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## Family Group Conferences

### References

**CA:** Children Act 1989

**Vol 1 Guidance:** Children Act 1989 Regulations and Guidance, Volume 1 Court Orders <http://www.justice.gov.uk/guidance/careproceedings.htm>

**PLO:** Public Law Outline <http://www.justice.gov.uk/guidance/careproceedings.htm>

### Introduction

From time to time, many families have difficulties in caring for their children. This may be for a whole range of reasons, for example a family bereavement, the parent/ carer is having difficulty looking after their child or their child has particular needs or is at risk of harm. In these circumstances families often turn to outside agencies for help. This can include specialist agencies which provide a particular service, for example speech therapy or it may involve asking the local authority to provide support services.

The local authority is under a duty to provide support services if the child concerned is assessed as 'in need'. This can include practical support, advice on parenting, respite care if the parents/carers need a break from looking after their children and sometimes financial support. The local authority may also be involved because they have concerns that a child is at risk of suffering harm and needs to be better protected.

In these circumstances, there will be discussions about drawing up a plan to safeguard the child and to agree what services the agency will provide to the child and family. But sometimes it can feel like the professionals are making all the decisions and the family is not really being given much say.

To address this many agencies, particularly local authorities, are offering families the opportunity to have a Family Group Conference (FGC). A Family Group Conference provides a chance for the family to come together to work out a plan for their child, which addresses the problems which have been identified, with support from the agency involved. Indeed where there are child protection concerns which have not been satisfactorily

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*For further advice see FRG advice sheet on 'Family Support Services' and on 'Child protection procedures'*

*Vol 1 Guidance and*

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addressed and there is a possibility that the local authority might apply to the court to remove the child from their family, there is a strong expectation in official guidance that the local authority will have involved the wider family in plans for the child before they go to court; and Family Group Conferences are quoted as a useful way of bringing the family together for this purpose.

PLO

This advice sheet explains what a Family Group Conference is and what it means for families. The legal references are in the narrow column on the right.

*Further information can be obtained from FRG advice line – details at the end of this advice sheet.*

## **What is a Family Group Conference (FGC)?**

A Family Group Conference (or Family Group Meeting as they are sometimes known) is a family-led planning meeting to address concerns which have been identified about a child (normally in relation to his/her welfare). During the meeting, family and friends have private time to draw up a plan, which will be agreed by agencies as long as it is safe.

## **When are Family Group Conferences used?**

FGCs can be used when there is a decision that needs to be made about a child's future in all areas of child welfare. Some of the situations where they are most commonly used include:

- Difficulties in family relationships
- To support parents who are struggling
- To support parents and children where there has been domestic abuse
- Where there are concerns about a child's welfare
- Decisions about where a child is going to live if they cannot stay at home
- Decisions about how to reduce offending behaviour
- Contact with the family when a child is in care
- Where there are difficulties with a child's education such as poor attendance at school
- Planning for a child leaving the care system.

Family Group Conferences are also sometimes used for vulnerable adults. They can be used in the following circumstances:

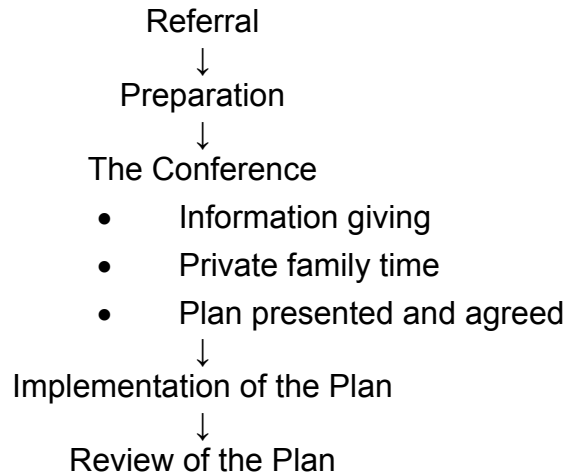
- In making decisions about older adults
- Where an adult has a physical disability

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- Where an adult has mental health difficulties

## **How does a Family Group Conference work**

### **The FGC Model**



### **The referral:**

The FGC starts with a referral being made. The person who makes the referral is usually someone who works with the child or family. Different FGC services accept referrals from different agencies/workers but often the referrer is a social worker, teacher, youth offending team (YOT) worker or health visitor. In some services families can refer themselves.

Before a referral is made the family should have been asked whether they want to be referred for an FGC.

***Whether or not an FGC takes place is a decision made by the family. Under no circumstances can a family be made or forced to have an FGC.***

### **Appointment of an independent co-ordinator:**

Once a referral is made an independent coordinator is appointed. It is the coordinator who will help the family to plan the meeting and who will chair the meeting. The coordinator is different from the referrer and acts as a **neutral** person. The coordinator will not influence the family to make a particular decision but will help them to think about the decisions that need to be made.

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## **Preparation:**

The independent coordinator will **prepare** the family for the meeting. S/he will meet the child and the parents/carers of the child. S/he will ask them to decide who needs to be invited to the meeting.

If there is a disagreement about who should be invited to the meeting the coordinator will help the family to reach an agreement.

The coordinator will then usually meet with everyone who has been invited to the meeting and will help the family to decide **where** and **when** to hold the meeting.

## **The meeting:**

The meeting takes place at a time and a venue to suit the family. This sometimes means that it takes place outside of traditional office hours or at a weekend. It will take place somewhere **neutral** which usually means that it is not in a family member's house or in social work offices. The family will be asked to help decide where they will be comfortable meeting.

The meeting will take place in 3 stages:

### Stage One: Information Sharing

The coordinator will start the meeting by welcoming everyone and making sure that everyone knows who each other is. S/he will then ask the person who made the referral to share information about what needs to be decided. This should include clear, understandable information about what decisions need to be made and any '**bottom line**' that needs addressing. A 'bottom line' is about addressing whether there are any restrictions to the plan. It is about the agency being clear with the family about anything that **must** be part of the plan or anything that **can't** be part of the plan. Some projects ask the referrer to provide this information in writing prior to the meeting so that family members can be better prepared.

Once the referrer has outlined their information the family are

given the opportunity to ask questions and clarify anything that is not clear.

Any other person who is at the meeting because they work with the family will be asked to share any information that they have. All of these information givers will be asked to outline what **resources** they have to offer the family i.e. any help they can give. Once the family have all the information they need to help them to make a plan the meeting will move into stage two.

### Stage Two: Private Family Time

Families should **always** be given private family time to make a plan. During private family time workers will be asked to withdraw to another room to give the family time to plan. The family will have **unlimited time** to discuss and draw up a plan which addresses the decisions that need to be made and that takes account of the 'bottom line'.

If the family need help in making their plan they can call back any worker including the coordinator into the meeting to help them. Once the family have made a plan they will call workers back into the meeting and move into the third stage.

### Stage Three: Agreeing the plan

At this stage the coordinator will ask the family to outline their plan. They may ask the family questions to help the family fill in any key details missing from the plan. The referrer will be asked whether they agree to the plan.

***Referrers should agree plans as long as they are legal, safe and address the 'bottom line'.***

### **The review meeting**

Once the plan is agreed the coordinator will ask the family if they would like a **review** meeting. A review is a chance to meet together again to look at the plan and make sure it is working. Reviews give families the chance to make changes to any parts of the plan that aren't working well or need adjusting/developing to reflect changes in circumstances.

## Do children attend FGCs?

Different projects will have different rules about what age it is felt appropriate to invite children to FGCs but most projects will invite children over 8 and many projects will also invite younger children.

The coordinator will spend a lot of time during the preparation stage to help children decide whether they want to attend the meeting. If they don't want to attend the meeting but still want to say things at the meeting the coordinator will talk to them about how they want their views represented. One option that is usually available is for the child to have an **advocate**. An **advocate** is a support person who helps the child prepare for the meeting and attends with them to support them and, if the child wishes, may speak for them at the meeting.

If they decide to attend the meeting, as most children do, the coordinator or the advocate will spend time with them helping them to think about what they want to say at the meeting, what they want to achieve from the meeting and how they'd like to say it. Sometimes a child is paired with a family member who can support them during the meeting and speak for them if and when necessary.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What do families say about FGCs?

*'I think it was good that it was held on neutral ground, everyone was on a par with everyone else.'*

*'It's good to have food and stuff available, they were a good excuse to stop for a little while'*

*'We just got on and decided what needed to be done. The plan was much better and is still working'*

*'Families are experts on themselves and FGCs allow this expertise to be used'*

*'We know who does what in our family. Social Workers don't know what extended family can offer'*

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## How are Family Group Conferences different to other meetings?

FGCs are used because of the belief that families make safer and more relevant plans for their children than those who don't have an in depth knowledge of the family.

FGCs are different because:

- It is the family in consultation with those who work with them who make the decisions. In other meetings the plan is made by 'professionals' who sometimes consult with some of the family;
- The meeting takes place at a time and a place to suit the family and may take place outside of traditional office hours;
- Extended family members are invited to the meeting;
- Children are invited and play an active role in the meeting;
- The FGC will always involve private family time.

## Am I entitled to an FGC?

FGCs originated in New Zealand but have been available in the UK since 1992. Unfortunately not all areas of the UK have an FGC project. To find out whether there is an FGC project in your area you could talk to your social worker if you have one or contact your local council. You can also contact Family Rights Group and check the website ([www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)) which has a list of FGC projects in England and Wales.

*FRG advice line details at the end of this advice sheet.*

## Who is invited to an FGC?

It is the immediate family who decide who to invite to an FGC. Decisions about who to invite are usually made by the child who is the subject of the meeting and their carers. Usually extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles are invited.

If there is disagreement over who to invite the coordinator will help the family to try to reach an agreement. However, it does not have to be blood relatives. Some families will want friends to join the meeting. A general rule of thumb is to invite anyone you feel will be useful in helping you to make a plan.

**Inviting Professionals.** The person who referred the FGC will be expected to attend the meeting. The family may also wish to

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invite others who they feel will help them in making a plan. Some families choose to invite teachers, health visitors, doctors or family support workers.

***Those who attend the meeting in a professional capacity will be expected to leave the room during private family time.***

## **How long does an FGC take?**

Preparation for an FGC depends on a number of factors including size and availability of the family and how much preparation needs to be done. It usually takes about 4-6 weeks to prepare.

The length of the meeting also varies. There are no time limits set in a family group conference although the family may have their own time limits e.g. children's bedtimes, time to be home for babysitters etc. On average meetings take just over 3 hours with reviews being shorter.

## **Our family argue a lot - can we have an FGC without private time?**

The aim of the FGC is for the family to make decisions rather than to have those decisions made for them. Private time is therefore central to an FGC as it is a way of enabling this to happen. If those working with the family are permitted to sit in on the planning process they will influence the plan and it will not be a **family** plan. Private time is the only way of ensuring that the plan made belongs to the family.

During preparation for the FGC you will be given the opportunity to express your fears and concerns with the coordinator who will help you to consider how to manage these concerns. If at any time during private family time you feel that it is getting too much you are free to leave or to call the coordinator back in. You can also agree some **ground rules** for the meeting to help you to manage private time. Ground rules such as 'no swearing' can help people to manage private family time in a calmer way.

## **How will the FGC process respect my family's traditions and culture?**

The FGC should be held in your language of choice and in some projects you can choose a coordinator from a similar ethnic background if you wish to. You can choose the date time and place of your meeting and the food that is served at the meeting. If you wish to keep to other customs and traditions that are part of your culture then this is possible.

## **I'm not able to attend the FGC but there are things I'd like to say at the meeting. How do I have my voice heard?**

People are often not able to attend because of work, travel, holidays, prison sentences etc. Also there may be those who don't want to attend but still have things they would like to say at the meeting. If you wish to attend but can't, speak to the coordinator who may be able to help. For example if you live far away the project may be able to help you to pay for travel to the meeting.

If you are not going to be at the meeting but have a view you want expressing the coordinator will help you to have your views heard. There are various ways of doing this including writing a letter to the meeting, being available on the telephone or even video link ups.

## **I have a disability which may prevent me from attending the meeting.**

The coordinator can often arrange a venue and transport to make the meeting accessible for you. Alternatively it may be possible to hold the meeting in your home. If none of these are possible you could write a letter to the meeting or be available by phone.

## **Can adults have advocates in Family Group Conferences?**

Some projects offer advocates for vulnerable adults in FGCs. If you think you may need an advocate speak to your coordinator who will be able to offer an advocate or help you to think about how you can be supported during the meeting.

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## What happens if we can't agree a plan?

When a plan is drawn up in private family time it is best if it can be agreed by all family members. In the third stage of the meeting the coordinator will ask whether everyone agrees with the plan. The referrer should have informed everyone of what will happen if a plan cannot be agreed. If you cannot agree a plan you may be given time to return to private family time or a chance to meet again.

## What if I don't want to attend an FGC?

You are under no obligation to attend or participate in an FGC. It should always be a voluntary process.

However, if the local authority has serious concerns about your child's safety and are considering starting care proceedings, you need to think about what may happen if you refuse to attend. Once a case is in court decisions are made by the judge, so this is an important opportunity for you and your family to take the lead in developing a safe plan. Even if your situation still ends up in court, an FGC will enable you to present your families' views to the court. If you wish to discuss this further, you can contact FRG advice line or take legal advice from a solicitor.

*Contact FRG advice line or contact a specialist child care solicitor – see details at the end of this advice sheet.*

## What if our family don't want an FGC?

If all the family agree that an FGC is not something they want then again you are under no obligation to have one, however you may wish to discuss what will happen if you choose not to have an FGC particularly if it is likely that your situation may end up in court.

If some members of your family request an FGC and others do not want it, it may still go ahead provided that someone with **parental responsibility\*** for the child or the child him/herself if s/he is old enough agrees. For further information on who has parental responsibility see Family Rights Group's advice sheet 'Parental Responsibility'

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*For further information see FRG advice sheet on 'Parental Responsibility'*

# Are FGCs effective? What does the research say?

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## **Children's attendance**

A greater proportion of children attend their FGCs than attend child protection conferences and most value the experience and their ability to take part in it.

*Judge et al, 2000; Lupton and Stevens, 1997; Marsh and Crow, 1998*

## **Engagement of family members**

- There is a higher rate of attendance by fathers and father figures at FGCs than at statutory meetings, such as child protection conferences.
- Most adult family members are very positive about the process.
- The FGC process helps involve the extended family early on in a family's involvement with children's social care services.

*Ryan, 2000; Marsh and Crow, 1997; Holland et al, 2003.*

*Smith and Hennessy, 1999; Wilson and Bell, 2001*

*Gill et al, 2003*

## **Using community resources**

- FGCs make more use of family and community resources than plans made at meetings which are dominated by agencies.

*Lupton et al, 1995*

## **Safeguarding children and promoting positive outcomes**

- Families produce plans that agencies agree to support in the great majority (over 90%) of situations
- Families make safe plans for children with a number of studies reporting reductions in re-abuse rates for children who have attended an FGC, compared with those who have not.
- FGCs reunite children with their families more securely
- FGCs increase the likelihood of placement with the extended family when a child cannot remain with birth parents.
- FGCs reduce the time children spend awaiting permanency decisions.
- FGCs produced plans which were assessed by social workers as having prevented children going into public care in 32% of cases and prevented court proceedings in 47%; and made no difference in 21% of cases.

*Marsh and Crow, 1997; Simmonds et al, 1998; Lupton and Stevens, 1997*

*Marsh and Crow, 1997; Merkel-Holguin et al, 2005; Judge et al, 2000; Marsh and Crow, 1998*

*Marsh and Crow, 1997*

*Merkel-Holguin et al, 2003*

*Merkel-Holguin et al, 2005*

*Smith and Hennessey, 1999*

- Children feel that FGCs have increased contact with family members.
- FGCs are effective in reducing re-offending and achieve high levels of victim participation.
- FGCs have significantly improved outcomes for children where there are concerns about attendance, bullying and behaviour problems (with half of schools (in the study) making positive comments about the effect of the FGC on the young person, the family, home-school relationships and their own understanding of their behaviour.

*Holland et al, 2003*

*Essex County Council and Police, 2002*

*Hayden, 2004; Crow, 2001;*

### **What are some of the challenging messages from research?**

- Relatives are still finding out about professional concerns late in the decision-making process and are therefore denied an opportunity to become involved.
- FGCs have been under-utilised for families from black and minority ethnic communities.
- There is evidence that families do not always receive the resources and support they need to implement their plan.

*Gill et al, 2003; Hunt and Macleod, 1999; Marsh and Crow, 1998*

*Lupton and Stevens, 1997; Chand, et al, 2005; FRG Survey of FGC project, 2005*

*Jackson and Morris, 1999; Lupton and Stevens, 1997*

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### **For Further Information:**

Ashley (ed.) FGC Toolkit – a practical guide for setting up and running an FGC service (Family Rights Group)

Ashley and Nixon (ed.) (2007) Family Group Conferences: Where Next? Policies and Practices for the Future (Family Rights Group)

Or go to Family Rights Group's website [www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)

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## Where can I get further help?

### **Family Rights Group**

The Print House  
18 Ashwin Street  
London E8 3DL  
Advice Line: 0808 801 0366  
Tel: 020 7923 2628  
Fax: 020 7923 2683  
E-mail: [advice@frg.org.uk](mailto:advice@frg.org.uk)  
Website: [www.frg.org.uk/advice\\_sheets.html](http://www.frg.org.uk/advice_sheets.html)

FRG free advice line is open 10am-3pm Monday-Friday so you can talk to an adviser directly about your case. You can also download FRG advice sheets mentioned in this advice sheet from FRG website: [www.frg.org.uk/advice-sheets.html](http://www.frg.org.uk/advice-sheets.html)

### **To find a solicitor, contact:**

#### **Community Legal Service Direct**

To find details of quality assured advice providers:  
phone: 0845 345 4345  
[www.clsdirect.org.uk](http://www.clsdirect.org.uk)

#### **The Law Society of England and Wales**

113 Chancery Lane  
London WC2A 1PL  
Tel: 020 7242 1222  
E-mail: [contact@lawsociety.org.uk](mailto:contact@lawsociety.org.uk)  
[www.lawsociety.org.uk](http://www.lawsociety.org.uk)

#### **Solicitors Regulation Authority**

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