

Family Group Conferencing: Information for Family Members

CHILD PROTECTION INFORMATION SHEET

What is a Family Group Conference (FGC)?

- An FGC is a meeting where family members get together to help make plans about how to keep children safe after a child protection assessment has concluded that they had experienced abuse or neglect or were at risk.
- It is a time when everyone concentrates on what is going to be better for the child in the future; it is not about blaming people or criticism of events the past.

Who organizes a Family Group Conference?

- An FGC is set up by the child protection service in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) but it is organised and run by a Facilitator.
- Facilitators are not employees of child protection but are appointed and approved as contractors by the Secretary of DHHS.
- When an FGC is to be held, child protection will talk to your child (if he or she is old and mature enough) and key family members which facilitators are available and offer you all some choice about will manage the conference.

What happens before an FGC?

- The appointed facilitator will contact immediate and extended family members and invite you to the conference.
- You and your child can make suggestions about when and where you would like to meet, what would make it comfortable for you (eg what food, music, or ceremonies you would like included).
- You may want particular people to support you in the conference. You may also need help with child care or transport, or someone in your family may need an interpreter. Please discuss all these issues with the facilitator.

- The facilitator will also invite child protection staff to the FGC. They will make the reasons for the involvement of child protection clear but also tell you about any support they may be able to offer in the future to help you care for your child.
- Other agencies, groups or professionals who are helping you now or could help in the future may also be invited.
- If there is a risk of violence at the FGC, the facilitator will ensure that the meeting is safe for everyone concerned. This may mean that some family members are excluded or that security is organised.
- The facilitator may also invite an Advocate (not generally a lawyer) to attend as a support person or representative for the child or another member of the family who is considered especially vulnerable. Advocates are not always used in an FGC but they are a very important means of ensuring that everyone's voice is heard.
- In situations where there are concerns about the child's education, a teacher or Department of Education support staff member may also be invited to the conference.

What actually happens at an FGC?

A Family Group Conference has three parts:

Part One – INTRODUCTIONS & INFORMATION SHARING:

- The facilitator explains why the FGC has been called and child protection staff will give information about their risk assessment and the support they could offer to reduce this risk.
- You can ask child protection workers, facilitator or other people present questions if you do not understand what has been said. If the child is not at the

- meeting, or is not confident to speak, their advocate may speak for them.
- The facilitator will sum up what was discussed, including the child protection risk assessment, and make clear to everyone what aspects of the child's care and protection the family is being asked to help to make plans about.
- It may be that there are some things that cannot be considered, including any plan that involves the child returning to live with an adult who seriously abused them.

Part Two - PRIVATE TIME:

- The facilitator and all those who are not part of the family (or close friends) will leave the room where the meeting took place and give the family time to share ideas and come up with a suggested plan for how they can support each other in meeting the needs of the child.
- The facilitator will have discussed with the advocate whether they and the child remain during this phase of the meeting.
- Unless there are safety reasons (or the family requests that they are not left alone during 'private time') family members will be given the opportunity to reach a decision and come up with their suggestions and plan in private.
- There is no set time limit for the 'family's private time' but it generally takes about 45 minutes. It could take much longer – or a plan might be formed quite quickly.
- The facilitator and child protection staff will remain close by, in case the family has any questions or need other help. Other service representatives may leave at this point as they are not responsible for discussing the plan or making any decisions about it.
- When family members are ready, the facilitator will bring the group back together to hear the family's ideas and suggested 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 at the conference 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**.

- Before the FGC is finished the facilitator will make sure that everyone understands what has been agreed and what needs to be discussed further or approved by a child protection manager or the Court.
- 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.

Will I have any contact further with the facilitator after the FGC?

- **NO** the facilitator's role is finished after the completion of the conference and the distribution of the written plans or outcomes from the FGC.
- If you need to find out what has happened in relation to the plan after the FGC, the child protection worker responsible for your child's care planning is the person to speak to.

Why do we have FGC's in Tasmania?

- Family Group Conferencing is included in the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997*, Tasmania's child protection legislation.
- Many other states and territories use the process and both family members and professionals who have been part of FGC's have found them helpful and a good way to work together in the best interests of children.
- The program is managed by a program coordinator in child protection. Feedback from family members and other participants helps us to improve the process and you will be invited by the facilitator to give feedback about your experience, both what was good and what could have been better.

If you would like to know more about Family Group Conferencing, please contact:

Family Group Conference Program Coordinator
 Email: fgccordinator@dhhs.tas.gov.au or
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