

Family Group Conferencing for Extended Family

MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

WHAT IS A FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE?

A family group conference is a shared decision-making process for families. Everyone who cares about a family is asked to come together to develop a plan to help solve problems, and to make sure that the children in the family have the care and support they need. A child welfare worker will be asked to review the plan to make sure it addresses the concerns about the child's safety and meets the 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, a neutral person – a coordinator – helps everyone focus and work things out in an organized way. The family can also invite friends, community members and people like teachers or counselors who play important roles in the children's lives.

The family still makes its own decisions. But help is provided to:

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

Family group conferences can help reach agreement on things like:

- how to keep a child safe
- what services a family needs
- where a child will live, or
- how the extended family and community will support the parents and child.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Family group conferences provide an opportunity for families to come together and agree on what's best for 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:

- bring together people who care about the child
- give you a chance to support a family you care about
- make decisions more quickly, 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 the child's life. That includes:

- parents
- children
- other family members like aunts, uncles and grandparents
- people like close friends and neighbours who are considered part of the family
- members of a church community
- members of the Aboriginal or other cultural community
- people who support the family, such as teachers, doctors, or counselors, and
- if they like, someone to help the child or other family members speak up and make sure their voice is heard.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

There are four basic steps:

1. The family works 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 how the process works. Then you all talk together as a group about the reason for the meeting, and some of the support services available to help. The conference coordinator will talk with everyone about the importance of respecting the confidential nature of the information that is shared.
3. After that, the family has private time with their extended family and friends (without professionals present) to work out a plan for the future.
4. When a plan is made, it is reviewed by a child welfare worker who approves it if it meets the children's need for safety.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Once the plan is approved by the child welfare worker, everyone who was at the conference gets a copy.

Everyone then follows through on what they agreed to. For example, you might agree to care for your brother's child, drive your friend to a parenting class, or just be available to talk on the phone when your neighbour feels stressed and is concerned about her children.

If the family requests it, there may be a follow-up 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 understand what the meeting is about, 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're solving and how quickly you can all reach agreement.

WHY SHOULD I TAKE PART?

Raising a family can be challenging at times, and everyone needs support now and then. If someone invites you to a family group conference, it means they trust you to help them make decisions about their children and their future.

Taking part gives you a chance to make a difference. It also helps make the family stronger, and can save them the time and stress of having to go to court.

HOW CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

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