

Family Group Conferencing for Professionals

MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

WHAT IS A FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE?

A family group conference is a type of shared decision-making for families who are receiving child welfare services. Everyone who cares about a family gets together to solve problems and develop a plan to make sure that the children get the care and support they need. A child welfare worker will be asked to review the plan to ensure 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 professionals like teachers, counselors, or service providers 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 children, 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 children.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

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

- make sure the family knows about, and has access to, resources and services that can help
- make decisions more quickly and bring together people who care about the children, 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 and children
- other family members like aunts, uncles and grandparents

- people such as close friends and neighbours who are considered part of the family
- members of a church community
- members of the Aboriginal or other cultural community
- professionals like you who support the family, and
- if they like, someone to help the child or other family members speak up and make sure their voices are heard.

WHAT'S MY ROLE AS A PROFESSIONAL?

Your role is to provide information and offer consultation. You do not make or influence decisions; that role belongs to the family.

You will be asked to think about what resources and services you and/or your organization can realistically offer. Written submissions are not needed, but it can be helpful to provide a few key points about your services on paper for the family.

All information you provide should be jargon-free and easy to understand. Remember: this is about children, and children may be taking part. Be open to questions and be prepared to explain or clarify points as needed.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

There are four basic steps:

1. The family works with the coordinator to decide who should take part. Then the coordinator sets up a meeting and, if people cannot attend, 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 the supports you may offer to help the family. Everything discussed in the conference is confidential, so you can speak as freely as you like.
3. After that, you leave the room. The family has private time to work out a plan.
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 receives a written copy.

Everyone then follows through on what they agreed to. For example, you might agree to provide several hours a week of parenting instruction, or to work with the family to address a child's challenging behaviours.

There may be 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 understand the process, and to find a time that will work for everyone to attend.

The conference itself may last anywhere from a couple of hours to one or two days – depending on the issues involved and how quickly everyone can reach agreement. You will only be expected to remain at the meeting until the private family time begins, usually not more than one or two hours.

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