Family Engagement
Strategies

Family Group Conferences and Family Team Meetings

Effectiveness and Challenges
A BRIEF HISTORY

- In 1980’s Maoris in New Zealand were concerned about high rate of children being removed from homes and low rate of family reunification.
- Maori people designed and government approved FGC process.
- Resulted in improved outcomes for families.
- Law was passed in New Zealand that FGC must be offered in all foster care cases.
Family Group Conferences and other family engagement models are:

- Strength Based
- Child Centered
- Family Focused
STRENGTH BASED

• Strength Based

- Recognize and utilize individual and family strengths
- Based on positive psychology
- Accesses family’s willingness to solve problems

• Deficit based

- Based on deficits and pathologies
- Lists of what is ‘wrong’ and ‘dysfunctional’
- Family gets negative labels to rationalize the failure of the system
UNDERSTANDING STRENGTHS

SECTION 3 ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY
A strength is a consistent near perfect performance in an activity and it does not have to be artistic.

For any activity to be a strength you must be able to do it consistently and this implies that it is a predictable part of your performance. You must also derive some intrinsic satisfaction from the activity.

An ability is a strength only if you can fathom yourself doing it repeatedly, happily, and successfully.

One excels only by maximizing strengths, never by fixing weaknesses.
Talent, knowledge and skills combine to create your strengths.

- Differentiate between what is innate and what you can acquire with practice...

- **Talents** are your naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling or behavior. They can be productively applied. **Talents are innate.**

- If you lack the necessary talents, you cannot have consistent near perfect performance. The key to building a bona fide strength is to identify your dominant talents.

- **Factual knowledge** is content. Experiential knowledge, some of which is conceptual – like values and self awareness, can be gained.

- **Skills** are the steps of an activity. **Skills can be acquired.** Skills bring structure to experiential knowledge.

- It is never possible to possess a strength without the requisite talent.
The child’s protection and safety needs are at the center of the decision making process.

Service is focused on building the family’s capacity to care for and protect the child.
PURPOSE

Family Group Conferences bring the family and close support people together to make plans for children to have safe, stable, and permanent living arrangements, combining the strengths of the family with the resources of the community to resolve issues and build ongoing supports.
FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE
STRUCTURE

- Introductions
- Information sharing
- Private family time
- Agreement and follow-up
WHY DO FAMILY CENTERED PRACTICE?

"Your proposal is innovative. Unfortunately, we won't be able to use it because we've never tried something like that before."
WHY DO FAMILY CENTERED PRACTICE?

1. Shifts responsibility for child safety, stability, permanency, and family connections from DFS to the family.
WHY DO FAMILY CENTERED PRACTICE?

2. Supports case planning in all types of child welfare cases

- Identifies family resources and placement
- Promotes consensus in service planning
- Facilitates communication
- Fewer contested court hearings
- Consistent with goals on Concurrent Planning

3. Strength-based processes are more effective
WHY DO FAMILY CENTERED PRACTICE?

4. Saves money
   - Prevents placements
   - Expedites permanency
   - Fewer/No recurrences of abuse/neglect
   - Fewer/No foster care re-entries
   - Effective tool to use with System of Care goals
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FTM$s$ AND FGC$s$

FTM:
Conducted during the crisis phase to primarily address issues of short-term planning for child protection but may include long-term planning.

FGC:
Often follows an FTM after the crisis phase has passed to primarily address issues of long-term planning; can be repeated as needed.
PURPOSES

**FTM:**
For the family and DFS to partner in making an immediate decision regarding child safety.

**FGC:**
For the family to make a decision that DFS can support and that will create safety, permanency, and well being for the child at risk of abuse/neglect.
GOALS

FTM:
The team, which includes the family, seeks consensus to protect the child.

FGC:
The family creates a plan to achieve the purpose of protecting the child.
DECISION RESPONSIBILITY

FTM:
DFS and the family reach consensus. If consensus cannot be reached, DSS maintains responsibility.

FGC:
The family crafts the plan in private. DFS approves the plan if it protects the child. If consensus cannot be reached, DSS maintains responsibility.
PREPARATION

**FTM:**
Limited preparation due to crisis nature of decision, usually 2 days. Referring Worker & Coordinator share preparation.

**FGC:**
Extensive preparation, usually 4 weeks. Preparation is critically important to engage the family in participating and leading the process. Coordinator does all preparation.
TEAM MEMBERS

FTM:
Family and service providers are invited. All who attend have the family’s permission to participate.

FGC:
Service providers and all persons with a familial connection or relationship to the child are invited unless they pose emotional and/or physical safety risks. Those excluded are asked to participate through writing, video, or audio.
FAMILIES NOT APPROPRIATE FOR REFERRAL

- Not enough family
- Refusal to participate
- Family not interested in making positive change
- Family and DSS cannot agree on purpose
- Family cannot participate safely
- Referring worker is not open to accepting Family’s Plan
- Other barriers
What we need is a brand new idea that has been thoroughly tested.
But Really, Does it Work?
YES
RESULTS

- Multiple studies in various places show the following;
- International research demonstrates that families who choose to participate in Family Group Conferencing experience,
  - “...decreases in substantiated child abuse/neglect, emergency responses to crises and indicators of woman/wife abuse; and increases in indicators that family members were safe at home.”
- The plans which families create are often more detailed and have greater expectations of family members than plans created by agency workers
- Family plans are rarely vetoed by the social workers
- Participating families experienced improved care for children, decreased violence, improved family functioning and reduced drinking problems.
RESULTS

- Increased safety for the child (R, AU, Norway, NL, TX, WA)
- Faster return to kin or bio parents (CA, DC, NL)
- Public care prevented (NZ, US, UK)
- Court Proceedings reduced (NZ, England, Scotland)
- High levels of Family Participation, agreement about plans, child and family approval and social worker approval
American Humane Association


- Issue briefs and a growing bibliography of international research on the effectiveness of family engagement models. The best resources around. If you cannot find it – call them, they will help.
PLANNING... WHO'S GOT TIME FOR PLANNING! I HAVEN'T EVEN GOT TIME TO GET DRESSED IN THE MORNING
CHALLENGES

Understand Family-Centered Practice and develop agency policy to support it.

- A way of working with families, formally and informally, across service systems to enhance the family’s capacity to care for and protect their children.

- Family is defined broadly to include birth, blended, kinship, and foster and adoptive families.
CHALLENGES

- Implementing a new process – a new way of doing business
- Attitudes
- Resistance to change
- Training/Supervision
CHALLENGE RESOLUTION

Get support from top executives
Transformation to a strength-based approach requires the dedication of top executives and upper management to work through the processes of organizational change.

Two tools that can help bring about this change and create a successful family-centered practice are:

1. The American Humane Association's "Key Decision Point Matrix for the Implementation of Family Group Decision Making"

2. Prochaska and Di Clemente's Trans Theoretical Model of Change.
This is a new way of thinking.

Problem-focused or deficit-based assessment leads to conclusion that there is something "wrong" with children and families.

Family Engagement focuses on the needs and welfare of children within the context of their families and communities.
Professionals can feel overwhelmed by the difficulties a child/family presents and rationalize that the remedial efforts failed because the children and their families are "unmotivated," "resistive," "lacking insight," and/or "not ready" for change.

Family Engagement recognizes the strengths of family relationships and build on these strengths to achieve optimal outcomes.
PROVIDE LOGISTICAL SUPPORT TO THE PROGRAM

- Promote the practice throughout the community
- Courts
- Community Services Boards
- Schools
- FAPT
- Private Agencies
2. FUNDING FOR STAFF

Funding possibilities include:

- Program improvement plan
- In-house CSA
- CSA contracted out to private agencies
- Regular staff position
- Use graduate student interns
3. ADDITIONAL EVENT-RELATED FUNDING

- **Food** for families who will spend long hours together.
- **Transportation** assistance for family members
- **Hotel** accommodations for out-of-town attendees when family resources are not available.
- **Room Rental** for conference if agency space is not available.
- **Child Care** when needed.
- **Training** for staff
- **Administrative support**
- **Brochures**
- **Translation resources**
4. COMMUNITY SUPPORT

- Community Advisory Committee
- Developing community support
- Model Court and Court Improvement projects
- Adapting the Family Centered practice of FGC’s has augmented the Model Court and Court Improvement projects
- Community Trainings
5. TRAINING

**Informal** - Local travel and support through the Forum – an informal regular gathering of FGC practitioners across the state providing peer support, successful practices, articles and discussion of common or unique issues.

**Formal** - American Humane provides excellent on site and teleconference training.

**National Conferences** - American Humane annual national conference provides an exceptional source of intensive training.

**Peer Supervision**

**Supervision**
ONGOING CHALLENGES

- To accept the idea that families can make as good or better decisions than we can.

- To task ourselves as parents, foster parents, social workers, probation officers, mental health professionals, judges, supervisors and agency directors - wherever we are in our systems - to be strength based.

- To work to find, recognize and utilize individual child, parent and family strengths, to help build these into competencies and improve the lives of our clients.
Michael Doolan, American Humane Fellow, ONZM, MSW (Distinction), BA, Diploma in Social Sciences, MANZASW


There are no more Mauri children in the care of non tribal or non family members in New Zealand. They don’t even call it “Foster Care” anymore, they call it “Stranger Care”
HOPE

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FINAL THOUGHTS

- Family Engagement is a practice, not a program
- Family engagement is a process, not an event
So, someday, this might just happen...

**NO 1 IN A SERIES OF UNLIKELY EVENTS**

**SOCIAL WORK IS SUCH MEANINGFUL, WORTHWHILE WORK THAT I'VE DECIDED TO SELL MY PORSCHE AND GIVE UP MY LUCRATIVE LAW PRACTISE TO JOIN YOU!**
Thank You!

Christian Volz
Coordinator,
Family Group Conferencing
Loudoun County Department of Family Services
102 Heritage Way N.E. Suite 103
Leesburg, VA 20176
(571) 258-3123