being able to measure effectiveness over a long term and the evaluation of all the outcomes. Securing funding for the longer term is another difficulty.

I am confident that the project will improve outcomes for all the young people involved and that although savings for services cannot be identified at this stage, they will far outweigh the investment through these projects.
Conclusions

As has been evidenced, the FGC in Education project and FGC Early Intervention Project have provided a valuable service in many respects. Feedback obtained from both family participants and professionals involved in the process has shown that it can be an empowering experience for the family and a catalyst for positive change in the behaviour and attitudes of the child. The co-ordinators played a valuable role in bringing concerned parties, particularly family members, together to form a plan to help the child, in providing information to the families on what resources they could make use of, in providing a listening ear and emotional support, and in mediating between parties where communication was difficult.

The majority of family members who gave feedback were satisfied with the process, and would recommend other families in a similar situation to use the family group conference service. In most cases it was felt that the conference was a positive experience for the children when they attended, although there were some for whom it was not, as has been seen.

One of the key findings of the evaluation was the importance of good preparation by the co-ordinators. The evidence suggests that in the vast majority of cases the co-ordinator prepared well by obtaining everyone’s views, providing information beforehand and making sure all knew what to expect. In a small number of cases there was evidence that preparation had been unsatisfactory in some respects, e.g. arranging the FGC before sufficient information gathering had been achieved. It was clear that there was a need for co-ordinators to liaise closely with Education colleagues, and stress that independence of their role.

For the professionals involved – largely those within Education – their experience of the family group conference was predominantly positive, and there was a commitment from those professionals who participated to the whole ethos of family conferencing and restorative justice. In terms of how the FGC meeting was conducted there was agreement from the large majority of participants, both family and professional, that there was good co-operation between different participants, there was enough information to make a plan, family members were listened to carefully and the child was treated fairly. A small minority of respondents expressed some concerns over the conduct of the FGC and its effect on participants present; the experience was not a positive one for all the children who attended, and a small number of professionals also felt uncomfortable at criticisms directed at them. The dynamics of the meeting is clearly an area that co-ordinators need to manage skilfully and sensitively, ensuring that both professional and family participants came with a positive, problem-solving attitude.
Getting the balance right between the number of family members and professionals at the FGC was an issue that was highlighted in this research by a small number of professionals. The role of the co-ordinator in encouraging relevant family members to attend the FGC in order to support the child and parent/s in forming a plan is crucial, however there were cases where there appeared to be no wider family, or they chose not to attend.

The immediate benefits of the FGC intervention included the opportunity to form a family plan with support from other agencies, the ‘offending’ child accepting responsibility for his or her actions and apologising, the victims having the chance to express their views either at the meeting or through an advocate, and improvements to the child’s self-esteem as a result of the positive comments expressed about them by adults at the meeting.

The majority of professional participants agreed that the FGC had been empowering for the family and that the child had understood the effect of his actions, although approximately 40% of the respondents were unsure, or did not know. The role of the co-ordinator in opening up lines of communication between different parties such as child and school, parent/s and school, and child and family was seen as a positive outcome of the FGC intervention in many cases. Their role in gathering information and co-ordinating all available resources – family and professional – to contribute towards a plan of action for the child was also appreciated.

The data on the eighteen cases that were studied revealed that in 44% of the cases the problem that had led to the referral (for example low attendance or bullying and anti-social behaviour) had improved in the longer term as judged by relevant school staff, whereas in the remaining 56% the situation that led to the referral had either remained the same or deteriorated. It should be borne in mind that some of the referred cases were extremely difficult, and were resistant to change even with interventions from the school and a variety of other agencies. Long-term benefits in terms of improved home-school communication, multi-agency co-operation, and the bringing together of agencies who could practical and emotional support for the parents were all noted.

The majority (90%) of the children for whom the prevention of permanent exclusion was one of the aims of their plan had not been permanently excluded in the 3 months plus post FGC, but were either maintained in their existing school, had transferred schools, were temporarily placed in a Pupil Referral Unit prior to re-integration, or were engaged in work experience schemes. Although not all succeeded in returning to school on a full-time basis, the outcomes reflect the input of the FGC service, schools and other agencies in preventing permanent exclusion.
References


Appendix 1

Family Group Conference feedback forms
Family Group Conference Participant’s Feedback/Evaluation Form – Early Intervention

We would like you to fill in this form to find out more about what people think about the Family Group Conference Conferences. IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW WHAT YOU THINK. This form is ANONYMous. Only the Independent Researcher will see your answers. When you have finished, please put this form in the envelope provided which will be returned to the researcher. THANK YOU.

Name of Co-ordinator: .................................................. Date: ........................................

What is your relationship to:
YOUNG PERSON/ AGGREIVED PERSON/ OTHER (Please delete as appropriate)

1. Who invited you to this meeting? ...............................................................

2. Did you have enough information about the meeting beforehand? .......... YES/NO

3. Was it made clear that your participation would be voluntary? ............... YES/NO

4. Was the conference held at a suitable place? ...................................... YES/NO

5. Was the conference held at a suitable time? ........................................ YES/NO

6. Did you help choose the time or place? .............................................. TIME/ PLACE/ BOTH/ NEITHER

7. Did you feel able to ask questions throughout the FGC? ...................... YES/NO

8. Did you feel comfortable at the meeting? ......................................... YES/NO

9. Do you think you were given enough information to make a family plan, in a way you could understand? .............................................. YES/NO

10 (a) Were there any difficulties during the ‘private time’ e.g. The fact that professionals were not present? .............................................. YES/NO

10 (b) If so, what are they? ..............................................................................

11. Do you feel the plan was: Too Lenient? ☐ About Right? ☐ Too Harsh? ☐

12 (a) Do you think the Young Person was fairly treated? .......................... YES/NO

Please turn over/..............

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12(b) If not, say why .................................................................

13(a) Do you think you were treated fairly? .................................................... YES/NO
13(b) If not, why not .................................................................

14. Did you feel that people listened to your views?
   A LITTLE BIT ☐ QUITE A BIT ☐ YES, VERY WELL ☐ NO, NOT AT ALL

15(a) Please detail any other facilities which you feel could have been provided for the
   FGC? ........................................................................................................... YES/NO
15(b) If yes, please state what ........................................................................

16. Do you think any people at the meeting SHOULD NOT have been there?
   If so, who? ................................................................................................
   When? ...... At the first, information giving, part ☐ In the family time ☐ In the end ☐

17. Is there anyone else you think SHOULD have been there?
   If so, who? ................................................................................................
   When? ...... At the first, information giving, part ☐ In the family time ☐ In the end ☐

18(a) Would you recommend someone in a similar situation to attend a meeting? YES/NO
18(b) Please say why ......................................................................................

20. Please add any further comments you would like to make ................................

Conference Date __________   __________   __________ Conference Time __________

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Essex Family Group Conference (FGC)

Professionals’ Feedback - Education

Please record your thoughts about the Family Group Conference Education RJ project for which you have had some involvement. We value your views even if your involvement was minimal and you were not participating in the conference itself. Please attach a separate sheet if you do not feel the form covers all your views of the Family Group Conference. This form will remain confidential to the researchers and any quotations will be anonymous.

Which of the following best describes your level of involvement with the FGC or people involved? YOU MAY TICK MORE THAN ONE BOX.

- A little professional involvement with a participant in the FGC but not participating myself
- A moderate to high level of involvement with a participant but not participating myself
- Involved with preparation for an FGC
- Involved with court proceedings
- Directly participating in the FGC itself

Other, please specify ..............................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................................................

Please state your professional role (e.g. job title) in relation to the FGC
...........................................................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................................................

Please state the organisation (e.g. independent, Social Services etc) you belong to in relation to this professional role
...........................................................................................................................................................................
...........................................................................................................................................................................
Please consider the following statements. Tick one of the boxes provided in the grid below for each question for which you feel you are able to offer an opinion. If none of the boxes apply for you feel further clarification is required, please write your comments in the space provided below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
<th>AGREE</th>
<th>NEITHER</th>
<th>DISAGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
<th>DON'T KNOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agencies co-operated well together</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication (professionals &amp; others) was good</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I was comfortable in my role in relation to the FGC</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Young Person understood the effect of his actions as a result of the FGC</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The FGC empowered the family to find solutions</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FGC gave the aggrieved person a voice in the Process (if applicable)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FGC was beneficial for the Young Person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The FGC meeting went well</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please give your views on the following issues in the spaces provided. If you need more space please feel free to use the reverse side or attach a separate sheet.

- Lessons to be learned in terms of good practice (things that went well or could have been done differently)
- Positive and Negative aspects of conference or process of preparation.

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- Impact on Young Person of conference or process of preparation
- **Impact on victim/aggrieved person (if applicable)**

- **Any comments**

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**Essex Family Group Conference – RJ Education**

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Essex Family Group Conference
Restorative Justice FGC

My Questionnaire
I am ________ Years Old

How I felt getting ready for the meeting...

Happy ?

Angry ?

Worried ?

Scared ?

Unhappy?

Or something else ?
If so, What ?

Circle How You Felt
How I felt at the meeting............

- Happy
- Important
- Comfortable
- Nothing
- Scared / Frightened
- Sad
- Worried
- Nervous
- Tongue - Tied
- Safe
- Shy
- Something Else - What?
- Embarrassed
- Giggy / Laugh
- Stupid
- Anxious
- OK
- Angry

Circle How You Felt - circle as many as you want

People who came to my meeting ...............

- Mum / Dad / Family
- Social Worker
- Teacher
- Policeman
- Carer/s
- Others

How did you feel about who was there?

- Happy
- Sad
- Worried
- Scared
- A mixture of feelings

Circle How You Felt

© Essex County Council
Did they Listen to me?  
Yes / No / not sure

Do I know what will happen next?  
Yes / No / not sure

Is it what I want?  
Yes / No / not sure

Do I think it will help?  
Yes / No / not sure

Now that you have had your meeting...

My thoughts about it are ....

© Essex County Council
Thinking about the person I upset or hurt......

Did they come to the meeting? Yes / No
Do I know why they came to the meeting? Yes / No

Do I want to say why they came? __________________________

How did I feel seeing them? __________________________

Thinking about the person I upset or hurt...

Did they ask me questions? Yes / No
Did I answer them? Yes / No
Do I feel sorry? Yes / No
Did I say sorry? Yes / No
Do I feel better now? Yes / No
THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING
THIS QUESTIONNAIRE!

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Appendix 2

Interview schedule for feedback from referrer/school on outcomes
Telephone interview schedule for referrers to the Education and Early Intervention FGC projects

• the main concerns that there were around the young person, and the reasons for the referral to the FGC project

• thinking specifically about the reasons leading up the referral, what changes in the young person, if any, have you been aware of since the involvement of the FGC service? e.g. details of any temporary or permanent exclusions since the FGC meeting and current exclusion status

• any changes in relationships within school – with adults and peers

• any incidents of misbehaviour in school or outside that you are aware of

• any changes in attitude and mood

• educational progress

• could you give me your overall impressions on the usefulness of FGC service involvement for the young person?

• how do you think the young person was affected by being part of the FGC?

• do you feel that any further action is required to help the young person regarding the problems that led to the referral to the FGC project? (e.g. a further FGC at a later date, referral to other agency, more school-based intervention, more home-based intervention)

• to what extent do you feel that FGCs are an effective way of tackling this kind of problem?
Appendix 3

Feedback questionnaire for parents on longer term outcomes
This feedback form gives you an opportunity to think about how useful the Family Group Conference has been for you. As these meetings are a new way of trying to help families, it is very important for us to hear from you and other families who have had one.

All the information you provide will be treated confidentially by the researcher, and will only be used in an anonymous form. Your comments will be added to feedback from other families who have had a Family Group Conference to evaluate how helpful these meetings are.
1. What did you want the Family Group Conference to achieve?

2. Did you succeed in forming a Family Plan?  
   Yes ☐  No ☐

3. If you formed a Family Plan, to what extent is it being followed at the moment?
   Please tick
   Completely ☐
   Partly ☐
   Not at all ☐

4. If there are difficulties in following the Plan at the moment, why is this, and how do you think these could be overcome?
5. Please tell us about any changes in your child that you are aware of since the Family Group meeting took place:

- any changes in your child’s behaviour at home

- any changes in your child’s attitude or mood

- any changes in your child’s behaviour at school (if applicable) or how he/she relates to teachers or other school children

- any changes in your child’s friendships

- any other changes
6. To what extent were your original aims for having a Family Group Conference met?
   Completely □
   Partly □
   Not at all □

7. What is your overall impression of the usefulness of the Family Group meeting for your child’s situation?

8. Were there any unexpected outcomes as a result of the Family Group Conference process?

9. Do you feel that you will require a further Family Group Conference in the future?  Yes □  No □
Thank you for completing this feedback form, which will help us to evaluate the usefulness of Family Group Conferences. Please return it in the pre-paid envelope to:

Kay Pountney
Research Team
A309 County Hall
Chelmsford
CM1 1YS

If you would prefer to give your comments to these questions over the telephone please ring the researcher on 01245 434186 between 10am and 2pm, or you can email your comments to kay.pountney@essexcc.gov.uk
To find out more or to request additional copies, you can contact us in a number of ways:

By telephone:
01376 555551

By email:
fgc@essexcc.gov.uk

By internet
www.essexcc.gov.uk/socialservices

By post:
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Braintree
Essex
CM7 9DB

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Painting of family provided by St Francis RC Primary School, Braintree

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