CHILDREN 1ST

Practitioner Research

Engaging with Fathers - Men in the FGC Process

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Contents

Introduction

Aim:

The aim of this piece of work was to prepare, carry out and present a small research study exploring factors and processes affecting the participation and contribution of fathers in Family Group Conferences (FGCs) organised by Children 1st. I am a Family Group Conference Co-ordinator with Children 1st in Midlothian and undertook this study alongside my normal duties.

Background:

Family Group Conferencing is a participatory approach to planning in child welfare that was originally developed in New Zealand, drawing heavily on Maori traditions of family and community. The approach was successful in New Zealand and was introduced to the UK and other countries throughout the 1990s. FGC services are now well established in Scotland and operate in 14 local authority areas. Of these services, 13 of the 14 are operated directly by Children 1st. FGCs have been operating in Midlothian and East Lothian for around 5 years.

FGcs can be used in a wide variety of situations where family issues and difficulties are impacting on children and young people and decisions need to be made and plans prepared to resolve the main issues. FGCs provide a

voluntary forum for doing so that puts extended families at the heart of this process, recognising and building on strengths within the wider family group.

FGCs recognise that 'children and their parents are nested in a family system that has a history, unique ways of functioning and is a source of support and help'(Pakura 2004). FGCs also bring in key professionals alongside the family to support, inform and help to resource the family plan in a way that is respectful of the family.

The approach can be used a number of key points in the life of a young person. From early intervention to assist families to resolve problems before they become unmanageable, through to crisis intervention to prevent a chid/young person being accommodated or to consider options for placement within the wider family.
The approach can also be used to consider possibilities for a young person being reintegrated to their family from a care setting, or to look at contact with family where a return home has been ruled out.A wide range of issues can form the focus for the meetings, including child protection, children affected by substance misuse, youth offending and family relationships.

Although most FGCs will be a one off event, a significant proportion (around 40% in Midlothian) do go on to one or more reviews, which take the same format, though can be smaller in size. The option of having a review is discussed with the family prior to the FGC ending. The FGC model, as practised by Children 1st, is characterised by the following features:

- An independent co-ordinator who helps the family to prepare, and who convenes the meeting.
- The encouragement of extended family members to participate and lend support.
- The emphasis on the FGC as a significant event and the encouragement of children and young people to be fully involved.
- The provision of food at the meeting to provide both sustenance and a focal point that emphasises the informality and family focussed nature of the meeting.
- The importance of private family time where the plan is outlined, emphasising family empowerment and ownership of the plan.
- The presence of key professionals to inform and support the family.
- The emphasis on concerns and information being shared prior to the meeting.
- The importance of the FGC being child focussed, future focussed and blame free.

Descriptive studies show that FGCs engage more family members than other case planning methods and that there are high degrees of family and professional satisfaction with the process. It is widely recognised within this that fathers and the paternal side of the family are generally represented at FGCs and that men are more likely to attend FGCs than more traditional meetings such as Child Protection Case Conferences or Looked After Children Reviews.

A UK wide Family Rights Group survey in 2005 showed that, 'in 62% of cases, fathers (birth or step), attended FGCs organised by the projects consulted in the year prior to the study (FRG 2005). This contrasts to the research by Thorburn et al in 1995 which found fathers to be present at only 16 % of Child Protection Case Conferences.
Similarly, Grimshaw's study in 1996 showed that fathers attending FGCs relating to children within the care system were present at 61% of FGCs, compared to those attending conventional review meetings, which was 21%.

These studies give some idea of the number of fathers attending FGCs, but it is more difficult to assess the contribution made by these fathers and gain insight into the experience as perceived by the fathers themselves. It is this area that the study seeks to explore.

This study should be of interest to a wide range of professionals involved in planning, facilitating and evaluating FGCs within and beyond Children 1st. It should also be of interest to those involved in planning and managing children's services, as well as practitioners in the field. It should be of interest to fathers themselves and to other family members who have participated in or are considering participating in an FGC.

The study is offered in the context of a growing awareness of the need to facilitate and support strong, positive relationships between fathers and their children, whether or not those fathers are living with their children. There is also a growing awareness of the need for key child welfare organisations to adapt their services to make them more accessible to and inclusive of fathers, as evidenced by the formation and growth of organisations like Fathers Direct.

Study Design

Basis:

This study represents an opportunity to look beneath the statistics and anecdotal evidence to explore factors and processes affecting the participation and contribution of fathers in FGCs. and which elements of the FGC process are significant in this area. In looking at engagement, I examined:

- The father's willingness to meet the co-ordinator and attend the FGC.
- The father's degree of commitment to the overall process
- The father's contribution to the discussions and decisions.
- Any significant obstacles or problems limiting the father's participation.
- The father's experience of taking on and following through responsibilities agreed at the FGC.
- Any other aspect of the process that the father wished to comment on and some comparison with other types of meeting relating to their children.

Methods:

The central element of the study consisted of a series of 1:1 interviews with fathers. A sample of 6 fathers were interviewed from a list of around 20 fathers, all of whom had attended an FGC or review FGC in the Mid or East Lothian areas within the last year. The sample size was limited due to the need to fit the study around work commitments. From the original list, participants largely self- selected themselves depending on their willingness and availability and the first 6 who agreed and who could commit the time were chosen. They were not selected according to the perceived likelihood of their making positive comments about their particular FGC. Of the 6 interviewees, 5 were from Midlothian and 1 from East Lothian.

Participants were sent a standard letter describing the study, giving them an opportunity to opt out by pre-paid post or opt out verbally, when contacted by telephone. Of the others who were approached, 2 fathers declined to take part, one did not attend the interview and the rest were difficult to contact.

Prior to the interviews starting, participants were reassured that the study would be anonymized and answers treated as confidential, unless there was a disclosure of previously unknown harm to another person. The fathers all

signed a declaration that they understood and agreed to the terms of the study.

Interviews themselves were structured and the questions were largely open ended, the study, overall, being a qualitative one.

3 of the 6 fathers interviewed were known to me as I was the co-ordinator at their FGC, and the other 3 were not, having been nominated by fellow co-ordinators.

In addition to this, I sent out a questionnaire to practising Children 1st Co-ordinators. The questions covered similar areas to those put to the fathers themselves, enabling some comparisons of the two different perspectives and bringing the comments of some very experienced practitioners into the study. 10 questionnaires were analysed in the study from co-ordinators across Scotland. A total of 19 questionnaires were sent out to co-ordinators experienced enough to comment, therefore there was a response rate of just over 50%.

Research Findings: Father Interviews

Sample Characteristics: .

The following details numbers and living situations of fathers and young people subject to FGCs covered by the study, at the point when the FGC was held.

	Children	**Fathers**
Total number involved across 6 FGCs	14	6
Children residing with both birth parents	2	1
Children residing with birth father	1	1
Children residing with birth mother	7	2
Children residing with foster carers	4	2

Although the study was open to both fathers and stepfathers, all of the men involved in the final interviews are birth fathers to their children. Some of the comments made by co-ordinators in their questionnaires do pertain to stepfathers.

Profiles:

Given the wide variation in the Different FGCs in terms of size, issues and the ages of children involved, I have given a brief profile of each participant, including relevant background. The fathers' names, and the names of partners and children where they appear, have been changed to respect confidentiality.

Peter:
Peter attended an FGC in relation to his 12 year old daughter who had been living with foster carers for 2 ½ years. The FGC looked at improving contact between Peter's daughter and her family (including Peter and her older brothers and sister). The meeting also considered whether there were realistic family options for placement or whether the arrangement with carers needed to be made permanent. A total of 8 family members and 3 professionals attended the meeting (not including co-ordinator). Peter saw his daughter twice a week.

Michael:
Michael's FGC focussed on improving communication and relationships within the family. Michael's children are aged 15 and 16 and there were issues around behaviour at home and behaviour and truancy at school in relation to both children. There were also alcohol related problems at home in relation to

Michael's wife. Michael's daughter has ADHD and is diabetic. There were frequent arguments at home and stress levels were running particularly high. Michael was off work with depression and stress related problems. 5 family members and 2 professionals attended the FGC.

Bryan:

Bryan's FGC involved 24 people, 16 of whom were family members. The meeting was convened at short notice as a result of mounting concerns about Bryan's ex-partner and her care of her 6 children. This woman's lifestyle and drug and alcohol consumption were causing her to neglect the children and they were being placed at risk. Concerns were such that it was no longer considered safe for the children to remain at home. There were 3 different fathers and the children were aged 3 to 15. Bryan is father to 2 of the children, aged 3 and 6. He had contact with the children at weekends and school holidays.

Eddie:

Eddie's FGC was called to address concerns about his care of his 7 year old daughter. Eddie's wife had died the previous year, meaning that he had to cope as a single parent with the upbringing of his daughter. Two half siblings had previously been accommodated. A plan for support for Eddie and contact between his daughter and other family members was considered, alongside support from external agencies. The FGC was attended by 7 family members and 3 professionals.

Norman:

Norman's FGC focussed on his 15 year old son's situation. The son lived with his mother, Norman's ex-partner. This boy's situation had deteriorated badly at home and school and he was unlikely to return to mainstream school with no alternative provision in place. There were frequent arguments at home and Norman's son was regularly put out of the house, causing him to stay with friends. Norman was actively involved, but unable to offer a home to his son, having already taken in his older son 2 years previously. Norman's son was involved in substance misuse and was offending in the community. The FGC considered education, support and living arrangements for Norman's son. 6 family members and 4 professionals attended the meeting.

Dave:

Dave's FGC focussed on the care of his 3 sons, aged 4, 6 and 7. Most concerns centred on his partner's previous misuse of drugs and the impact of this on the boys. There were also complex family issues and housing issues for Dave. The boys were and continue to be placed with foster carers and contact with them was one of the areas that the FGCs looked at.

Dave attended an initial, very small FGC with 3 family members and 2 professionals. He later took part in a larger review FGC with 11 family members and 5 professionals.

Of the 6 FGCs, 2 went on to at least one review FGC. Although the original FGC was the main focus for the study, some of the opinions expressed relate to the reviews.

Questions and Main Themes:

1. Willingness to Participate:

When asked to place themselves on a scale relating to their willingness to participate when first approached (i.e: Very willing, quite willing, reluctant, very reluctant), 4 out of 6 interviewees described themselves as very willing and 2 as quite willing.
Of the former, the most enthusiastic comment came from Norman,

'*Thought it was a great idea- make sure everybody's cards were on the table- get everybody in the one room*'.

Bryan acknowledged that he was unaware of the extent of the problems when contacted.

' I was not too happy- everything came as a shock- I was blind to what was going on- I only saw the kids once a week. I got a phone call out of the blue and then I was at the meeting.'

Having got over the initial shock, he described himself as ' wanting to be part of it, to get my neb in.'
Others were quite happy with the idea. The 2 fathers who were quite willing described themselves as being apprehensive, nervous and worried about arguments and lack of agreement. Dave summed up his feelings of wariness:

'*I didn't totally understand it at first, but it brought a lot of things to the fore.*'

2. Obstacles to Participation:

A number of doubts and worries were expressed. The main factor here was ongoing family tensions and anxiety about how this might play out at the FGC. There were also worries about the possible consequences of difficulties not being resolved at the FGC, such as children going into care, or permanent exclusion from school. One father expressed scepticism and anxiety about his

ex-wife's involvement, while Dave was worried about his partner's family being invited:

'I thought it wis a gey positive thing- I wisnae 100% sure though- Jackie's family are no that supportive, only when it suits them. I wis a bit apprehensive about being involved.'

Another father had doubts relating to social work involvement in the meeting, having views about negative experiences in the past.
Given the large scale of Bryan's meeting and his surprise at the extent of concerns about the children's situation, he felt quite intimidated and described his feelings.

' I was a bag of nerves coming to the meeting. I was really worried and I hadn't even done anything wrong. It was hard not knowing where my kids were going to end up. My worst fear was that they would end up in care and I would have to apply for custody. I was worried not knowing what sort of questions I would be asked.'

No practical difficulties were mentioned as obstacles to attending. In fact, it was clear that the flexibility around the timing of the meeting was valued by most fathers and seen as a real strength of the process, as mentioned later in the study.

Several fathers did make positive comments about the role of the co-ordinator in helping them with worries or doubts. Dave, for example, stated:

'It wis dead relaxing. She (the co-ordinator) made it something you wanted to go to rather than something that would scare you off. She made everybody feel at ease- took the officialdom away from it.'

3. Contribution to the Meeting:

The fathers interviewed all said they felt OK about speaking and contributing to the meeting. Again, there was some trepidation caused by strained family relations and events preceding the meeting. Two felt discomfort at first, but stated that this became easier as the meeting progressed.

'Once people started talking, it was OK- the longer the meeting went on, the better it was.' (Bryan)

One father who had acknowledged that he found it difficult to express himself in other settings said he was able to let other family members know

how he felt. Several comments were made about the relaxed, informal nature of the meeting, and that this did make it easier to contribute.
Norman expressed frustration that he felt he contributed 'the truth', whereas he perceived his ex-partner to have been less open and honest:

'*It was very one sided- everybody spoke honestly except Gillian- her answers were very unsatisfactory.'*

Michael was positive about the atmosphere and tone of the meeting when professionals were present, but contrasted this with the private family time:

'I don't think I contributed very much. I was asked by the family to chair our bit of the meeting and I couldn't keep a grip of it- people weren't sticking to the subject. Nothing was getting decided.'

Dave pointed out that he felt he learned a lot more from the meeting than he put into it:

'I did have my own input, but I put more value on the things I learned. Multitudes of things. It helped me understand what J was going through- stuff that goes way back. I learned about the real Jackie, not the façade she's put up for years. Other people learned more about her too.'

4. Contribution to Plans/ Satisfaction with Plans:

Out of the 6 fathers, 4 said they were happy overall with the plan, although a number of 'sticking points' were identified (discussed later).
Commitments made by the interviewees as part of family plans were wide and varied.
Bryan's children came to live with him as part of the plan:

' I was happy with the plan and I'm even happier now. I agreed to take my kids and I now have them permanently.'

Peter described reduced but much improved contact with his daughter:

'Laura visits and stays over on a Tuesday- our Friday visits were stopped (by agreement at the meeting). The Tuesday visits have happened. I take her to her music lesson and bring her back here. We have a tune together on the box (accordion), and she stays over and goes to school from here the next day.'

This contact has been sustained, although L's long- term foster placement broke down and she is now with new carers.

One father channelled his commitment to his son into specific help, both practical and emotional:

' I agreed to transport Michael to the education centre and pick him up to take him to his mother's. I agreed to help him speak and to support him with the problems with his Mum. When there was a problem with the education outreach, I got the woman to phone me and we sorted it out.'(Norman).

Another acknowledged that changes needed to be made in his approach:

'I agreed to listen to advice- I was doing things wrong, but I need to make mistakes to learn. I need to do things for Sharon because I'm her Dad. I need to be even more of a dad to her because I don't have my wife beside me. I realise now that I have been thrown into it that I have missed out on a lot. I didn't even go to her sports day before- I didn't realise how important it was.' (Eddie).

Dave felt that his FGC clarified his role in supporting his partner through difficult times:

'I have stuck by Jackie- helped her through her drug problem. I've kept up contact with the kids and so has she. She would never have gone to something before- she always walks out. She's been doing great and has kept her commitment.'

Of the 2 fathers who were not entirely happy with the plan, one, Norman, was frustrated at his ex- partners ability to acknowledge the need for change and for honesty. He was also frustrated at the lack of input and resources from professionals, specifically social work and education. Given that his son had been out of schooling for upwards of 6 months, he did acknowledge that something was achieved, although it was several weeks after the meeting before this was actioned.:

'We did get some sort of education sorted out, though it was not enough and it took the co-ordinator to create merry hell before it finally happened.'

This also refers to the advocacy role that can be played by the co-ordinator in assisting the family to implement their plan where resources have been agreed but are not forthcoming, or there is a lack of clarity around professional roles and responsibilities.

Michael felt that his son and daughter were being given treats regardless of whether or not they had earned them and stated that;

' Some ideas were discussed and ended up in the plan that I didn't necessarily agree with.'

Two of the fathers acknowledged the impressive amount of work that had gone into the plan.
Bryan was very happy with the plan in relation to his own children but expressed frustration at the fact that no options were available for another two vulnerable children within the same family:

'*Why was it important for my two kids to be removed but not them…'*

Most of the fathers acknowledged the fact that the issues and concerns discussed at their meetings were both longstanding and complex. Dave summed this up by stating:

'Aye the plan that wis made up wis the best that could be made at the time.'

All fathers interviewed felt that they had been able to follow through with commitments made at the meeting. They weren't all happy with other peoples' levels of commitment and, because of this, two fathers expressed a view that this aspect of the meeting was a 'waste of time'.
Eddie felt that people had made promises and commitments that they couldn't maintain. This was rectified at the review FGC:

' It was better, because we all realised at the second meeting what wasn't working. It just wasn't practical for everyone to do what they said. They were over- committing themselves. People were more realistic at the review.'

This is a common feature of reviews, where families are already familiar with the format and expectations of the meeting.

Eddie also expressed frustration with social work:

' I did have doubts about social work and their part in the plan. This has proved to be true as I don't feel they have taken any notice of the plan- it's as if the meeting hadn't happened.'

Similar sentiments were expressed by another father who was very frustrated by several changes in social worker.

5. Feeling More Informed / Involved About the Child's Issues:

Fathers were asked whether they felt more informed or involved as a result of the FGC. 4 said yes, definitely, and the two fathers who answered no both felt that they were already well informed:

'We *did know what the problem was and what we needed to do.' (Norman*).

Eddie referred to confusion over jargon and terminology in his dealings with professionals prior to the FGC:

'I didn't understand the language being used like 'boundaries' and 'routines'.'

He felt the FGC had been helpful in clarifying this:

'*I'm a lot clearer now but I still have a long way to go.'*

Bryan felt he was on a 'steep learning curve' and stated, in response to the question:

'*Definitely- I went from knowing the basics to knowing every single thing. Being told at the meeting about what was going on. Stephanie opened up at the meeting and was honest about this.'*

6. Positive Aspects of the Meeting:

Overall:

Fathers were asked to comment on what they felt were the most positive aspects of the meeting. Comments ranged from practical decisions like sorting out contact, living arrangements and education, through to relationships improving and fathers feeling listened to:

'I felt listened to at the meeting. Sharon and I were close but we are even closer now.' (Eddie)

'It gave a bit of hope at least. I did feel listened to. Saying what I needed to without any pressure wis good. It wis more honest, a different regime. You can loosen up and get more involved. You're there as a human being.'(Dave).

Norman liked the fact that openness and honesty are encouraged:

' You are able to air your views and tackle the problems head on. It was all out in the open and, with everybody there, you knew what was going on. There were no lies or jiggery-pokery.'

FGC Process:

They were also asked about what they liked about the different aspects of the FGC process.

Preparation:(the period between first contact with the co-ordinator and the FGC, including discussing and agreeing the main issues and the sharing of peoples' views and agendas).

All six fathers valued the preparation phase of the meeting and felt it was very valuable or in some cases essential:

'*The preparation is essential- you've got to prepare the ground. There's no point going in blind or going in with guns blazing. Good to get everyone's thoughts together and take it from there.' (Michael*).

Timing and Structure: (the meeting is primarily arranged to make it possible for the family to attend, and is set up in 3 parts: information sharing, where professionals give their input to the family; private family time, where the family are given an open ended opportunity to prepare a plan without the presence of professionals, and the discussion of the plan, where professionals return to discuss and agree on the plan).

Several positive comments were made about the flexible timing of the meeting and the fact that the meeting is 'set up to suit everybody.' Fathers liked the fact that the meeting could be after work to suit those in employment.

What came across clearly from three fathers was the generous allocation of time for the meeting:

'I liked the fact that proper time was allowed- this gave everybody their chance to say their piece. I don't think it would work if you said 'right, it's 12 o'clock now- this needs to be finished by 1 o'clock.' (Bryan).

'There was no pressure, or anything- everyone was given a chance to speak their mind. Liked the fact that you were free to come and go from it- have a fag and calm down a bit- have a wee break from it.' (Michael).

Venue: (the family are consulted on the venue- usually a community centre or local family resource base).

Most of the men indicated that the venue was not of prime importance. Norman's comment that 'it could have been held on the moon as far as I'm concerned, as long as it got something done', summed up the general feeling. There were several approving comments on the benefits of holding the meeting locally in terms of ease of access for those attending. Holding the meeting in a neutral venue was felt to be helpful, as was the need for privacy, but within a relaxed atmosphere.

Private Family Time: (this is felt to be crucial in terms of empowering the family and imbuing a sense of ownership of the meeting and the plan).

This question split the group. Three said they thought it was a good thing and that people used the time well to 'say their piece' and that people were 'actually listening'. Two fathers said that they felt this was where their meeting had foundered, and one felt that it was a good idea to have it 'if the family all get on', but it may not be responsible to leave people together who are clearly in conflict. He gave an example of this from his meeting, but still felt the private time was important.

The Role of the Co-ordinator: All six fathers expressed positive views about the role of the co-ordinator, both in practical terms, like organising the meeting and inviting everyone, through to feeling they could talk to the co-ordinator without feeling judged. Two fathers made direct comparisons between speaking to the co-ordinator and dealing with social workers.

'. It's hard with social workers because they keep changing and you feel like you're starting from scratch- they read bits of paper. It's people you're dealing with, no bits of paper! Talking to her (the co-ordinator) wis the first time I've been able to speak to somebody normally and relaxed.' (Dave).

'It really helps to be able to speak to pick the co-ordinator's brains and learn about other options- see the bigger picture.' (Eddie).

The Presence of Professionals: This was generally felt to be helpful, though some frustration was expressed about individuals coming to the meeting without answers about particular resources or support.
Eddie felt that his relationship with the head teacher of his daughter's school had been improved:

'I feel I can pick up the phone now, whereas before I felt I was being judged. The school were more understanding at the meeting that I was trying to feed Sharon breakfast but she just refused to eat it. Before, they just reported that she wasn't getting breakfast and that was it…they were judging me without really knowing about my situation.'

Bryan felt intimidated at first by the number of professionals at his meeting, but felt that this eased as the meeting went on and people started speaking. Dave pointed out that professionals seem to feel more relaxed at FGCs but was concerned that there were inconsistencies between what had been said at FGCs and what was said at other meetings.

'Social workers shouldn't say different things at different meetings, just because it's a relaxed atmosphere.' (Dave).
Another father echoed this concern, feeling in his case that the social worker was much clearer about concerns and more willing to listen at the FGC, but this was not followed through at subsequent non FGC meetings.

Other Aspects of the Meeting: Three of the fathers made positive comments about the presence of food at the meeting in terms of putting people at ease and freeing people up to speak. One father felt that food was a bit unnecessary given that no-one felt like eating

7. Difficult Aspects of the Meeting:

As well as commenting on the most difficult aspect of their meeting, fathers were asked whether they had any dislikes in relation to the same aspects of the meeting that were covered in the last question.
Two fathers said there were no difficult aspects. As mentioned previously, two felt that the private family time was the most difficult aspect of their meeting. In Norman's case, this highlighted his concern that the meeting would be one-sided and commitment and honesty would not be shared across the family:

'By that time, we were getting frustrated- that was when the bubble burst, it was all take, take, take and no give. There was nothing coming from Gillian (Norman's ex-partner).' (Norman).

Michael, as acknowledged earlier, was concerned that his meeting descended into argument at this point.

'When it was left up to us, it fell apart and ended up in a rammy. People were disagreeing just to get on each others' nerves. That didn't happen when other people were present….when the co-ordinator was handling the meeting, it was tickety-boo and everybody got their opinion in.'

Bryan felt that the worst aspect of the meeting was worrying afterwards, given that there was a delay between the meeting agreeing to his children coming to live with him and this actually happening.

'Every day I was worried- I was a bag of nerves, waiting a week for the kids to come to us. We knew that the kids were in the house with no improvement- drug taking, drinking and the kind of guys that were going to be in the house. There was loud music 'til 2 am when the kids were up for school the next day.'

Another father felt that the most difficult part was having to face up to the truths that came out as a result of the more relaxed atmosphere at the meeting.
Other difficult aspects have already been mentioned, such as inconsistencies in professional inputs between FGCs and other meetings, and frustration with professionals who came with high expectations of the family but offered little in the way of resources and support.

8. Comparisons with Other Meetings:

This area drew a strong set of responses based on most of the fathers' negative experiences of other types of meeting where they clearly felt less involved and less in control. They focussed mainly on school meetings and social work meetings/reviews.
School meetings were mentioned by four interviewees, who contrasted their FGC experience with some of the frustrations encountered here. Comments included fathers feeling judged and talked down to, schools dictating the meeting and 'having the last word'. One father felt the school meetings were 'all one sided' and focussed on relatively minor behaviour.
Norman missed what turned out to be an important meeting for his son.

'I only missed one (school meeting) and I was gutted that I missed that- I was away on holiday. That was a crucial meeting and turned out to be the final nail in the coffin for C at school.'

Three of the four fathers who spoke about social work meetings (mainly LAC Reviews) felt that they had more freedom to speak at FGCs. Peter said in relation to social work meetings,

'you felt if you said something, it could get brought up at a later date.'

'*The whole family meeting was a better meeting than the ones at social work and school. There was more time spent on things. It gave people a chance to come after work.' (Peter)*

Dave gave a particularly vivid description of his feelings of frustration and helplessness:

' At social work meetings, you feel that every move is being watched. It's a waste of time speaking because nobody listens. In a meeting room with suits and ties, you feel undermined- people looking over their glasses at you. You do feel judged.' (Dave).

He went on to contrast this with the FGC:

'*At the FGC we had more freedom to speak- we didn't feel the same stress. One FGC could do more than 20 meetings in a clinical environment.'*

In comparing the FGC with other meetings, Eddie stated;

' I felt much more listened to at the FGC, …..it was great. We had honesty and clarity from social work- they were much more up front about what I was doing wrong.'

Only one father, Bryan, compared social work meetings favourably to the FGC, feeling that, in his case, the social work review was smaller and more manageable than the FGC.

'I knew who I was going to speak to and was less in the dark this time.' (Bryan).

Only one father mentioned another type of meeting- he spoke about a Children's Hearing after the FGC where he felt the FGC plan was ignored because the social worker disagreed with it and didn't refer to it.

9. Overall views of FGCs:

When asked to comment on whether FGCs are a good idea and should be more widely available to families, all interviewees said yes and most said definitely yes.

When asked whether they thought it was important for fathers to be involved, interviewees expressed strong views and all thought that it was essential. Norman drew attention to societal tendencies to ascribe blame and over simplify often complex circumstances:

'*They have to be involved because the father's not always wrong- people assume that it's your fault that the family have split up. The father isn't always to blame.'*

Bryan highlighted fathers' rights and responsibilities:

'Absolutely, we made the other half of the child, why should we be in the dark? We should be just as involved as the mothers- the more fathers are involved, the better.'(Bryan).

Eddie recognised that this is not always easy for fathers and referred to traditional attitudes that may present obstacles:

'I do realise there are some men who don't have the parental instincts, but if you are at all interested in being a good Dad, you should be there. You should go if you care- even if you don't get on with the kids' Mum. Don't say it's women's stuff and not get involved.' (Eddie).

10. Suggested Improvements in FGCs:

When asked whether FGCs could be improved overall and in making it easier for fathers to be involved, Michael felt that the private family time should be more restricted, with a time limit on certain subjects. Bryan felt that more preparation time and more information would be useful. Eddie spoke about the need for straight talking and for fathers to be involved and communicate rather than going to court. He spoke about the need for services generally, to be more accessible for fathers-' I didn't know who to ask, or where to turn to.' One final comment, made by Eddie, pointed out that his family's FGC taught them vital lessons that were to stand them in good stead when dealing with another family crisis:

'My Mum has cancer- because we're a lot closer now, we can meet to discuss how we can help her. The FGC showed us how to do this. I definitely think they should be more widely available.
'

Co-ordinators' Views:

1. Representation of Fathers/Stepfathers at FGCs- Factors Promoting Involvement:

9 out of 10 co-ordinators were confident that there was a high level of fathers' participation in the FGCs they organised.

Reasons given for this focussed mainly on the specific remit of the co-ordinator in contacting all key adults in the life of a young person, whether or not they reside with the young person and whether or not they have active involvement- clearly fathers would normally be contacted unless there were specific reasons not to. It was acknowledged that, as well as co-ordinators being charged with this responsibility, they also have the time to do it and often need to use perseverance and imagination to make contact. Several co-ordinators mentioned that there is often a real sense of appreciation on the part of non- resident fathers that someone has taken the time and effort to do this- this would then make it easier to engage and invite the father to the meeting. Other significant reasons given were:

- The sense that the meeting 'belongs' to the family- a sense of ownership.
- The clear focus on the child regardless of whether adults 'get on' with each other.
- The child/ young person being able to specifically invite a father.
- FGCs are probably harder to opt out of than other types of meeting- sense of obligation/ family pressure to attend.

When asked whether there were specific features of the FGC process that encouraged the involvement of fathers, the feature that was given the most emphasis was the importance of the initial contact and preparation time. Other key features that co-ordinators highlighted were:

- Time spent on achieving a balance of attendance between the maternal and paternal side of the family.
- The emphasis on family empowerment and a real opportunity to influence events- there was an examples of a father who came along against the odds because he felt he could substantially influence a Children's Hearing by engaging with an FGC.
- The blame-free and child-focussed nature of the process.
- The sense that the meeting 'needs everyone to be present to be complete' and to achieve what it needs to achieve.

Not all co-ordinators picked out specific aspects of the model- several felt that the whole process encouraged involvement and that fathers were no different to other family members in that respect.

When asked about specific areas of their practice that may be effective in involving fathers, particularly in the initial contact stages, co-ordinators replied (in no particular order).

- Writing to both parents simultaneously (whether or not the child lived with both), rather than writing to the main carer first.
- The co-ordinator stressing the importance of fathers and encouraging the family to take this on board.
- Being non-judgemental.
- Encouraging emotion from fathers who may be unused to discussing feelings and relationships.
- Emphasising the 'no-blame' element of the meeting and being clear that FGC is not mediation.
- A solution focussed approach, alongside the 'future focus' of the meeting.
- Working at the father's pace and taking the necessary time to do so.
- Always seeing fathers on their own.
- Creative ways of communicating and making contact (eg: texting).

2. Factors Limiting Involvement:

When asked to comment on problems encountered in trying to involve fathers and particular obstacles to this involvement, co-ordinators highlighted several key themes. The problem that emerged as most significant were the high levels of conflict across families, often associated with acrimonious separations. Domestic violence and the presence of threats and intimidation was another common feature- both historical and current. This was mentioned in relation to mothers not wishing to be in the same meeting as an ex-partner because of previous domestic abuse. It was also mentioned in the context of fathers being wary of attending because of a worry that meeting would turn into a blaming session because of previous violence towards an ex-partner.

Step families and the influence of newer partners (ie, a father's new partner resisting his involvement or a mother's new partner not wanting non-resident father to attend) were mentioned by half of the co-ordinators and it was generally acknowledged that non-blood relatives being involved can lead to strong feelings and fathers or step-fathers opting out of the process. Other significant obstacles mentioned were:

- Absence of legal rights on the part of some fathers, or a lack of understanding about legal rights and responsibilities.
- Attitudinal and cultural (eg: *'it's the woman's role to be involved and make decisions about the children and the father's role to be the breadwinner'*).

Somehow seen as more acceptable for father to opt out than for mother to opt out.
- FGC often female dominated (attention also drawn to the fact that caring professions are female dominated and therefore, professionals at FGC are far more likely to be female).
- Child/ young person may be actively resistant to father/stepfather being involved for a variety of reasons. Empowerment is not always predictable.
- Mother may not acknowledge the child's need to have the father involved.

Mention was also made of the fact that many fathers may see attendance at an FGC and it's association with the need for support as an admission of weakness and may resist engaging for this reason. It is also possible that a father may attend, but not acknowledge the need for support. A father's fear of appearing vulnerable was acknowledged to influence attendance at other meetings as well.

3. Issues that Fathers Focus on at FGCs:

Given that it is difficult to generalise and co-ordinators may not be aware of all the issues raised in the private family time, when asked to specify which issues fathers tended to raise at FGCs, co-ordinators highlighted fathers' willingness to discuss ways of improving relationships, both with the mother for the child's sake, and with their child. The issue of improving or securing contact was also one that co-ordinators felt concerned a lot of fathers. Other issues that came to the fore were:

- Discipline and boundaries.
- Exploring their role and parenting issues.
- Meeting their own needs.
- Wanting to ascribe blame to the mother.

A number of co-ordinators pointed out that it is difficult to generalise here and that fathers often go with the consensus in terms of issues for discussion.

4. Contribution to Meeting:

Positive

When asked to give examples of fathers making positive contributions to the meeting and plan, co-ordinators felt the most common positive outcome was for a father to become more involved in a child's life, including children being placed with their father through an FGC. Another aspect of this was for fathers to focus more on their children and show more of a willingness to provide more support, including offering to become the main carer, if necessary. Again, improved relationships were a key outcome here- fathers' renewing their relationship with the child via an FGC. Other positive contributions mentioned were:

- Stepfathers supporting partner at meeting and being a stabilising influence.
- Fathers being there/being involved for the first time in years.
- Fathers acknowledging past failures and the need to do more.
- 'Taking the flak' without retaliation.
- Coming to the meeting and giving lots of hugs and physical attention to children (several co-ordinators mentioned children looking for close physical contact with their father in FGCs where parents were separated and where there is a history of acrimonious relationships).
- Fathers being able to calm other people down.
- Fathers seeking to /agreeing to engage with process even if they can't attend the meeting.

Negative:

When asked to give examples of fathers making negative contributions or where they had an unhelpful impact on the FGC process, co-ordinators highlighted examples of fathers being verbally aggressive/ intimidating and compromising other family members' feelings of safety- affecting the atmosphere of the meeting. There were also examples of fathers being controlling, impatient or overly assertive and of fathers dominating the conversation. Other negatives mentioned were:

- Fathers engaging with the process but not attending the meeting (leaving child upset and let down).
- Walking out of meeting before the end.
- Talking rest of the family out of having a meeting.
- Attending the FGC, but not the review- children feeling let down.
- Blaming the child.

5. Benefits to Child/ Young Person: When co-ordinators were asked to point out additional, specific benefits to the children from their father's involvement and contribution to their FGCs, they highlighted the benefit to children of a father's better understanding of them. Again, improved relationships with the child and with a current or previous partner were

perceived to be a crucial benefit, as were those associated with renewed or increased contact with a father. 2 co-ordinators mentioned a child's increased sense that their father does care about them as an important outcome from an FGC. Other significant benefits were:

- The benefits to a child where father has made a particular effort to attend (eg: from prison).
- Father doing positive activities with children rather than just providing discipline.
- Father recognising his own withdrawal from engagement with children and spending more positive time with them.

6. Comparisons with Other Meetings:

The co-ordinators in the survey all mentioned at least one example (and implied that there were many more) of fathers engaging with the FGC process, having not engaged in other meetings, or with other professionals. Clearly, many of the obstacles to fathers engaging with FGCs that are mentioned in section 2 above, would also apply to other types of child welfare meeting and this was reflected in the responses. In terms of obstacles to attending other meetings, co-ordinators' responses fell into three. main themes:

- Difficult relationship with social worker/ lack of respect for social work generally. Most of the co-ordinators gave examples of this and there is no doubt that this is a key factor in influencing whether fathers attend social work led meetings or not.

- Attitudinal and cultural. A lot of fathers collude with their partner taking the lead and attending meetings. There tends to be more of a sense of duty and expectation that mothers will attend meetings. Fathers often don't feel it is their place to attend, or they haven't been asked.

- Fathers being marginalized by their families and often by professionals, in terms of their parental rights- assumptions and decisions made about absent fathers' involvement without hearing their views.

- Practical difficulties. Fathers finding it difficult to get time off work to attend meetings that are scheduled during office hours, or don't take cognisance of shift work.

Most co-ordinators focussed on social work led meetings, but there was recognition of the fact that fathers are often excluded from school meetings and can feel pre-judged and often intimidated by these meetings.

In terms of comparisons with FGCs, the factors detailed in section 1 above give an impression of what makes FGCs different. When asked to make comparisons in relation to the fathers they have worked with, the co-ordinators focussed on the following areas:

- FGCs seem to be seen by a lot of fathers as less threatening and less intimidating than other meetings.

- Fathers feel listened to by co-ordinators and at the FGC in a way that they often don't at other meetings.

- Fathers seem to value the fact that FGCs allow a wider view of the situation and include a wider range of opinions from people who know the child well.

FGCs and Gender

When asked whether they thought the gender of the co-ordinator made any difference in terms of engaging with fathers, most co-ordinators replied no, emphasising that it is the approach and FGC process that count and that it is more about communication and relationship skills than gender.
There was some acknowledgement that individual fathers may have issues with women and that, in certain cases, female co-ordinators may need to be appropriately assertive and persistent to overcome prejudices. Similarly, there was some acknowledgement that some fathers may be more comfortable speaking to a male, but overall, co-ordinators did not rate this issue as significant in engagement.
When asked whether they thought that gender roles are reinforced (or otherwise) by FGCs, the overwhelming view was that they were not, and that, if anything, FGCs challenge traditional gender roles, by encouraging fathers to take more of an active role with their children and encouraging the expression of feelings, frustrations and aspirations concerning family life.

Key Findings

This study focussed primarily on the direct experience of a small number of detailed interviews with fathers who have attended at least one FGC- the main voice in the study is theirs. Their views are complemented by those expressed by a representative group of experienced co-ordinators from FGC projects across Scotland. The two sets of views matched up well, rarely contradicting each other.

Willingness to Participate and Initial Engagement:

I found a high degree of willingness on the part of fathers to commit to the FGC process and a real sense that the idea of getting everyone who knows the child well together in the same room is essentially a good one.
Those fathers who did have initial doubts were honest enough to convey them. Some of these doubts lessened as the FGC process progressed and the meeting was convened, or were eased by discussing them with the co-ordinator.
The main doubts centred on relationship difficulties within the family and extended family, often relating to acrimonious separations, rather than the FGC process itself. This reflected scepticism about peoples' ability to change or behave any differently in the context of an FGC. There was also scepticism about professionals likely contribution to the meeting, based on previous experience.
Other doubts and anxieties were fuelled by fathers' heightened concerns where they were previously unaware of the extent of concerns about their non-resident children.
. Clearly the fathers' doubts were not insurmountable, given that they did all attend their FGC.

The co-ordinators' observations also identified difficult separations and acrimonious relationships as the primary reason for fathers not attending or being difficult to engage with. Other main obstacles to engagement that were highlighted were the presence of current or previous domestic violence and the influence of new partners or step-families. Although cultural factors and traditional male attitudes regarding male and female roles were also felt to be a significant obstacle to engagement, co-ordinators expressed clear views that the FGC model allowed opportunities to challenge some of these views and prejudices. Some of the fathers' comments reflected their acknowledgement of this.

Given the high rates of fathers attending and the co-ordinators' many successes, it is clear that in a significant number of cases, these obstacles can be overcome

In commenting on which aspects of the process were significant in achieving this this, co-ordinators gave a range of factors. These focussed on the remit and commitment of the co-ordinator and the inclusive nature of the process- a sense that the meeting would be 'incomplete' without the paternal side of the family being represented. Clearly, this represents far more than a token attempt to contact the father and invite him to a meeting which will go ahead anyway, which may well be the case with other types of child welfare meeting.

Initial contact and preparation time was felt to be crucial in engaging fathers and it is significant that this aspect of the process was also valued and positively commented on by all fathers in the study.
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Contribution to Meeting and Plans:

In terms of contributing to the meeting, the fathers consulted were generally positive about their ability to speak and play a full part in the meeting. Where they had concerns, the informal nature of the meeting in terms of taking breaks, and the generous allocation of time, played a key part in allaying these concerns. In fact, several approving comments were made about the recognition within the FGC process of the importance of taking proper time to discuss issues.
As well as fathers feeling positive about their contribution to the meeting, it was acknowledged that fathers had learnt a lot from their FGC, gaining insight into peoples' situations and personalities, clarity about terminology and concerns, and ideas from others about what might work..

Overall, interviewees expressed satisfaction with family plans, with one or two doubts and qualifications given the long-standing and serious level of the concerns in most cases. All felt confident that they had followed through with their own commitments. These ranged widely, from sorting out contact, school, transport and support, to providing a full time placement to children who would otherwise have been accommodated.
It was also clear that the plans suited the styles and preferences of the families concerned.

Co-ordinators too, acknowledged the wide range of positive contributions made by fathers, both in terms of outcomes and plans and in terms of helping to facilitate the meeting itself.

As regards the co-ordinators' views on what issues were of most concern to fathers, the opportunity to influence events and improving and resolving

issues in relation to contact with a non-resident child featured highly. We know from other sources, such as Parentline Scotland figures (Hamilton 2005) that this issue is often high on the agenda of 'absent' fathers. The issue that was mentioned more frequently however, was that of relationships- both with children and with current or ex- partners. Given that improved relationships were cited by co-ordinators as a key outcome of FGCs in relation to fathers, this aspect of fathers' involvement is an important one. Again, there was evidence from the fathers consulted that improved relationships could be achieved through an FGC.

Given that FGCs exist in the real world, it is no surprise that fathers can negatively influence FGCs and, in focussing on this issue, co-ordinators acknowledged childrens' feelings of being let down when a father does not attend the meeting, despite the co-ordinator's best efforts. It was also acknowledged that, despite the aspirations of the FGC model, fathers can do their fair share of blaming at times, of both the young person and the mother and can exert a negative influence on the meeting by being aggressive or overly dominant.

Positive Aspects of FGCs:

In terms of positive outcomes, the fathers consulted emphasized three main areas:

1. Relationships improving as a result of the meeting, including relationships with children, partners and ex-partners and professionals.
2. Fathers feeling they had been listened to at the meeting- in some cases for the first time since problems began.
3. Fathers feeling that the FGC was able to 'widen out' the picture from the narrow focus resulting from the view of one or two professionals, to a more holistic picture of a child's issues involving the view of a number of family members who all know the child.
4. Other positive outcomes tended to be practical ones such as sorting out contact, living arrangements and education.

In terms of positives about the process, the preparation time and relationship with the co-ordinator was clearly valued by fathers , who generally felt able to speak very openly to them. The other element that was clearly important was the timing and flexibility of the meeting and the lack of pressure.
The encouragement of openness and honesty was specifically valued and the sharing of information was felt to be positive and helpful.

For 4 out of the 6 fathers, private family time was crucial to the success of the meeting and this aspect of the process was an important element to them feeling listened to and contributing successfully to the plan.

Problems and Frustrations:

Frustrations experienced by two fathers came to the fore during private family time. For one father, this was because there was a lack of openness and commitment from his ex-partner. For another, private family time with no professionals present descended into frustration and argument. There is no doubt that, while private family time remains a central component of FGCs organised by Children 1st, the level of conflict, animosity and entrenchment within some families, means that success is far from guaranteed.
This was recognised in the key findings of the City of Edinburgh review of their FGC service:

'For some family members, having private family time was crucial, and for others, it led to a breakdown of the meeting, with the family resorting to negative ways of relating.' (City of Edinburgh, June 2004)

The family can ask the co-ordinator to come into the private time to re-focus the meeting and calm frayed tempers. This did in fact happen at this particular father's meeting, leading to a more purposeful conclusion- this was recognised in his comments. This father also expressed concern about finding himself 'chairing' the private family time and felt that he was unable to keep control of the meeting at that point. Practice across Children 1st varies in terms of the co-ordinator's role in helping the family prepare for the meeting. Some co-ordinators discuss and agree who will 'chair' the family time in advance of the meeting, and would help to prepare this individual for that task, whereas others would flag up the benefits of a chair/spokesperson, but leave the family to decide and manage this themselves.

As well as concern about private family time, the other main frustration about the FGC process experienced by the fathers was where professionals had come to the meeting with little to offer in the way of either support or resources. This led to a perceived imbalance between what the family were trying to do and what Children 1st were putting in, and what was being done by other agencies, particularly social work. Another issue that was of concern to two fathers in the study, was that social workers had given reports that were different in tone and content to those made at reviews and Children's Hearings. Their point was that this was confusing and contradictory and the atmosphere of meetings should not affect what professionals say or report. There were clear indications that the fathers concerned felt that the social

workers' inputs at the FGC were far clearer and more helpful than the more critical tone adopted at other, more formal meetings.

Comparisons with Other Meetings:

There was some scope in the study for some general comparisons to be made between FGCs and other child welfare focussed meetings. The fathers in the study, for the most part, preferred the atmosphere and tone of the FGC, where they felt relaxed and listened to. Their comments in relation to other meetings reflected their feelings of being judged, 'talked down to' and intimidated.

In looking at fathers' engagement with other meetings, co-ordinators acknowledged that many of the obstacles to fathers attending FGCs in terms of conflict within the family, would also apply to other meetings. They recognised that a fathers' relationship with professionals, as well as practical and cultural issues may affect whether they attend social work or school meetings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it was clear from the study that the fathers consulted experienced a high degree of satisfaction with the FGC process, despite serious difficulties and frustration in their lives and the lives of their children.

FGCs were seen by co-ordinators and fathers as being able to overcome many of the obstacles to constructive participation by engaging with fathers on their terms, listening to them, making the meetings more accessible and informal, and encouraging better communication. The practical and cultural barriers that often prevent fathers from engaging with children's services and attending associated meetings do have a bearing on FGCs, but there are many aspects of the FGC process and the role of the co-ordinator that actively succeed in breaking these barriers down.

As well as highlighting the key elements of the FGC model that are significant in engaging fathers, I would suggest that this study indicates areas of practice that could transfer across and inform other professionals and agencies seeking to involve fathers in child welfare issues. Clearly resources and funding would have a bearing on this, but not all of the practices highlighted involve additional time and resources.

In terms of opportunities for learning and development the study brought focus to some of the frustrations that fathers and co-ordinators have experienced . These fall into 3 main areas:

1. The issue of preparing for and 'managing' private family time (where necessary) is one that merits further exploration within Children 1st.

2. The issue of preparing professionals for the meeting and emphasising the need for consistency of information and input between FGCs and other child welfare meetings. This is an area that could be discussed at an individual co-ordinator level and in discussion with referring and participating agencies.

3. The issue of recording and influencing gaps in service and unmet need is an ongoing one for FGC services and the 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.

Finally, I hope this study succeeds in illuminating some of the key issues pertaining to engaging with fathers and would suggest that it does go 'beyond the statistics' in providing at least some of the answers as to why FGCs do indeed engage more successfully with fathers than other equivalent forms of planning and engagement in child welfare. Certainly, the outcomes and positive contributions made by fathers via FGCs as revealed by this research, can only be of benefit to those children concerned and indicate a

strong argument for continuing to make this service more widely available to fathers and their families.

It is only fitting that I leave the last word to one of the fathers involved in the study.

'*If you get daunted, downhearted, FGCs give you that boost, that bit of hope. It perks you up, stops you getting pulled down with it all. It's the most positive thing we've been through in all of this.'(Dave)*

Ewan Ross, Dec 2006

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5. The Family Group Conference 14 Year Journey (Pakura S) June 2004

6. Participant Views of Family Group Meetings (City of Edinburgh) 2004

7. The Dilemma of Men: Participation of |Men in the FGC Process (Hamilton A) Children 1st, May 2005.

Appendix 1 Interview Schedule: Fathers

1. What was the purpose of your FGC?

(What did the meeting focus on?)

2. Do you live with the child/children who were the subject of the meeting?

3. What is your relationship to the child/children?

4. How did you feel about being asked to participate?

5. How willing were you to participate?
- **a.** Very willing
- **b.** Quite willing
- **c.** Reluctant
- **d.** Very reluctant

6. Did you have any doubts or worries?

7. Were there any reasons that made it hard for you to :
- **a.** Attend the meeting
- **b.** Contribute to the meeting

Please describe these

8. What do you feel you contributed to the meeting?

9. Were you happy with the plan?

10. Did you agree to do anything as part of the plan?If yes, did you feel you were able to follow this through? How?

11. Did you feel more involved/informed about your child's issues as a result of the FGC process? Why?

12. What was the best aspect of the meeting?

13. What was the most difficult aspect of the meeting?

14. Did you go on to have a review? If yes, how did it compare to the original FGC?

15. What did you like/dislike about:

- **a.** The preparation
- **b.** The timing of the meeting
- **c.** The venue
- **d.** The structure of the meeting
- **e.** The private family time
- **f.** The role of the co-ordinator
- **g.** The presence of professionals
- **h.** Any other aspect of the meeting?

16. Have you been invited to other types of meeting about your child?
If yes, did you attend?
How did they compare to FGC?
If you didn't attend, what was the reason for this?

17. Do you think FGC's should be more widely available to families?

18. Do you think it is important for fathers/stepfathers to be part of these meetings. Please explain your answer.

19. How do you feel FGCs could be improved

a. Overall

b. To make it easier for fathers to contribute

c.

20. Do you have any other comments?

Appendix 2 Co-ordinators' Questionnaire

1. Do you feel that fathers/stepfathers are well represented at your FGM's?
If yes, can you say why you think this is the case?

If no, can you say why you think this is the case & what might increase this representation?

2. Are you aware of situations where fathers/stepfathers have not engaged with other meetings/ professionals, but have engaged with the FGC process? Can you **a.** Outline any brief examples
b. Comment on why?

3. Are there any aspects of the FGC process that you think are particularly important in engaging with fathers/stepfathers? Please comment.

4. Are there any aspects of your own practice that you feel have been particularly successful in engaging with fathers/stepfathers?

5. Do you feel that the gender of the co-ordinator makes a difference? How?

6. Can you think of any particular obstacles or difficulties that have made it difficult for fathers/stepfathers to participate in FGCs.

7. Can you think of any particular obstacles or difficulties that have made it difficult for fathers to participate in other meetings or engage with other services?

8. Do you think gender roles within families are reinforced at FGMs, or otherwise?

9. What kind of issues do fathers/stepfathers tend to talk about most in FGMs?

10. Can you identify occasions in FGCs where fathers have contributed: **a.** Negatively
b. Helpfully (please detail brief examples).

11. Are you aware of particular benefits to a child/young person where their father/stepfather has engaged with the FGC process? (please detail brief examples).

12. Do you have any other comments to make about fathers/stepfathers & their engagement with the FGC process?