



What is a Family Group Conference?

A family group conference is a meeting of the extended family and friends to make decisions and plans for resolving problems around a child, young person or vulnerable adult.

This may involve, for instance, where a child can live safely, support for a lone parent, families struggling with alcohol or drug abuse, domestic violence, homeless families and young people, elder abuse, offending or potential offending behaviour of a young person, or problems with school attendance or behaviour.

It is the family's meeting. It is an opportunity for all family members present to understand the concerns of the agencies and develop an action plan to address those concerns.

FGCs – What is the Process?

The process starts with the very careful preparation of everyone for the meeting. This is done by the coordinator, who will try to visit everyone to be invited, and discuss what is involved. He or she will try to smooth out any problems that might deter someone from attending.

The process is very sensitive to the diverse nature of families. It is always in the first language of the family and takes place according to the particular wishes of the family. For instance, some cultures may wish to start with a prayer. Others may wish an elder to open the meeting. It is always held in the first language of the family and translation is provided for those who cannot understand this language.

The principles on which this process is based include the belief that any plan made by a family themselves is much more likely to be successful than one that has been imposed on them by outsiders. It helps all family members to have a voice in what happens. This includes the child, young person or vulnerable adult for whom the meeting may be held. It respects the importance and dignity of everyone.

It also brings in a whole network of people other than the immediate family to share the problem and offer solutions. These include the wider family network, friends, neighbours, and the local community. For instance, a youth leader, local church members or someone from a local voluntary organisation may be invited by the family.

It builds on the strengths of families and communities rather than leaving individual family members to struggle on their own.

The model is based on empowering the widest possible network of extended family members and friends to participate in decision making about a member of their own family. It recognises that family members have a life-long commitment to each other, and an intimate knowledge of family history that goes back a long time. It encourages and enables family members to bring a wide range of their own resources to the meeting.

The coordinator will ensure that high quality information is presented to the meeting for sharing and discussing. This includes information about the issue to be resolved, and information about professional resources that are available to the family. Because the family chooses what they feel to be the most appropriate to their situation, there is a much higher chance of everyone being committed to the plan. It is difficult to be committed to a plan that has been devised by others for you to implement.

The active participation of children, young people and vulnerable adults in their own FGC is a key strength of the model.

In respect to child welfare, for instance, there is a higher proportion of children and young people who attend their own meeting and feel that they are heard and treated with respect and dignity by the adults present. This is in stark contrast to professionally biased meetings, such as Child Protection Conferences.