

Practitioner Research Summary

# Engaging with Fathers - Men in the FGC Process

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## Engaging with Fathers: men in the FGC process

The purpose of this research was to explore the factors affecting the participation and contribution of fathers in Family Group Conferences (FGCs) commissioned by CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup>.

It is widely recognised that FGCs engage more family members than other methods of case planning in child welfare, and that men are more likely to attend FGCs than traditional meetings, such as looked after children reviews or child protection case conferences.

### Family Group Conferences

Family Group Conferencing is an innovative approach that brings relevant family members together when a significant decision needs to be made about a child or young person or where there are concerns regarding a child's welfare. FGC helps the family to find their own solutions to difficulties, and is based on the belief that given resources, information and power families will make safe decisions for their children.

### Research Design and Methods

Six fathers were interviewed from a list of 20 possible participants who had attended an FGC or review in Mid or East Lothian over a 12 month period. In addition, ten questionnaires were analysed from FGC co-ordinators across Scotland.

### Research Findings

- Fathers experienced a high degree of satisfaction with the FGC process, despite serious difficulties and frustration in their lives and the lives of their children.
- Co-ordinators' and fathers' views of the process commonly coincided: both saw FGCs as being able to overcome many of the obstacles to constructive participation by engaging with fathers on their terms, listening to them, encouraging better communication and ensuring

that the meetings were more accessible and informal, with more flexible timing.

- Fathers felt listened to, not judged, and believed the FGC allowed for more honesty, openness and a wider view of the child's situation from a variety of people who knew the child well.
- Fathers felt that the FGC process brought many positive outcomes, including: improved contact and relationships with their children, improved education for the child, and the fathers being more involved in providing emotional and practical support for their child(ren).
- Some of the difficulties fathers identified within the FGC process centred around family conflict and a perceived lack of resources from professional agencies.
- Fathers were more likely to participate in FGCs where the co-ordinator spent time with them, where there was an emphasis on the FGC as an opportunity to influence events, and where there was a clear focus on the child, regardless of whether or not the adults got on with each other.

## **Conclusions**

Practical and cultural barriers which often prevent fathers from engaging with children's services and attending associated meetings have a bearing on FGCs, but there are many aspects of the FGC process and the role of the co-ordinator which actively succeed in breaking down these barriers. The fathers who participated in the study experienced a high degree of satisfaction with the process and compared their FGC(s) very favourably with other planning meetings they had experienced.

As well as highlighting the key elements of the FGC model that are significant in engaging fathers, the study indicates areas of practice which could inform other professionals and agencies seeking to involve fathers in child welfare issues. While resources and funding do have a bearing, not all of these practices involve additional time or resources.

The study highlighted three areas for further learning and development:

1. Preparation and management of private family time where there is a high degree of family conflict requires further exploration.
2. Preparing professionals for the FGC meeting and emphasising the need for consistency of information and input between FGCs and other child welfare meetings.
3. The issue of recording and influencing gaps in service and unmet needs is an ongoing one for FGC services, and this study highlights the need to avoid situations where efforts and changes made by families are not matched by commitment and resources from professional agencies and service providers.

*This research was carried out by Ewan Ross, Family Group Conference co-ordinator at the CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup> Midlothian FGC Service, as part of a series of CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup> practitioner research studies. For a full copy of the report, please contact [info@children1st.org.uk](mailto:info@children1st.org.uk).*

CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup> works to give every child in Scotland a safe and secure childhood. We support families under stress, protect children from harm and neglect, help them recover from abuse and promote children's rights and interests.

We provide 40 services in 25 local authority areas as well as five national services including the free confidential helpline ParentLine Scotland (0808 800 2222), and ChildLine in Scotland (0800 1111) which we operate on behalf of the NSPCC.

CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup> has pioneered the use of Family Group Conferencing in Scotland, and now works with 15 local authorities to provide FGC services.

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