



## Snyder County Children and Youth Services

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### **Family Group Conferencing**

#### **Introduction**

Family group decision making (FGC) offers a new approach to working with families involved with the child welfare system. Families are engaged and empowered by child welfare agencies to make decisions and develop plans that protect and nurture their children from enduring further abuse and neglect.

The FGC process inherently fosters cooperation, collaboration, and communication between professionals and families. FGC is primarily being used by child welfare, juvenile probation and other community resources.

Over forty of sixty-seven counties in Pennsylvania are currently using FGC. The PA process is a strengths-based empowerment model designed to join the wider family group, including relatives, friends, community members, and others, to collectively make decisions to resolve an identified concern.

A unique aspect of the FGC model is the structured time during the information sharing stage of the family meeting for a facilitated discussion of family strengths and concerns. The differentiating element of the FGC is the provision of private time whereby only family considers the information presented, deliberate, and make decisions that are then presented back to the professionals and other conference attendees for discussion and approval.

Both in New Zealand and the United States, incorporating FGC into child welfare practice has been spurred by a number of phenomena, including:

- The escalating number of children, disproportionately minorities, living in out-of-home care;
- Many children spending an unacceptable length of time in out-of-home care settings;
- Many children experiencing multiple out-of-home placements; and

- The services delivered to children and their families (particularly to Maori in New Zealand) were gauged as racist.

With more children, disproportionately minority, living in out-of-home care for longer periods of time, and in multiple settings, it is logical that the child welfare field would be ready to review international practices that may prove to positively impact children and families. In addition, FGC is being studied because it fits closely with some of the current philosophical changes in child welfare. These philosophical trends include increasing the use of kinship care, capitalizing on family strengths, and creating a partnership and participatory decision-making process between the family and professionals. As child welfare agencies' commitment to delivering culturally competent and family-centered services increases, and New Zealand experiences positive results with FGC implementation, it is not surprising that approximately 25 states in the United States are discussing or implementing some form of FGC.

## **Principles**

While communities have varying impetuses for implementing FGC, the cornerstone philosophies tend to be similar. If it is believed that families, communities, and the government must partner to ensure child safety and well being, then families must be regularly involved in making decisions about protecting and ensuring safety for their children. FGC is in fact the non-adversarial process that provides families with the opportunity to make these important decisions.

FGC is characterized as a practice, which is family-centered, family strengths-oriented, culturally based, and community-based. It recognizes that families have the most information about themselves to make well-informed decisions and that individuals can find security and a sense of belonging within their families. It emphasizes that; first and foremost, families have the responsibility to not only care for, but also to provide a sense of identity for, their children. It encourages families to connect with their communities, and the communities to link with their families

***"What started as an experiment in five communities in 1995 is now a widely recognized practice embraced by over 150 communities across the nation."***

***— Lisa Merkel-Holguin***

***We need to send a different message to society ... "It's not us who can help you, it's you that can help you."***

***— Rob van Pagee***

## **Values and Benefits**

### **Our Common Vision and Values**

- A more hands-on, integrated planning approach emphasizing a family focused intervention that empowers family members to seek out and organize solutions for their children who are at risk.
- A family-driven family service system versus an agency driven social service provider agency with a common belief that all families have strengths and capabilities to resolve their own problems.
- A system that asserts a genuine opinion of family unity is flexible to change and promotes an atmosphere that encourages cooperation and receptiveness by families to engage within the process.

## **Referrals**

Snyder County Children and Youth Services accepts referrals from outside agencies and individuals. If you are interested in making a referral for a conference or would like to hear more about family group conferencing, please contact our in house coordinator, Lori Weir at (570) 374-4570

## **Links**

For more in depth information on the family group conferencing process please visit the following links:

National Web Site: <http://www.americanhumane.org>

University of Pittsburgh PA Family Group: <http://www.pacwcbt.pitt.edu/FGDM.htm>