

Practitioner Research Summary

# Life Changing Decisions

The relevance of Family Group Conferences  
in permanence planning

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## The relevance of Family Group Conferences in permanence planning

The purpose of this research was to determine the extent that Family Group Conferences (FGCs) are being used in permanence planning for children in Scotland, when FGCs should be considered, what contribution this approach can make to the process and any potential problems.

### Family Group Conferences

FGC 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. This model helps the family 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

The views of key professionals were obtained from local authority professionals, CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup> FGC staff and relevant academics. Information was gathered mainly via telephone interviews using a set of 13 questions for professionals within the local authority and ten similar questions for FGC co-ordinators. In total, information was gained about 25 permanence-related FGC referrals.

### Findings

- There are considerable benefits to having an FGC when permanence is being considered, including: improvements in communication between all parties, giving the child a sense of identity and helping to keep them safe, empowering family members, and helping professionals to explore all the options for the child quickly and effectively.
- FGCs allow kinship care to be fully considered for each child or young person, which can provide clear benefits in terms of their emotional development and wellbeing, as well as aiding preparation for permanence panels.

- Scottish legislation and the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989) state that children's views should be given proper consideration; an FGC gives the child that opportunity.
- Some respondents highlighted that it is important that an FGC does not delay permanence or raise unhelpful family conflicts or contact issues – co-ordinators need to assess these potential issues in each family situation and plan accordingly.
- An FGC ensures that the child knows that every effort had gone into exploring their family options. If a placement is made outwith the family, this can be made quicker, and the extended family coming together can also give the child permission to attach to another family (Harnott & Humphries, 2004).
- FGCs lessen demand on local authority resources.

### **Recommendations for Referrers**

Social workers are required to check resources within the family before any permanence panel will make a decision, so an FGC should be at the forefront of their thinking.

Referrals for an FGC should be made as early as possible to offer both the best and "speediest" outcome for the child or young person and to avoid prolonging damaging situations. Referrals should be made:

- at the time of decision for permanence
- at the point of parallel planning or 'twin tracking'
- alongside kinship care assessments.

Referrers could also consider two FGCs: the first at the point of decision making to consider rehabilitation and to identify potential family members and support in the event of rehabilitation breaking down; and the second at the point of the final decision to ensure that all options have been considered before going to the permanence panel.

Referrals can also be made when family placement is not possible, in order to discuss contact and to help the child move on.

### **Recommendations for FGC Co-ordinators**

Co-ordinators must have an essential understanding of the intense feelings surrounding permanency decisions, demonstrate counselling and empathy skills, and be skilled at dealing with conflict. They should actively promote the benefits of FGCs in cases where permanence has been decided.

Co-ordinators should take steps to counteract the potential problems identified by professionals, for example, timing issues.

It is important that co-ordinators understand issues such as separation and loss, age and stage of development, behaviour, attachment, vulnerability and resilience.

*This research was carried out by Lorraine McKillop, Family Group Conference co-ordinator in the CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup> South Lanarkshire FGC Service, as part of a CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup> practitioner research training programme.*

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CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup> has pioneered family group conferencing in Scotland, and currently works with 15 local authorities to provide FGC services.

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