



The Family Group Conference

Recognizing that families have the most information about themselves to make decisions to protect children.

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) offers a new approach for families in which children have been maltreated. The process is based on the belief that families and communities must partner together to ensure child safety and well-being. FGC is a facilitated process through which an extended family works to develop safety plans that protect their children.

Statement Of Principles

- ▶ Children must be protected from harm and their welfare promoted.
- ▶ The family has the primary responsibility to care for and protect their children.
- ▶ Families should be supported in their efforts to keep children safe.
- ▶ It is more desirable for children to live with their families than in institutional or foster care.
- ▶ Government agencies and communities must work with families to ensure child safety and well-being.

Who Is Involved?

FGCs can involve a number of individuals including parents, children (depending on their emotional development and stability), immediate and extended family members, teachers, counselors, social workers, clergy, doctors, and others who are committed to the well-being of the child(ren) involved. The Department of Health and Human Services

(DHHS), state mediation centers, and court system are also involved. DHHS and/or judges may refer families to FGC. The local mediation center will then assign an FGC Coordinator who will oversee the process.

How Does FGC Work?

DHHS Protection and Safety Workers and/or judges may refer families for FGCs by first contacting their local mediation center. The conference Coordinator assigned by the center works closely with the Protection and Safety Worker. That person is responsible for the critical activities that ensure the needs of the child and family are met.

FGCs are a means of involving extended family members and other persons important to troubled families. The conference not only involves families in decision making in child abuse and neglect cases, but also involves the family members more intensively in the lives of the troubled parents and maltreated children.

The conference itself usually lasts 3-8 hours, and is held in a neutral location that is convenient and comfortable for the family. Prior to the scheduled conference, the FGC Coordinator makes contact with the participants and prepares for the conference.

The process itself has four phases:

INTRODUCTIONS

Beginning in ways that are culturally and traditionally relevant to the family, the Coordinator welcomes all participants, reiterates the FGC process and purpose, and clarifies the meeting's goal and each participant's role.

INFORMATION GATHERING

The Coordinator elicits from each participant their concerns related to the safety and well-being of all children and their perceptions of family strengths. During this time, the DHHS Protection and Safety Worker clearly communicates the health and safety risks known to DHHS.

THE PRIVATE FAMILY MEETING

The family meets in private to develop a plan to assure that the child(ren) will be cared for and protected from future harm. The Coordinator, though not present at the family meeting, is available to answer questions or address concerns.

DECISION MAKING

The Coordinator, professionals and other supporters rejoin the family. The family presents the plan. If the plan is not realistic or viable, the group works together until consensus is reached.

What Happens Next?

The Coordinator records the plan and participants sign the plan. In court cases, the family's plan is presented to the Court for consideration and approval. In non-court cases, the Protection and Safety Worker and the family approve the final plan. An optional follow-up meeting can be arranged, if needed.

Who Benefits?

- ▶Children, who will live in safer living environments with support from their families and their community.
- ▶Families, who may become more involved, unified and better informed in order to resolve concerns and issues.

Family Group Conferencing Recognizes That. . .

- ▶Families have strengths, and are capable of making decisions and plans which keep their children safe.
- ▶Families have the most information about themselves to make well-informed decisions.
- ▶Individuals find security and a sense of belonging with their family; families provide a sense of identity for their children.
- ▶Families have the ability, if given the opportunity, to activate helping networks within communities to keep children safe.
- ▶Plans to protect children are most effective when they develop out of the strengths of the community and the culture in which the family lives.

Nebraska Court Improvement Project UNL Center on Children, Families and the Law

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Office of Dispute Resolution

Lincoln, NE
402-471-3148

Center for Conflict Resolution

Scottsbluff, NE
308-635-2002 or 800-967-2115

Central Mediation Center

Kearney, NE
308-237-4692 or 800-203-3452

Nebraska Justice Center

Walthill, NE
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Concord Center

Omaha, NE
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402-441-5740

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Giving families the opportunity to care for
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