

What is Family Group Conferencing?



Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is a voluntary, inclusive and restorative approach to decision-making. It involves family members coming together to make significant decisions for one of their members.

FGC promotes respectful and strength based engagement with family members and vulnerable persons in planning to meet what is in the best interests of the person.

FGC invites extended family members to take a lead role in making decisions for the benefit of, and where necessary, attending to any harm experienced by 'one of their own.'

Both Family Group Conferencing and Aboriginal Family Decision-Making are aligned with principles underpinning the Victorian Charter of Human Rights & Responsibilities 2008. [Click here to view more about The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.](#)

'Human rights are the cornerstone of strong, healthy communities where everyone can participate and be included.' Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission 2011. [Click here to view more about The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.](#)

Family Group Conferencing

' Families Making Decisions '

Stages

Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose of the conference? • What are key issues? • What are the strengths and formal/informal networks/resources in this situation? • Who are key persons to attend? • Is restoration of well-being or relationships a consideration? • Child Inclusive Practice (seeking the young person's or adult client's view) • Bottom lines for decision-making i.e. what's non-negotiable? • Options of support from community and professionals
Meeting Stage Venue conducive to relaxed participation	
Information-Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Questions listed (On Whiteboard) • Facilitated discussion on Key Issues • Offers of professional / informal support • Equity lens on what assistance may the family need in engaging with Agencies? • Solutions explored. • Will this solution work? • Reality check: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ what could go wrong? ✓ what do you need? ✓ what will it take to do this?
Family Private Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family meet in private & make decisions. • Solutions and plan developed • Refreshments provided
Presenting Family Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan presented • Negotiating and Resourcing the plan • Agreement • Key worker identified • Review time set

A Family Group Conference is a process where family members and their supports (e.g. friend, advocate, etc)

1. Convene a meeting between extended family, supports and professionals
2. Share concerns and needs
3. Explore solutions and supports
4. Make decisions and develop a plan of support
5. Appoint a 'key worker'
6. Agree how they will review their plan
7. Review Meeting



History

Family Group Conferencing emerged in New Zealand as a response by the Maori community to an over-representation of their children and young people in New Zealand's criminal and child welfare systems.

They questioned 'why such over-representation?' when their culture places strong value on family, kith and kinship (i.e extended family and respected persons) support.

Maori's drew attention in the late 1970s and early 1980s to the impact of their family systems being fractured and their cultural norms of kinship support being by-passed leading their children and young people to be received into State care.

Such observations led to an inquiry into alternative models of decision making and led to the introduction of legislation i.e The Children, Young Persons their Families Act, 1989. This legislation attended to culturally respectful provision for Maori young offenders, children in need of care or protection and made provision for inclusive decision-making by their families and communities. This innovation proved consistent with kinship values of the Maori culture.

Overview

Family Group Conferencing is a democratic and restorative approach to decision-making and has appeal across sectors and cultures e.g. Health, Aged, Disability, Mental Health, Youth Justice, Family Law, Education, Child Protection, Aboriginal and CALD communities etc.

It is an inclusive approach which, when restorative, addresses well-being or actual harm that has occurred. It invites family members and their supports to take a lead in making decisions alongside professionals. There are instances when decisions need to be made for children e.g such as during an intervention from child protection, youth homelessness services and when families are involved with family support agencies. FGC can be most effective when there is family breakdown or stress on the family as a result of the negative impacts of drug and alcohol misuse, family violence, mental health concerns, disability, criminal matters or imprisonment of a parent.

The objective is to offer people a process that creates the optimum environment, with appropriate resources, for important decisions to be made that are both realistic, restorative of well-being and will last over time.

Family Group Conferencing as an Indigenous Restorative Practice



Picture : Hands Across The Divide (source unknown)

This statue may be found in the city of Derry, Northern Ireland depicting persons stretching across a divide in a then culture of sectarian conflict in a gesture of reconciliation.

Like all restorative practices, family group conferencing emerges from a history and philosophy of kinship and relationship as the central values of society found in many indigenous cultures. This way of experiencing the world is sometimes contrasted with the more individualistic values more commonly found in western cultures.

Angela McCullagh (VARJ committee member, [click here for link to 'notice the difference'](#)) had the privilege of working with Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative (<http://www.rumbalara.org.au/>) from 2001 in innovating in Hume Region the model of Aboriginal Family Decision-Making. Key collaborators included Ray Ahmatt, Lorraine Forrester, Howard Nichols, Elder Irene Thomas and Magistrate Kate Auty. This model is now implemented state-wide in the Victorian child protection program in conjunction with Aboriginal Cooperatives. The model is based on the Principles and Restorative Practice of 'The Message Sticks'.

The New Zealand Process of Family Group Conferencing

The process involves talking to all people who have an interest in the well-being of the child and inviting them to participate in a conference. An average conference will take approximately 20 hours, with approximately 3 hours for the Conference meeting.

1. Preparation Stage:

The convenor liaises with everybody who has an interest in the person's well-being, the issues of concern and proposed solutions, resources to support the family's ideas are explored within the family and professional network.

2. The Family Group Conference

a. Information Stage

Following introductions the issues are presented by the convener to the family and professionals.

The convenor clarifies the key questions for the family to address and bottom lines for decision-making. Professionals provide helpful information and resources that will assist the family to make decisions. The role of the convener is neutral and solely to facilitate constructive discussion.

b. Private Time

The convenor and other professionals leave the room. This enables the family members to discuss the issues themselves and arrive at their own conclusions. At any time the family can invite the convenor or any other professional to return to the room and assist with further information or advice on how to move forward.

c. Implementation Stage

The family arrive at their decisions and basic plan. They re-engage with the convenor and professionals to clarify and confirm how it will work. The Plan is drawn into a written agreement by the convenor and signed by the participants.

3. Follow-up:

In most cases the convenor will make contact with the participants within 8 weeks of the conference to follow up on the progress of the plan. If helpful, an additional conference with relevant people can be arranged.

The process can be considered restorative and be distinguished from other decision-making processes, such as courts, therapy and mediation, in that:

1. The process proceeds on the basis that people can resolve their own conflicts if given the opportunity to do so;
2. Facilitators offer people respect and specifically acknowledge their ability to resolve their own conflicts;
3. The process facilitates an environment in which the people with an interest in an issue are given an opportunity to resolve their own conflicts;
4. The process acknowledges inherent and imposed power imbalances;
5. The process acknowledges that events take place within a communality of individuals and interrelated networks of relationships.
6. The process may be offered to address and restore harm to individuals. Needless to say competent facilitation and consideration of ethical dilemmas is required to work with significant harm as caused by sexual abuse, assault and family violence. Family Group Conference upholds as paramount over all other benefits the principle of 'do no further harm'.

A most recent paper on Family Group Conferencing is written by Nathan Harris on behalf of the Australian Institute of Family Studies titled 'Family Group Conferencing 15 years on' and may be found here: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/issues/issues27/issues27.html#family> Family group conferencing in Australia 15 years on.