

Family Group Conferencing: Information for Teachers and Other Professionals

CHILD PROTECTION INFORMATION SHEET

If a child with whom you work closely (eg in your class if you are a teacher) has become a client of DHHS in relation to known or suspected child abuse, a family group conference may be called in order to plan for his or her future care and protection.

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 families (especially those who are extremely fearful of the power of the state) have sufficient information to feel comfortable about attending an FGC.

All participants need to be clear about the process and the possible outcomes. An information kit has also been developed to assist service providers and community members understand the process. Information about these and other resources is available from the Child Protection Services Family Group Conference Program Coordinator at fgccoordinator@dhhs.tas.gov.au.

- When children or young people do not receive the care and protection they have a right to, as a teacher, or other professional offering a service to the child or family you may have become involved.
- 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 the 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 as well as what supports and services are available to them. 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. As the Facilitator of the conference, this person will not be involved with the family after the conference unless another FGC is needed.
- In some circumstances the individual may have a professional role with the family in the future, but this will be quite distinct from their role as Facilitator (eg they may provide counseling services to the child or family). In this case, they would not be able to facilitate a future FGC with the same family.
- 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 family and the child protection worker.
- 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 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 circumstances where there are concerns about the child's education, a teacher or Department of Education support service staff member may be invited to the conference.
- 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.

- It is very important that information on available resources is provided to the family in a manner that is clear and accessible.
- Professional detachment is required when participating in an FGC in this capacity and it is not an opportunity to direct the family's decision-making. The child protection worker and Facilitator might help professionals and other attendees in preparing for the conference.
- 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.
- If the attendance of a professional or service representative is not possible or appropriate, a written report or other information about the services or supports available can be submitted in the form of pamphlets, videos etc to the meeting through the Facilitator.
- It is very important that the family receives copies of all documentation what will be presented to the conference in advance. It is important to remember that this is not a Court setting and the point of the meeting is not to determine whether abuse or neglect has occurred or by whom.
- The focus of the meeting is on the future and on strategies for the future care and protection of the child. 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 an Advocate, they will speak for them about their wishes and their needs.
- 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:

- The Facilitator and all those who are not part of the family (or close friends) will leave while they discuss their plan for supporting the child. The Facilitator will have discussed with attending professions, and others whether they remain during this phase of the meeting.
- 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 to talk in private.
- When they are ready, the Facilitator will reconvene the meeting to hear the suggested plan. It is not always necessary for teachers and other professionals to return to the conference as negotiation around the plan is essentially between the family and DHHS.

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.
- 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 who have been part of FGC's have found them helpful and a 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 in a number of ways including feedback sheets.
- If you would like to know more about Family Group Conferencing, please contact:

Family Group Conference Program Coordinator
 Email: fgccoordinator@dhhs.tas.gov.au or
 GPO Box 125 Hobart TAS 7000