



# Family group conferences

Principles and practice guidance



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Developed and written by Patrice Lawrence and Jane Wiffin of Family Rights Group in conjunction with members of the Family Group Conference Network. A special thanks is due to the members of the Family Group Conference Network who contributed by attending a meeting or by giving feedback on early drafts.

## **NOTE: TERMINOLOGY**

This publication refers always to family group conferences. Some services refer to family group meetings. The two names are interchangeable. The principles and practice guidance refer equally to family group conferences and family group meetings.

# Introduction

Family group conferences are now offered to families in a wide range of circumstances when decisions need to be made about children.

Local authorities and projects vary in when they provide family group conferences, and this service is not yet available in all areas. Some projects concentrate on offering family group conferences when children are looked after or when there are child protection concerns. Other projects take a broader approach. There are also projects funded by education, social services, single regeneration budgets and other sources.

The principles and practice guidance in this booklet have been written to ensure that whatever the reasons that have led to the family group conference, and whoever is organising it, families including children and young people should know what service they can expect when they attend a family group conference. Organisations providing or offering this service should also know the standards of service they should be seeking to provide.

This booklet is also a guide for agencies, to enable them to check that they are providing families with a good standard of service. All organisations providing family group conferences should support these principles. We recognise that not all organisations providing family group conferences will be able to meet all the standards set in the practice guidance. Under these circumstances organisations should acknowledge this and seek to meet the practice standard in the future.

Families who have been to a family group conference, and organisations and individuals involved in providing the service, have been consulted in the development of these principles and practice guidance. We are delighted that the principles and practice guidance have also been welcomed by the Department of Health, and have the support of the Association of Directors of Social Services and the Local Government Association.

Family group conferences are also offered in youth justice. Although the principles and practice guidance apply to these conferences, additional material is being developed to cover the position of victims whose involvement is crucial to family group conferences in a youth justice setting.

We hope that the principles and practice guidance will be helpful to families who attend a family group conference and to all those involved in providing the service.

Robert Tapsfield  
Chief Executive  
Family Rights Group

# What is a family group conference?

Every family is unique, with its own culture, personalities, personal dynamics and history. All families come up against problems from time to time. Some more difficult situations involving children can be sorted out more easily with help from relatives and friends, and some may also need help from the health services, the education department, social services, or other agencies.

Family group conferences are a way of giving families the chance to get together to try and make the best plan possible for children.

The decision makers at a family group conference are the family members, and not the professionals. It is here that the mother or father or aunt or grandfather gets together with the child or young person and the rest of the family to talk, make plans and decide how to resolve the situation.

# Family group conferences — the model

How is a family group conference set up and who does what?

## STEP 1 THE REFERRAL

- There is agreement between family members and staff from an organisation that a plan needs to be made for a child or young person.
- An independent coordinator is appointed to work with the family to set up the meeting.

## STEP 2 PREPARATION FOR THE MEETING

- The coordinator, in conjunction with child, young person and immediate carers, identifies the family network which can include close friends.
- The coordinator sends out invitations and agrees a venue, date and time for the conference.
- Family members and friends invited to the conference will be contacted by the coordinator who will let them know what the meeting is about and discuss any worries or concerns they may have.

### **STEP 3 THE MEETING**

#### **a) *Information giving***

This is where staff from agencies give the family the information they have about the child or young person and about services, resources and support that may be available. This part of the meeting is chaired by the coordinator.

#### **b) *Private family time***

Staff and the coordinator are not present during this part. The family members have time to talk among themselves and come up with a plan that addresses the concerns raised by the staff in Part 1.

#### **c) *Agreeing the plan***

The coordinator and staff rejoin the family to hear the family's plan. Any services or support from the agencies needed to make the plan work are discussed. The plan should be agreed by agencies unless it places the child or young person at risk of significant harm. Everybody decides how they will check if the plan is working and what they will do if it is not working.

### **STEP 4 REVIEWING THE PLAN**

A review family group conference or other meeting is often arranged to review how the plan is working and make new plans if necessary.

# Principles and practice guidance

The following Principles and Practice Guidance are intended to let families know what they can expect from a family group conference. They are also an important guide for agencies offering or working with family group conferences, to enable them to check that they are providing families with a good standard of service.

The **Principles** sets out what families should expect.

The **Practice Guidance** describes how the principles will be met.

**Principle 1** Families have the right to clear, appropriate information about the family group conference process.

- Practice**
- a) Families must be given clear information about what a family group conference is and why they have been offered a family group conference.
  - b) Families must be informed about timescales and possible delays.
  - c) Information must be available in a way that meets the needs of the family.
  - d) All family members invited must be told who they can contact if they have any questions about the process and about how they can make a complaint.

**Principle 2** Families have the right to be involved in the planning of the meeting.

- Practice**
- a) Where possible, coordinators should reflect the local community and families will be offered a coordinator who speaks their language and who has an understanding of the way religious beliefs, cultural traditions and other lifestyle issues influence how the family operates.
  - b) A coordinator who is independent will work with the family to arrange the family group conference. 'Independent' means that they have not and will not be involved in making any decisions about the child.
  - c) The meeting will take place at a time, date and place agreed with the family.
  - d) Adults and young people will need to consent to information held by agencies being shared at the meeting.
  - e) The coordinator will work with the family and young person to decide who needs to be at the meeting.
  - f) The family will decide what language will be used at the family group conference, with interpreters provided for the others present as needed.
  - g) The coordinator may decide to exclude individual family members from the meeting if there are concerns that their presence would be a risk to anyone's safety.

**Principle 3** Family members have the right to be acknowledged as decision-makers in the family group conference process.

- Practice**
- a) The agency that referred the family for a family group conference must be clear about what decisions, if any, they may be unable to support and must give reasons for this.
  - b) The child or young person and any other family member who requires it will be offered someone to help them make their contribution throughout the process. This person may be called an advocate or supporter, and may be someone within the family network or someone outside the family. They will not be someone who is able to make decisions about the family.
  - c) The family must be given relevant, factual and jargon free information about the agencies' concerns and the resources available.
  - d) Parents must be given written information about the agencies' concerns at least 24 hours before the conference.
  - e) Reasonable travel costs and other expenses will be paid for family members who need it.
  - f) Family members will have the opportunity to share their concerns and have their questions answered before and at the meeting.
  - g) Family members unable to attend for any reason will be supported in contributing in other ways.

**Principle 4** Families have the right to private family time and a supportive and safe environment to make plans.

- Practice**
- a) Families must be given time to meet on their own without the coordinator or staff from agencies being present.
  - b) The coordinator must ensure that there is a suitable area and time allocated, with appropriate refreshments, for the family to make decisions.
  - c) Childcare provision should be available if required.
  - d) The coordinator will work with everyone to enable them to make a plan that meets the needs of the child.

**Principle 5** Families have the right to have safe plans agreed and resourced.

- Practice**
- a) The referring agency must agree to support the family's plans unless it places a child at risk of harm and must provide reasonable resources to make it happen.
  - b) All family members and agencies who attend the conference will receive a copy of the plan within a stated time. The plan will include details of what resources the family needs and how the proposals in the plan will be carried out and monitored.
  - c) The family, referring agency and coordinator will agree how the plan will be reviewed and whether a follow-up review should take place, and who will be responsible for making this happen.

- d) Every effort should be made to respond to the family's plan at the meeting. Families will be informed who will give them a written response, and when and how, if the plan or some of the resources cannot be agreed at the conference.
- e) Agencies whose support is required to carry out a plan should respond within ten days to say whether they can provide the support requested and, if necessary, how long this will take to provide.

**Principle 6** Families have the right to be involved in the development of family group conferences.

- Practice**
- a) All families will be offered the opportunity to give their opinion of the service they have received.
  - b) Where possible, families will be kept informed about changes made as a result of their comments.
  - c) Families should have the opportunity to have contact with other families who have used the service.
  - d) Families who have attended a family group conference should have the opportunity to be involved in developing policies and practice about family group conferences.

The Family Group Conference Network is run by Family Rights Group. The aims of the Network are to promote and support the development of family group conferences. The network connects together all those interested in family group conferences, produces publications about family group conferences, including a tri-annual newsletter and a video, organises conferences and seminars, provides training, and works with others to promote family group conferences.

For information about how to join the Family Group Conference Network, or for more information about family group conferences, including videos, contact Family Rights Group, The Print House, 18 Ashwin Street, London E8 3DL. Tel 020 7923 2628, fax 020 7923 2683, e-mail [office@frg.org.uk](mailto:office@frg.org.uk), website [www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)

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