



Family Group Conferencing for Parents

MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

WHAT IS A FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE?

A family group conference is a shared decision-making meeting for families. At a conference, the friends and the family you invite come together to develop a plan to help solve problems, and to make sure that your children have the care and support they need. A child welfare worker will be asked to review your family plan to ensure it addresses the concerns about your child's safety and meets your family's needs.

HOW IS THIS DIFFERENT FROM DISCUSSING THINGS AT HOME?

In a family group conference, which is also known as family group decision-making, you will work with a neutral person – a coordinator – who helps you focus and work things out in an organized way. You may want to invite people like teachers or counselors who play important roles in your child's life.

You make decisions as a family, and receive help to:

- sort through issues
- learn about supports in your community, and
- make a formal plan that works for your children, builds on your strengths, and meets your family's needs.

Family group conferences can help you reach agreement on things like:

- how to keep your child safe
- what services your family needs
- where your child will live, or
- how your family and community will support you and your children.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Family group conferences provide an opportunity for you and your family to come together and agree on what's best for your children. Family group conferencing is a voluntary decision-making process that often helps to avoid the need for court involvement.

Family conferences are a way to:

- give you a chance to plan for your family's future
- make sure your voice is heard
- make decisions more quickly and bring together people who care about your child, and
- build stronger relationships by helping families work out their problems together.

WHO CAN TAKE PART?

The family group conference is for anyone who plays an important role in your child's life. This may include:

- you and your children
- other family members like aunts, uncles and grandparents

- people close to you, like friends and neighbours, who you consider part of your family
- members of your church community
- members of your Aboriginal or other cultural community
- people who support your family, such as teachers, doctors or counselors, and
- if you like, someone to help you or your child speak up and make sure your voice is heard.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

There are four basic steps:

1. You work with the family group conference coordinator to decide who should take part. After the conference participants have been agreed on, the coordinator sets up a meeting with each participant to talk to them about what family group conferences are all about, and to prepare them for the day of the conference. If people cannot be at the conference, the coordinator arranges for their views to be heard another way (in writing, or over the phone).
2. At the conference, the coordinator makes sure everyone knows each other, feels welcome, and understands what will happen. Your family and the invited community members will talk as a group about the reason for the meeting and the support services that are available to help you and your family. The conference coordinator will talk with everyone about the importance of respecting the confidential nature of the information that is shared.
3. After that, your family has private time (without any professionals present) to work out a plan for the future. The coordinator will be available in a nearby room in case you get stuck.
4. When the family group has finished developing a plan, the child welfare worker will be asked to return to the meeting and review the family plan. The child welfare worker will approve the plan if it meets your child's need for safety.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Once the plan is approved by the child welfare worker, everyone who was at the conference receives a written copy of the plan. Everyone then follows through on what they agreed to. For example, an aunt might agree to care for your child a few days a week, or you and your teenager might agree to go to family counseling together. Your child welfare worker may review the plan with you from time to time to make sure it still meets your needs. You may choose to have a follow-up family group conference in a few months to see how everything is going, and update the original family plan.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

It can take from 3 to 6 weeks to prepare for a family group conference. The coordinator needs to speak with everyone who is involved in the conference to ensure they feel safe, and to find a time in which all the participants are available to meet. The conference itself may last anywhere from a couple of hours to one or two days – depending on the issues you are solving and how quickly you can all reach agreement.

WHAT OTHER OPTIONS DO I HAVE FOR SHARED DECISION-MAKING?

The family group conference is one of several ways of making shared child welfare decisions. Depending on your family's needs, you may also want to learn more about:

- **Family meetings:** family members meet with a child welfare worker to agree on things like goals and supports
- **Integrated case management meeting:** family members, advocates, and involved professionals like teachers, public health nurses, child welfare workers, and counselors, meet to solve problems together and make a plan to support your family and keep your children safe
- **Mediation:** a trained, neutral mediator helps family members and child welfare workers work through issues and settle disagreements about children's care
- **Traditional decision-making:** family members follow community or cultural traditions to work through their problems; for example, in an Aboriginal community, elders might lead families and child welfare workers through a traditional problem solving process to guide decision-making.

HOW CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

For more information on family group conferences and other types of shared decision-making, talk to your child welfare worker or family group conference coordinator, or visit the website at: www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child_protection/mediation.htm