

A graphic of several hands placing white puzzle pieces onto a grid of pink squares. The puzzle pieces are arranged to form a larger shape, symbolizing family and community support.

Family Group Conferencing for Children

MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

WHAT IS A FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE?

A family group conference is a way for families to solve their problems together. Your family is asked to come together to develop a plan to make sure that you have the care and support you need. A child welfare worker will be asked to review your family's plan to make sure it meets your needs.

HOW IS THIS DIFFERENT FROM DISCUSSING THINGS AT HOME?

In a family group conference, you have another person – a coordinator – who helps you work together. If you want you can also invite people like neighbours, friends, teachers or counselors who play important roles in your life.

You still make decisions on your own, as a family. But you have some help to:

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

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

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

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Family group conferences can help everyone agree on what's best for you. They can also:

- make sure you have a chance to say what you want
- give you a chance to help plan your family's future
- make decisions more quickly
- bring together people who care about you, and
- make sure you and your parents get the support you need.

WHO CAN TAKE PART?

The family group conference is for anyone who plays an important role in your life. That includes:

- you and your parents
- your brothers and sisters
- 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 Aboriginal or other cultural community
- people who support your family, such as teachers, doctors or counselors, and
- if you like, someone to help you speak up and make sure your voice is heard.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

There are four basic steps:

1. Your family works with the coordinator to decide who should take part, and where and when the conference should take place. The coordinator will likely set up a time to talk with you, and to explain how the process works. The coordinator may also ask you about how you would like to participate and whether you would like to attend. Then the coordinator sets up a meeting and, if people cannot come, arranges for them 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 is happening. Then you all talk together as a group about the reason for the meeting and about support services that are available to help you and your family. Everything discussed in the conference is confidential. That means no one else will be told what was talked about. You can speak as freely as you like.
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. The adults at the conference will make sure you understand the plan – and that you have had a chance to say what you want to happen. The plan is also reviewed by your child welfare worker who approves it if it meets your need for safety.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Once the plan is approved by the child welfare worker, everyone who was at the conference gets a written copy. Everyone then follows through on what they agreed to. For example, an aunt might agree to care for you a few days a week, or your parents might agree to go to counseling together. You may have a follow-up family group conference in a few months to see how everything is going.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

It can take about 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 are ready to meet. The conference itself may last anywhere from a couple of hours to one or two days – depending on the problems you are solving and how quickly you can all reach an agreement.

ARE THERE OTHER WAYS TO SHARE IN DECISION-MAKING?

Yes. The family group conference is only one way to make 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 you safe
- **Mediation:** a trained, neutral mediator helps family members and child welfare workers settle disagreements about your 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?

If you have questions, 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