

A graphic of a grid of puzzle pieces in shades of blue and yellow. Some pieces are missing, and hands are shown placing pieces into the grid. The text "Family Group Conferencing for Youth" is overlaid on the left side of the grid.

Family Group Conferencing for Youth

MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

WHAT IS A FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE?

A family group conference is a type of shared decision-making meeting. You get together with people you care about and work out a plan ensuring you get the care and support needed. A child welfare worker will be asked to review your plan to make sure that it meets your 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 have another, neutral person – a coordinator – who helps you focus and work things out in an organized way. You can also invite people like neighbours, friends, teachers or counselors who play important roles in your life. You and your family make decisions on your own, with the people who are at the conference. But you have some help to:

- sort through issues
- learn about supports in your community, and
- make a formal 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 you or your family needs, or
- how your family, friends and community will support you.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Family group conferences provide an opportunity for you and the people you care about to come together to plan for your future. Family group conferencing is a voluntary decision-making process. Family conferences also help to:

- make sure your voice is heard
- make decisions more quickly
- bring together people who care about you, 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 life. That includes:

- you,
- 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. You and the coordinator will work together to decide who should take part in the conference, and where and when it should be held. The coordinator will set up a time to talk with you and each of the other participants to explain how the process works and to prepare them for the meeting day. Then the coordinator sets up the conference, 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 how the process works. 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, so you can speak as freely as you like.
3. After that, you and the people you have invited have private time to work out a plan for the future.
4. You have a right to have your views heard and considered in the development of the plan. The adults present in the meeting will make sure that you understand the developed plan. The plan is also reviewed by your child welfare worker who approves it if it meets your needs for safety.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Once the plan is approved by the child welfare worker, everyone who was at the conference receives a 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 you and your parents 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.

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 to find a time when everyone can 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.

WHAT 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 you safe
- **Mediation:** a trained, neutral mediator who does not work for the Ministry of Children and Family Development 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?

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