

Family Group Conferencing: Information for Advocates



CHILD PROTECTION INFORMATION SHEET

You may be asked to participate in a Family Group Conference (FGC) in child protection. This information sheet is designed to help you understand the role of an advocate for a child or family member in an FGC.

- At various stages during child protection intervention, a Family Group Conference (FGC) may be called to involve people in the child's family and community network in collaboratively seeking the best option possible to ensure that his or her future needs are met.
- This may be at a point when an application to the Court for a care and protection order is considered likely. An FGC may also be seen as the best way of planning for a child's return to their natural family after being in care.
- Under the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997*, an FGC can also be requested by a child under a care and protection order (or 2 family members).
- Research indicates that outcomes for children separated from their families are often unsatisfactory and that the best place for them to grow up is usually with their own family and within their own community so long as they are safe and nurtured.
- A family group conference may be called during the period of assessment and investigation (rarely in the first fortnight but prior to the conclusion of Court proceedings).
- It is a meeting where members of a family can get together with child protection workers and other involved service providers to make plans about how to keep their children safe.
- It is a time when everyone concentrates on what is going to be best for the child. While the family members are given the opportunity to have a real say in what happens, it is essential that they are provided with information both about the risk assessment and the ongoing concerns held by child protection.
- They should also be provided with information about what supports and services are available to them in both the community and government sectors. This will assist them in making plans for care of the child or young person.
- The FGC will be organised and run by a trained Facilitator who is independent of management and decision-making in the case. This person will not be involved with the family after the conference in their role as facilitator.
- The facilitator will contact and invite participants to the conference. The time, venue and other practical arrangements are made by the

facilitator in consultation with the child (if he or she is old and mature enough), family and the child protection worker.

- In circumstances where there are concerns about the child's education, a teacher or support person may be invited.
- Representatives from other government or non-government agencies or groups who are currently offering, or could offer, support to the child or family may also be invited.
- The facilitator may also invite an **Advocate** (rarely a legal representative) to attend as a support person for the child or another member of the family who is especially vulnerable.
- Advocates are not always present in FGC's but they are a very important means of ensuring that everyone's voice is heard.
- The role of the advocate is to represent the views, opinions and needs of the child. If you have been chosen by a child to be their advocate and you are a member of the family, it is important to remember that an advocate must remain as neutral as possible and it may not be possible to be part of the conference both as a family member and the child's advocate.
- The facilitator will discuss this with you and the child if they are old enough to understand. It may be considered more appropriate for someone outside the family to act as the advocate and for other people, both inside or outside the family to be there as 'supporters' to the child or other family member.
- If the child is very young, the main role of the advocate is to express in simple terms to the conference what the particular needs of children in the early years are.
- This explanation can be a very powerful aspect of the process as the attention can be deflected from the main focus (ie the care and protection of the child) by debate or argument about details of the case.
- As the advocate you will be invited by the facilitator to speak to the meeting towards the end of the first part of the FGC.
- It is very important that roles are clear, as family members can see the facilitator as their advocate, whereas they **have responsibility for the process**. A high level of professional skill and detachment is necessary for advocacy to be effective and appropriate. The child protection worker and facilitator can help advocates in their preparation for the conference if needed.

- The FGC may take place within a community setting. FGC's do not run to set timetables. This is a clear demonstration to the family that it is their meeting – not one controlled by DHHS.
- The emphasis in the FGC is on the current situation, not on a deep exploration of past issues. It is a planning meeting, not a trial or a family therapy session!

A Family Group Conference has three parts:

Part One - INTRODUCTIONS & INFORMATION SHARING:

- The facilitator explains to the meeting why it has been called and both child protection and representatives from other agencies give information about their concerns, their ideas and the support they can offer.
- The family can ask child protection staff, facilitator or other service representatives questions so that they understand fully what has been said.
- If the child or young person is not at the meeting, or is not confident to speak and is supported by you as their advocate, you will speak for them about their wishes and their needs. As stated earlier, a very powerful time for the advocate to speak is towards the end of this first stage of the FGC as it re-focuses the meeting onto the child and his or her needs.
- If your role is advocate for a vulnerable adult member of the family it is likely that you may speak before the child or his her advocate. There are no hard and fast rules.
- The facilitator will then sum up what was discussed, including the risk assessment and safety statements made by child protection and clarify what the family is being asked to do.

Part Two - PRIVATE TIME:

- Unless there are safety reasons (or the family requests that they are not left unaccompanied during 'private time') family members will be given the opportunity and reach a decision and come up with their suggestions in private.
- The facilitator and all those who are not part of the family (or close friends) will leave while they discuss their plan for how they can support each other in caring for the child.
- Teachers and other professionals (but generally not the advocate/s) may leave the FGC at this point as the development and negotiation around the family's plan is essentially between the family and child protection.
- The facilitator will have discussed with you as an advocate whether you and the person you are supporting (either child or adult family member) remain during this phase of the meeting.
- Sometimes family members or young people request that the facilitator (and even, in some

- cases, the child protection worker/s) join them in all or part of this 'private family time'.
- When the family members are ready, the facilitator will re-convene the meeting to hear and discuss their suggestions and plan.

Part Three - DISCUSSION OF THE PLAN:

- This is when the family presents their plan for the future care of the child to the facilitator and child protection. Although everyone may agree in principle, **all plans have to be endorsed by a senior manager in child protection** and some may need to be approved by the Court.
- The advocate does not have any decision-making responsibility, but may, if appropriate, reflect on the plan in relation to the expressed wishes of the child or young person or, if the child is very young, make comments regarding the plan's relevance to the needs of the child.
- Before the FGC is concluded the facilitator will make sure that everyone understands what has been agreed and what will happen next in relation to endorsement and implementation of the plan.
- After the FGC everyone will be sent a copy of the outcome. What is said or how people behaved will not be used in Court. Only a record of the agreements or decisions of the conference will be given to the Court.
- Family Group Conferences have been formally introduced to Tasmania through the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997*.
- The practice has been adopted in many states and territories as well as the rest of the world. Many families and professionals involved in FGC's have found them helpful and both a positive and creative way to work with families.
- The program is managed and monitored by an administrator with professional experience in the child protection field. Feedback from participants assists with ongoing improvement of the process and this is achieved through a number of ways, including feedback sheets.

This information sheet is one of a set which is intended to 'demystify' the process of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) for all parties concerned. Information sharing is an essential component of strengths-based child-centred family-focused practice and it is important that all participants have sufficient information to feel comfortable about attending an FGC.

An information kit has also been developed through SAAP funding to assist service providers and community members understand the process.

More information is available from:
Family Group Conference Program Coordinator
 Email: fgccordinator@dhhs.tas.gov.au or
 GPO Box 125 Hobart TAS 7000