Family group conferences in permanency planning

The decision to place a child for permanency is clearly a momentous one for the child and immediate and extended family. The family group conference model, discussed here by Helen Gill, Lorna Higginson and Helen Napier, offers a way of planning and making decisions which ensures that children, along with parents and families, have their views listened to and are involved in decisions directly affecting their lives. The best interest of the child remains the focus and, where appropriate, the family may come up with possible alternatives to adoption or long-term fostering. Even when the decision is made to place the child outside the family, the family’s increased involvement through a family group conference may enable them to be more accepting of the longer-term plan for the child.

Origins and philosophy

Family group conferences originated in New Zealand in the 1980s as a radical alternative to more conventional decision-making processes. The passage of the Children, Young Persons & their Families Act in 1989 in New Zealand sought to create a model for child welfare and young offender services based on the concept of partnership between family groups and the state. A government briefing paper to New Zealand social workers (Department of Social Welfare, 1989) states:

The procedures . . . are based on the belief that, given the resources, the information and the power, a family group will make safe and appropriate decisions for children. The role of professionals such as social workers and doctors should not be to make decisions, but to facilitate decision-making by providing information, resources and expertise, which will assist the family group. Professionals will have a crucial role as resource people.

(p 3)

This new law, introduced to govern the management of processes in relation to child welfare, child protection and youth offending, launched a renewed interest around the world in empowerment and partnership practice.

The development of this practice during the 1990s coincided with western governments’ moves to increase user participation in public services, particularly in issues such as needs definition, services development and natural resource usage.

Many countries have sought to introduce family group conferences, or variations of the concept, into child welfare and protection services, youth justice services, schools, services that address family violence, victim services and the resolution of conflict between adults. Legislative mandates for family group conferences exist in New Zealand, South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and the Republic of Ireland. Family group conferences are being introduced as best practice initiatives in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, many states of the USA and Israel. Morris and Tunnard (1996) refer to a range of family group conferences throughout the world, all of which reflect the particular patterns of local culture (Taylor, 1999).

By the early 1990s family group conferences were being introduced and monitored in several authorities in England and Wales. Since then there has been a steady growth in confidence and enthusiasm for the way this model has made the commitment to partnership working with families a reality. Family group conferences were introduced into Scotland in 1999.

The values and principles that underpin the model are consistent with the core principles of the Children Act 1989 (of England and Wales) and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. There is a clear emphasis in both Acts and their Guidance on the enduring nature of...
parental relationships and of parental responsibilities. Family group conferences offer a radical way of engaging with families at the stage of assessment and planning, which builds on the strengths of parents and wider family resources, and which maximises the potential for children and young people to have their needs met within the family network wherever possible. It is a way of planning, and decision-making, which aims to ensure that intervention in family life is the minimal possible and in the best interests of the child. It ensures that children along with parents and families have their views listened to and are involved in decisions about their lives.

The child welfare model
In New Zealand, the family group conference is central to the legal process. Although the model as applied in the UK has been kept essentially the same as in New Zealand practice, with local variations, the model has neither legislative nor mandatory backing. It is a ‘best practice’ model.

In this model there is a preparatory phase and three key stages to the family group conference itself, as well as possible subsequent follow-up meetings. The extensive work done in the preparatory phase is crucial to the success of family group conferences.

The preparatory phase
This first phase starts with the referral to an independent co-ordinator who convenes the conference. The family network is identified, in consultation with the child and immediate carers. Emphasis is given to helping the child to express his or her views. If appropriate, an advocate, either from within the family or independently, assists in this task. The co-ordinator spends time preparing the family and professionals for the meeting and negotiating which family members attend. The co-ordinator can exclude certain family members in the interests of the child, but exclusions are rare and need to be specifically justified. The family will be consulted on the arrangements they would like for the family group conference, including time and venue.

The preparation phase takes on average five to six weeks.

Stage 1
Stage 1 of the family group conference involves professionals sharing information with the family about their concerns for the child. The co-ordinator chairs this part of the meeting, ensuring that information is presented in an accessible form using the chosen language of the family, and that professionals describe resources, which may assist the family.

On almost all occasions, there are more family members than professionals present and the family can ask questions and seek clarification from the professionals. The professionals and the co-ordinator then leave.

Stage 2
The second stage provides time for the family in private to draw up a plan, which takes into account the concerns they have heard in the first part of the conference. They have as much time as they need and food and drink are provided to assist the process. The food will reflect cultural norms, as will the manner in which the particular conference is conducted. No record is made of these private family deliberations, although the family may record their plan to be discussed in Stage 3.

Stage 3
This begins when the family has agreed a plan and they ask the co-ordinator and any remaining professionals to rejoin their meeting. The plan is presented to the professionals for their agreement and any requests for resources are negotiated. The only ground for refusing a plan is if it places the child at risk of significant harm. In such instances the family is then asked to reconsider, but if an adequate plan cannot be agreed, the matter is referred to another decision-making body, such as the court or children’s hearing. This happens extremely rarely (Jackson and Nixon, 1999). In the Scottish experience this occurs in fewer than one per cent of cases.

Crow and Marsh (1997) outline the five key features of the family group conference model as follows:
1. An independent co-ordinator It is crucial that the co-ordinator is fair and impartial and has no line management responsibility for the family.

2. A wide and inclusive notion of the extended family Key family members decide who to invite to the family group conference. This often includes aunts, uncles, cousins and family friends as well as parents and grandparents. If there is any dispute about who attends, the co-ordinator’s negotiation skills may be required in the preparation phase.

3. Information giving in plain and concise ways There should be no use of jargon or wordy reporting of information.

4. Private family time This is the most important part of the family group conference where the family will debate the issues and agree a plan for the child.

5. A process of negotiating and agreeing the plan Professionals have the opportunity to hear the family plan, clarify any issues and accept the plan, indicating their agreement to respond to requests for assistance or resources.

These characteristics are what define this method as different from other decision-making processes and ways of involving the family in them. But within these constraints the family is able to make key decisions about how the process happens. Feedback from family members about the private family time reflects the fact that most people find it reasonably relaxed and they feel more in control of the process than families do in traditional social work meetings such as case conferences or reviews. It is very much the family’s meeting, albeit within parameters laid down by professionals.

Views on the family group process
Some of the feedback on family group conferences held in Scotland is as follows:

a. Children and young people
I got to say what I wanted to say.

It was ALL RIGHT.

I think it went quite well and that the things that I wanted sorted got sorted out and I am happy with the outcome of the meeting.

I got to speak freely.

You could walk about and there was food.

b. Relatives
It made the family face up to reality.

(Parents)

It went fine. (Parent)

It gave my daughters a chance for their point of view. (Parent)

I think it has made things better for my brother because he has now got a place to settle down with his family. (Sibling)

Well, I think it got a lot of questions answered. (Grandparent)

c. Professionals and referrers
I would recommend it. It’s discussing important issues in front of family members. Families have answers themselves.

(Professional)

Surprised at first – a little doubtful if a family in conflict could communicate and reach decisions . . . I was surprised that they managed to communicate sufficiently. (Professional)

Excellent practice . . . whole ethos of family group conference demonstrated . . . family empowered. Good for us as workers to see we do not always know best. Working alongside is good practice.

(Professional)

It was a very successful meeting with an unexpected outcome. It proved a valuable forum for the family. (Referrer)

A case example
Joe was referred for a family group conference. He had been looked after and accommodated by the local authority for some considerable time. A return to his mother’s care had proved not possible because of her continued misuse of drugs.
His mother was a lone parent who had long-standing difficulties related to misuse of drugs over many years. Joe’s father was not contactable and was reported to misuse alcohol seriously.

A family group conference was convened to plan where Joe was going to live. The social work department had reached the view that he could not safely return to live with his mother. Consequently alternative permanent carers were needed for him.

Before looking for carers outwith the family, the social worker requested a family group conference in order to find out whether there were any family members who could offer to care for Joe.

Ten family members attended the family group conference. Further family members who were unable to be there provided information for the meeting. Two social work staff and the foster carer were present to give information on the local authority’s view, responsibilities and role, plus the care needs of Joe.

Following the private family time, the plan put forward by the family and accepted by the professionals was for an aunt and uncle potentially to act as carers. These relatives wanted to find out more about what was involved in caring for Joe, for example what rights and responsibilities would they, his mother and the social work department have? What did the assessment consist of? The aunt and uncle needed time to think through the implications for their own family.

Arrangements were made for the social worker to begin discussions with the couple. A follow-up family group conference was agreed in order to make sure planning for Joe moved forward.

By the time of the follow-up family group conference the aunt and uncle had decided they were not able to offer to care for Joe and everyone connected to the meeting knew that. Nonetheless the family group attended for the second family group conference. Once again the family group used the information-sharing stage as an opportunity to check out the roles, responsibilities and likely actions and decisions of the social work department. They were keen to know about probable timescales, the possible geographical location of an alternative placement, and the likelihood of contact with Joe.

Then in private the family debated the options for Joe. At times there were raised voices, family members left from and returned to the meeting room and there were tears. The plan from the meeting reflected the family’s decision – no one within the family could offer to care for him. The family was aware of the implications of this painful decision: namely that non-related permanent carers would now be sought for Joe.

**Why use family group conferences in permanency?**

*Advantages for the family*

As Joe’s case illustrates, the decision to place a child for permanency is clearly a momentous one for the child and also for the family. No other decision in child welfare is as fundamental as placing a child permanently with another family. It is of vital importance that other family members, not just the immediate family of parents and possibly grandparents, understand what is involved in a decision to go for permanency and what it would mean if the child were to be placed outwith the family.

It is not unusual in day-to-day social work practice for extended family members to hold back from involvement, seeing themselves as not wanting to interfere, or it not being ‘their place’. Holding a family group conference is a very good means of giving to all family members the same information and the same opportunity to discuss and deliberate together and hopefully to come up with a plan. The extended family is then involved in the decision-making process, takes responsibility for decisions and has the opportunity to offer resources, as well as to seek appropriate resources from the agencies.

In one case it was not until the family group conference co-ordinator visited to discuss the family group conference that a relative had had an opportunity to discuss the situation, in which adoption for her grand-daughter was a likely outcome. Although other members of the extended family had attended meetings with the social work department and been
present at children’s hearings, this relative had not been invited. The outcome of the family group conference was that the grandmother would be assessed as a carer for the child.

In situations where there may be several family members offering to care for the child, it allows the family as a whole to look at who is best placed to do that and for all offers to be considered and discussed at once. This can obviate the sort of situation where a series of people come forward one after the other, as family members withdraw or are found to be unsuitable.

This can result in considerable delay in the decision-making process and therefore delay in finding the child a permanent family home. Therefore, as part of the plan, it may be that a contingency is agreed, so that timescales are not drawn out in the event of some of it failing.

The outcome of one family group conference was that three family members wished to be assessed as permanent carers for a child. However, in their discussions, the family group acknowledged that one particular family member from the three was the best option. The family decided to have a follow-up family group conference as soon as the assessments were completed in order to further plan for the child’s future and their part in it. If the child was going to be placed with a family member, contact with other family members would be discussed. If after assessment no family member was going to care for the child, the family wished to discuss the implications of placement outwith the family and the family’s potential role and place in the child’s future.

During the information-sharing part of the family group conference, it is vital that family members are given clear information about the needs of the child and any assessment that might be involved if they were to put their names forward as carers for the child. This allows family members to make an informed choice about whether or not they wish to put themselves through such a process. A member of the family placement team may be invited to give information on matters such as legal routes to permanency, financial help, adoptive placements and contact.

Advantages for the child

There is likely to be a considerable saving in time, particularly where there is a large extended family. This usually means that decisions can be implemented more speedily for the child. The child will also know that the whole family was involved and that family members did come together to try to make the best plan for him or her. If the outcome is a permanent placement away from home, the family group conference will hopefully help to give the child permission to attach to another family.

In one such family group conference, 15 family members were involved in planning for a child. For a variety of reasons none of them could offer the child a permanent home. The social worker hoped that the child would understand, both now and for the future, that placement within the family had been fully explored and that this would aid settling and attaching to non-family carers. The child was present at the meeting, made cakes for it, took photos and described it as ‘a bit of a family party’. As with many family occasions, the event spanned the emotional spectrum from fun and laughter (cakes and photos) to serious discussions and decisions (the plan).

Kinship placements are also a more likely outcome of family group conferences. One national study on family group conferences showed that those children in the UK offered a family group conference were more likely to be placed with extended family (than by orthodox methods) and that a placement was more likely to be stable (Crow and Marsh, 1997). Waterhouse (2001) found that relatives other than grandparents were frequently involved as kinship carers and a significant number of identified carers had no blood relationship to the child.

Other research shows that placement with a family member tends to be more stable, last longer and mean fewer moves than with foster carers (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987; Dubowitz, 1990; Gabel, 1992; Berrick et al, 1994). US research suggests this can be particularly the case
with children from minority communities (Berrick et al, 1994), though Ince (2001) argues that UK practice and policies lag behind those of the USA in relation to black and minority ethnic children. The main reasons for the stability of kinship placements seem to be that the carer feels a special commitment to a relative and that the children experience placement within their family as less disruptive (Dubowitz et al, 1993).

In the past in the UK, adoption has been considered for some children before the availability of care within the family has been fully explored (Trent, 1989; Walton et al, 1993; Ryburn, 1995). One of the criticisms has been that children placed with their family are left in a ‘legal limbo’ with a lack of clarity as to their right to long-term security (Sheindlin, 1996). Also some professionals seem to doubt extended family members’ commitment to children in their wider family networks. Yet practice experience is that professionals are more reluctant than family members to attend family group conferences (Lupton et al, 1995).

Advantages for the local authority or adoption agency
The co-ordinator during the preparation time is likely to undertake work which may have a significant impact on the social worker’s work with the family. For example, time will be spent with children to help them express their views; contact may be made with wider family who have not previously been known to social services (sometimes because of geographical distance or because of parental resistance); family members may be enabled to move forward for the purposes of a clearly focused meeting. Here the independence of the co-ordinator can be a significant factor.

The social worker’s role both prior to and at the family group conference is crucial. The clearer the referrer can be, the clearer is likely to be the focus of the meeting and the family’s plan. As discussed above, use of the family group conference can help to reduce delay, maximise the likelihood of a placement with relatives and ensure that all the family receive the same information.

The fact that the family in a family group conference tends to feel more in control and empowered is also generally helpful to the social worker as relatives are perhaps more inclined to say what they think, whether it is supportive or critical, and to ask for services they need. In the process of permanency this can be helpful in moving people on emotionally from what can at times be a rather entrenched position. It is of great importance that the social worker spells out with absolute clarity what the bottom line is, e.g that the child is unable to return to live with her or his parents for the following reasons. Provided that the family accept this, a family group conference is appropriate. Where a family does not accept it, the co-ordinator is likely to conclude that a family group conference will not work, and other means of moving forward will be needed, for instance through a contested action in the courts.

One family group conference was arranged after a period of several months of trying to engage the parents. Both parents were at times enthusiastic and at other times made themselves unavailable. Members of the mother’s family were also keen at first, but after an argument with the mother decided not to come to the family group conference.

In the event, the only people who attended the family group conference were members of the father’s family, one of whom offered to care for the child. Although it would have been preferable to have a wider family network there, including the parents, a viable plan was still made for the child and was not opposed by the parents.

Where parents are actively opposed to family group conferences taking place and where they are refusing to let information be shared, other ways of addressing this may need to be considered. We understand that in one case in England a court order was made overriding parents’ refusal to allow a family group conference to take place. It is the right of the child to have a placement within the family considered rather than the right of the parent to refuse such consideration. Whether such a placement would be advisable in the face of strong opposition...
from the parents would then have to be part of the discussion at the family group conference.

In two separate family group conferences in Scotland, the carer parent chose not to attend. In the first example, through time the parent concluded that while she was not against a family group conference taking place, she would not attend and would have nothing more to do with it. Following the family group conference, the child went to live with family members. In the second example, the parent stated her opposition to a family group conference. Preparation for the meeting went ahead and the parent was informed by letter what was happening. She did not attend the meeting. As a result of the family group conference, family members are being assessed as permanent carers for the child.

Research in New Zealand, where family group conferences have been running longest, indicates a significant reduction of children in the public care (Maxwell, 1991), although there have been problems with official record-keeping, so comparisons over time have been problematic. On the basis of the early research from New Zealand, Thornton (1993) concluded:

*Families are more involved than ever in making decisions and taking responsibility for their children. Fewer children are being separated from their family or whanau [extended family] than for many years.* (p 29)

Family group conferences can also provide a supportive function, strengthening family connections. In New Zealand the involvement of extended family has served to increase the support around the original caregivers (Hassall and Maxwell, 1991). In the UK extended family members were also far more likely to be involved in offering support to their kin than with traditional approaches. Marsh and Crow examined 80 family group conferences in the UK; in 94 per cent of these, families volunteered some level of support and in 31 per cent of cases offered to look after the children for at least some period of time (Marsh and Crow, 1998).

Thus in addition to the children benefiting greatly from the family group conference, there is less demand on the resources of social services departments (Nixon, 2001).

**Family group conferences in permanency planning**

Ideally, if family group conferences were to become more mainstream, a family group conference would be held before accommodation or shortly after the accommodation of a child. Further family group conferences may then be appropriate as the situation changes.

The timing of a family group conference in permanency has to be considered carefully. There needs to be sufficient clarity about the direction in which the planning is going, but there should still be options open. Once a child reaches the point where decisions about permanency are being formulated in social workers’ minds, and certainly by the time that formal decision-making meetings are taking place, a family group conference should be held. After a looked after children review decision to pursue permanency, a family group conference is highly appropriate, preferably before an adoption panel recommendation and agency decision for registration (in Scotland) or best interests (in England). Where adoption panels are used for consultation purposes, a family group conference is often appropriate after the consultation panel and prior to the next panel.

For one child the family group conference was prompted by the social services department’s decision to move the child from the foster placement he had been in for over one year. By this time social services had also decided against returning the child home. Family members were angry that they had not known about social services’ thinking and decision-making at an earlier stage. Some family members felt they had been suddenly weighed down by the need to consider the child’s future, the position of the child’s mother, their relative, and their own circumstances.

One family member said the family group conference should have happened...
much earlier, ideally prior to the child being accommodated (as this was not the first time the child had been accommodated by the local authority) or immediately after the child was accommodated in order to inform the extended family about what was happening, and to explore options of family support for the child and the parent. Despite this difficult and painful meeting, the outcome for the child was positive. Through the family group conference process, the child’s father was traced and two family members wished to be assessed as permanent carers. The child was subsequently placed with a family member.

A family group conference is also appropriate when parallel planning is being used to shorten the decision-making process. The family could look at what supports they could offer parents and what support is needed from professional services to enable the parents to have the child home. Or, in the event of that not working out, what, if any, offers to care for the child on a permanent basis are being made by the family. Then, as part of the parallel planning process, any assessment of family members making such an offer could take place, thus avoiding delay for the child.

Once a decision to move towards adoption has been taken, is it appropriate to hold a family group conference? Issues to be discussed could include contact, the characteristics of a suitable adoptive family and information for the child. The difficulty seems to be that it is impossible to discuss these concerns in a vacuum with just the views of the birth family. Contact has to be negotiated with adopters as well as birth family members and must have at its heart what is in the best interests of the child. It is very important that if a family is being invited to a family group conference they have decisions to make which can have a real impact on the outcome for the child.

As illustrated by the following case example, a family group conference at this stage is not something to be ruled out. However, it is likely to be less widely relevant than at earlier stages in the process.

A family group conference took place after the decision was made that a child would be placed permanently with non-family members. The family plan included the family group’s suggestion for future contact by a variety of methods. The family group also agreed to work together on a family tree/family scrapbook for the child. Family members felt it was very important that the child should know who his extended family was, irrespective of who he was living with.

Parents considering adoption for their child (relinquishing parents)
There may be times when it is appropriate to use a family group conference to help parents reach a decision about relinquishing a child, typically a baby. In such a case, there are very often differing views between parents and grandparents.

A family group conference would be a way of marshalling the family resources and looking realistically at whether or not there was enough support from within the family and from professionals to enable the parents to care for the child. If adoption were to be the plan from the family group conference, the family could also discuss gathering information for the benefit of the child, how this would be done and who would facilitate this.

Involvement of the child in the family group conference
Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) not only demands that children are entitled to express their views on matters of concern to them but also that their views are given proper consideration. Family group conferences can offer children the opportunity to fulfil these principles and be more involved in making key decisions that will affect their lives.

The co-ordinator’s role in the preparation stage of the family group conference is crucial to help family members and relevant professionals consider what their aims, objectives and expectations are of the meeting and to what extent the child will be involved in the decision-making process. The child’s involvement in a family group conference considering permanency will require serious deliberation, which is unlikely to have a simple or straightforward solution. How
do issues of age and stage of development, level of understanding, having a voice, expressing one's views or being listened to fit in with the emotional time-bomb of family decision-making in permanency? Quite simply there is no easy answer and family members, along with relevant professionals, need to make a judgement call, recognising it as such and being prepared to deal with any consequences arising from their decision.

Decision-making in permanency planning can be a complex process even for adults to comprehend. The child will need the process explained in a manner that they will understand so that they will be clear about the issues they are being consulted about and who ultimately will make the final decision.

There is no room for tokenism in this process and the child should have confidence that his or her opinion, whatever that might be, will be taken seriously. The co-ordinator will make sure that the child is well prepared for the meeting and has agreed how the child's information will be shared with the other participants. Should the child require additional information or clarification, then the co-ordinator will ensure that this is provided by the relevant person at the meeting.

Co-ordinators have no statutory responsibility and the independent nature of their role can be particularly useful when helping the child to prepare for the meeting. The child can discuss thoughts and feelings without fear of offending or upsetting a family member or a professional who has a responsibility for the child or has a role in the decision-making process. In some situations it may become apparent that the child may require additional input or support, particularly during the 'private family time'. In these circumstances the services of an independent advocate would be arranged by the co-ordinator to support the child throughout the process, ensuring their views were expressed and considered alongside the views of others.

**Resources**

Consideration must be given to what resources are or could be made available. A realistic picture of the likelihood of an adoptive family being found should be conveyed to the family. Resources to support the family in the event of a kinship placement need to be explained. The local authority must not avoid this or consider such a placement as a cheap option.

If members of the family are taking on children who have experienced the trauma of separation, plus other traumas associated with the reason for removal from home in the first place, they need support. These children are very likely to display difficult and disturbed behaviour, as is recognised very clearly in the preparation of adopters. Relative carers themselves have identified both financial and social work support as important (Laws, 2001). Both Pitcher (2002) and Richards (2001) highlighted the need for better and more consistent financial provision for grandparent carers, the majority of whom were experiencing financial hardship as a consequence of raising their grandchild.

They also noted the need for more widespread access to advice and support, and awareness of the needs of grandparent carers within childcare agencies. Therefore social workers attending family group conferences need to come to the conference with information about what resources may or may not be available and give a clear explanation of that to the family.

One plan from a family group conference involved the family stating how much financial assistance they would need from the local authority in order to be able to manage, given that the family member was giving up full-time work in order to care for the young child permanently. The request was for a time-limited period and was accepted by the local authority.

Resources may also be required if the family's decision is to support adoption out of the family. Research over many years makes clear that the painful losses involved in adoption continue to have an impact on both birth mothers (Bouchier et al, 1991; Howe et al, 1992) and birth fathers (Clapton, 2001). Not only parents but also grandparents or siblings may well need ongoing support and counselling.
Conclusion

Sometimes wider family members do not feel able to intervene when things are going wrong in a part of their family. They may feel that they are interfering, or they may feel that they have already tried and failed in, for example, supporting the parents to be able to care adequately for the child. However, once there is a decision that a permanent family placement should be sought for a child, the situation is different. No longer are people striving to support adults to care for the child; the focus is entirely on what is in the best interests of the child, and some family members who may not have come forward for fear of upsetting the parents may now be willing to have the child. Generally most parents do prefer their children to go to someone in the family, rather than have them adopted. Other family members do feel that they have a legitimate right to put themselves forward if the alternative is adoption.

A family group conference is a way of pulling together family members to look at all the options and to enable them to draw up a plan which meets the child's needs as outlined by the social worker.

The obvious benefits for the local authority or adoption agency would be to free the social worker from having to take on the practical tasks of linking in with all the extended family and bringing them together to participate in the decision-making process for the child. Family group conferences should also be approached as a practical demonstration of partnership working between families and agencies.

Note

All case examples are drawn from contributions from practice experience and identifying information has been changed.

References


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