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Theorie und Methodik des Family Group Conferencing

Theory and methodology of Family Group Conferencing

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Potsdam, 18.07.2011

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Abstract

Das aus Neuseeland stammende Hilfeplanverfahren des Family Group Conferencing findet weltweit Eingang in die Praxis der Sozialen Arbeit und wird dabei auch in Singapur angewendet. Im Rahmen der Ausbildung zum „Family Group Conference Co-ordinator“ der Fachhochschule Potsdam in Kooperation mit der singapurischen Organisation Beyond Social Services, hatten die Autoren die Möglichkeit ein Tutorium auszuüben. Im Zuge des Kurses entstanden verschiedene Falldokumentationen der Teilnehmer, hinsichtlich ihrer ersten durchgeführten Family Group Conferences.

Die Bachelorarbeit prüft, exemplarisch an der Organisation Beyond Social Services inwieweit das Verfahren Family Group Conferencing in der Praxis umsetzbar ist.

Dazu setzt sich die Arbeit mit der Historie des Verfahrens und den theoretischen Grundlagen auseinander. Dabei wird die Betrachtungsweise von Prof. Dr. Frank Früchtel einbezogen, sowie der „ONE – approach“, der Effekte des Family Group Conferencing auf lebensweltliche Netzwerke, als auch auf durchführende Organisationen, beschreibt. Ferner wird die praktizierende Organisation anhand ihres Leitbildes untersucht, um herauszufinden ob Family Group Conferencing die Philosophie der Organisation unterstützt. Außerdem wird durch Einbeziehung internationaler Fachliteratur der methodische Kontext erläutert. Anhand der Darstellung von zehn konkreten Fallbeispielen, mit jeweils kritischer Bewertung, wird die Praxis des Family Group Conferencing illustriert, darauf aufbauend erfolgt eine Metaanalyse.

Die Arbeit konstatiert die Umsetzbarkeit von Family Group Conferencing bei Beyond Social Services und weist auf Implementierungsschwierigkeiten in der Arbeit der Koordination selbst, sowie auf strukturelle Bedingungen hin.

Aufgrund der ersten Erkenntnisse empfehlen die Autoren Maßnahmen zur Sicherung und Weiterentwicklung der Qualität. Weitere empirische Forschungen werden darüberhinaus als notwendig angesehen, um das Verfahren weiterhin zielgerichtet implementieren zu können.

Abstract

The in New Zealand originating decision-making procedure Family Group Conferencing expands into social work practice worldwide and is used in Singapore as well. Within the framework of the “Family Group Conference Co-ordinator“ training course, a cooperation of the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam and the Singaporean organisation Beyond Social Services, the authors had the opportunity to administrate a tutorial. Thereby the participants of the course formed case studies in regard to their first conducted Family Group Conferences.

By means of the organisation Beyond Social Services, this Bachelor thesis analyses to which extend the method of Family Group Conferencing can be transferred into practice.

For that purpose the thesis deals with the history of the method and its theoretical basics. In doing so the view of Prof. Dr. Frank Früchtel is embraced as well as the “ONE – approach“ which delineates the effects of Family Group Conferencing on the structures of the lifeworld and on operating organisations. Moreover the executing organisation, by means of its mission statement, is explored to see if Family Group Conferencing supports the organisation’s philosophy. Aside from that the methodical context is illustrated in including international specialist literature. On the basis of ten case studies, each with a critical reviewing, the practice of Family Group Conferencing is illustrated. Subsequently a Meta analysis is given.

The thesis states the feasibility of Family Group Conferencing in respect to Beyond Social Services and indicates implementation difficulties, in the coordination work itself as well as on a structural level.

Owing to the first findings the authors suggest measures to safeguard quality and develop them constantly. Further empirical studies are seen as necessary to implement to method purposive.

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List of abbreviations

Cf.	=	Confer
CPO	=	Child Protection Officer
FGC	=	Family Group Conferencing/es
N.d.	=	No date
O.t.	=	Own translation
PO	=	Probation Officer
RTC	=	Restorative Training Centre
SRO	=	Senior Restorative Officer

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1. Introduction

One of the most essential principles of social work is to “help people to help themselves”. The in New Zealand originating concept of Family Group Conferencing consequently follows this philosophy by enabling families to make decisions for their children on their own.

Since its implementation in the New Zealand law in 1989 the concept thus found interest to many other nations and became an important tool of social work practice for a variety of organisations all over the world. Thereby it became apparent that an implementation into other youth welfare systems is possible. But because Family Group Conferences consequently gives families the right to actively take part in the decision – making process, the use of Family Group Conferences often requires institutions to make structural and strategic changes and to be flexible enough to support the realisation of the family’s individual decision.

By means of the organisation Beyond Social Services, this Bachelor thesis analyses to which extend the method of Family Group Conferencing can be transferred into practice.

Therefore we would like to discover the historical development of Family Group Conferences, to show where the concept has its seeds. Also we face the question what a Family Group Conference means in regard to the underlying philosophy and what it requires from the executing organisation and the professionals involved. In this context it shall especially be dealt with the philosophy opined by the executing organisation Beyond Social Services to get an idea of the compatibility in practice. Furthermore we will deal with the question of how a Family Group Conference should proceed, considering the underlying principles. Case studies will give an insight in the Family Group Conferencing practice of Beyond Social Services to further analyse how the method does work out in the organisation’s social work practice.

As an approximation we will begin with picturing the history of Family Group Conferencing from the Maori settlement to the legislation of the concept (see chapter 2.1). Further development, in the method’s worldwide expansion will be described (see chapter 2.2).

Subsequently the concept will be displayed in regard of its philosophy (see chapter 3.1). Thereby the theoretical explanatory model of Habermas' "Theory of communicative actions" used by Früchtel, is considered. Also the "ONE – approach" is used to explain the effects that using Family Group Conferencing causes on organisations. In addition, the professional key role of the coordinator to transfer the theory in practice is commented. Furthermore the mission statement of the executing organisation Beyond Social Services is analysed in regard to the Family Group Conferencing philosophy (see chapter 3.2).

Following that the methodical context will be defined in picturing the procedure of a Family Group Conference from the referral to the review meeting as a manual for the practical work. Thereby a variety of guidelines from international Family Group Conferencing services are used (see chapter 4).

In the next chapter, the practice of Family Group Conferencing will be displayed by means of the executing organisation Beyond Social Services. Thereby an insight of the organisation's framework and the education of the coordinators are given (see chapter 5.1). In addition ten case studies will be displayed to get an insight of the practice. Each of them will be analysed in a critical manner (see chapter 5.2). At last there will be given a conclusion in regard to the practical realisation of the case studies (see chapter 5.3).

In the end the thesis will outline the results and answer the question of how Family Group Conferencing supports Beyond Social Services' social work practice as well as offer further suggestions for the implementation (see chapter 6).

2. The History of Family Group Conferencing

2.1 From the Maori Settlement to the legislation

The concept of Family Group Conferencing originates in New Zealand and is based on the Maori culture. Its legislation in 1989 has been an important incident for the New Zealand society since the first settler's way of life has not always been valued and taken into legal consideration. So picturing the history of FGC inevitably means to picture the history of the Maori.

The following timeline aims to give a first overview about the Maori and FGC development.

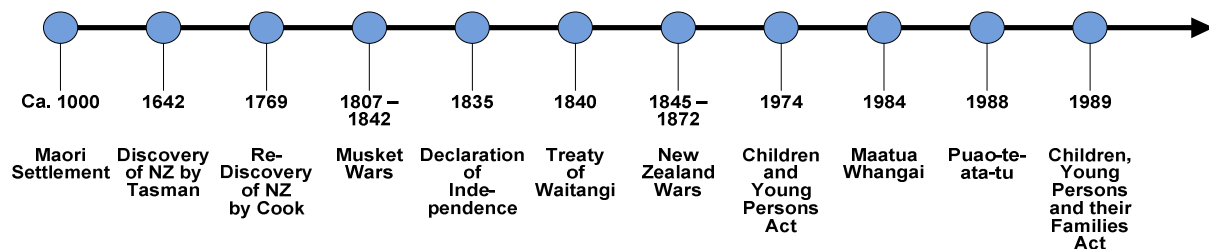


Figure 1 – Timeline, own graphic

The foundation of the Maori culture started about the year of 1000 when the **first Polynesian settled down (Maori Settlement)**¹ in the “land of the long white cloud” (King 2003, p. 41) better known as New Zealand.

In 1642 the Dutch sailor **Abel Janszoon Tasman** discovered the country. About 110 years after Tasman's death the English **James Cook** arrived at New Zealand in 1769 (cf. Fischer 2002, p.52). With Cook's re-discovery the European settlement started.

Both population groups, the European settlers “Pakeha”², and the Maori lived side by side predominately peaceful until the Pakeha started behaving disrespectfully towards the Maori's sanctuary. Disturbances arose and after the European made firearms available to the native population the **Musket Wars** hit their peak after 1834. The colonial power Great Britain intervened by sending their residential James Busby. He defined New Zealand's **Declaration of Independence** in 1835, because it was feared that the other colonial powers could pre-empt them (cf. Früchtel n.d.).

In 1840 another important step was made to rule the living together in society. The **Treaty of Waitangi** became the first written agreement between representatives of

¹ Words in bold refer to the events illustrated in Figure 1

² „Pakeha“ is the Maori term for the European settlers

2. The History of Family Group Conferencing

the British crown and various Maori chiefs and stated that the future shall be based on partnership. While the Maori ceded the legal power to the British, the colonial power promised to protect the chiefs' chieftainship in behalf of whose tribes. This included the right to decide on their land and any other possessions³ (cf. Te Puni Koriki 2001, p.14; Früchtel, n.d.).

The British aimed to establish law and order in New Zealand. Moreover the treaty was supposed to allow a mannered, well controlled and peaceful settlement on part of the Colonial Power. In this regard they tried to safeguard their interest in the islands to prevent influence of France and the USA (cf. Te Puni Kokirir, 2001, p. 28).

In the following years the treaty was often questioned because some parts were interpretable and insufficient detailed. According to that the British Crown started to allow new settlers to domicile on ground whose belonging was unclear. In consequence the Maori resisted by force, the **New Zealand Wars** began and until 1872 several times became revitalised. The Maori lost most of their ground and only many years later were partly reimbursed (cf. Planet Wissen).

Since the Treaty of Waitangi New Zealand was administrated in a British manner in politics, economics and social issues. In the 1970s the government had to intervene in families' life more than ever. In consequence a lot of children were accommodated beyond their families. Legally the intervention in regard to the children's well-being was demonstrated in the "**Children and Young Persons Act**" in 1974 (cf. Grant, et al., 2000, p. 284 f.; Früchtel n.d.).

"Traditionally the whanau, or extended family, the most basic of kinship levels, was responsible for the support, education, rearing, and general well-being of its members. A child was not regarded as the child of its biological parents alone, but rather as a child of the whanau— a communal responsibility."⁴ (Jackson 1988 cited in Grant, et al., 2000, p. 289).

As a result of the "Children and Young Persons Act" children, mostly of all Maori descent, were taken away from their whanau and often had to re-settle in different family networks repeatedly (cf. Früchtel n.d.). These circumstances were convicted to be hurtful for the children and in the late 1980s "[...] a series of reports identified that the Department of Social Welfare was mono-cultural and that institutional racism was

³ Called "rangatiratanga" in Maori

⁴ "Whanau, hapu, and iwi do not translate readily to Western concepts of what constitutes family, but most closely approximate a range of meanings from extended family to tribal affiliation, and comprise the familial kinship structure upon which Maori society is based." (Connolly 2004, p. 1)

inherent in its policy and practice” (Department of Social Welfare 1982 cited in Grant, et al., 2000, p.289).

In this context an organisation of civil rights and feminist anti-racist movement stated the following:

- “The children in children’s homes are mostly of all Maori
- There are almost no Maori-Staff in the children’s homes
- Foster families are mostly Pakeha-Families
- The children’s family network is not taken into consideration when a child needs to be accommodated.” (Früchtel n.d., o.t.)

“At the heart of the issue is a profound misunderstanding or ignorance of the place of the child in Maori society and its relationship with whanau, hapu, iwi structures”

(Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare 1988, p.7)

In 1984 the programme **Maatua Whangai**, which means “the parents who feed”, was established. It was “[...] focussed on the return of Maori children and young people from institutional and foster care to the care of their family or extended family group. Maori practitioners began to have a significant impact on emerging models of practice that emphasised the importance of wider kinship and community connections in reaching enduring solutions about children’s care or protection [...]” (Dyson 2006, p.3).

One of the most important steps in the history of the FGC development has been made in 1988 when the Government established the “Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare”. This committee included prominent Maori leaders as well as the chief executives of Social Welfare, Maori Affairs and the State Services Commission and had “[...] The task [...] to advise the Minister of Social Welfare on the most appropriate means to achieve the goal of an approach which would meet the needs of Maori in policy, planning and service delivery in the Department of Social Welfare [...]” (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare 1988, p. 5).

2. The History of Family Group Conferencing

By consulting with Maori tribes the “significant opportunity for the voices and experiences of ordinary people to be heard” (Dyson 2006, p. 3) has been given. As the result of this research the important report “**Puao-te-ata-tu**”, which means “Daybreak”, has been published and revealed the grave dissatisfaction on part of the Maori. It contained 13 recommendations regarding becoming an anti-racist society and achieving social equality for the Maori people. The basic statement of the report was that “though the employees of social services have worked dedicatedly and dutifully the impression of a centralised bureaucracy, in which the employees seemed to be under considerable strain, arose. [Moreover it was stated that] social services will not be able to achieve their goal without changing their politics, as well as their planning process and their interaction dynamics towards clients” (Früchtel n.d., o.t.). The committee further declared: “[...] the history of New Zealand since colonisation has been the history of institutional decisions being made for, rather than by, Maori people. Key decisions on education, justice and social welfare, for example, have been made with little consultation with Maori people [...]” (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare 1988, p.18).

The Puao-te-ata-tu report publicised the ignorance which New Zealand’s natives experienced through the European settlers and hence paved the way for the amendment, the “**Children, Young Persons and their Families Act**”⁵, in 1989.

The change of title refers to greater family involvement and reflects the primary role of the family group in the decision-making process for the care of their children.

The act is geared to “the ideal that child welfare is primarily a private rather than a state concern” (Pakura 2005, p. 114).

As a result convening a Family Group Conference became the first action for every child who was assessed as being in need of care and/or protection. Now the families were encouraged to create a plan within their own cultural and familial milieu while the professionals involved would only give effect to the family’s process by providing information and supporting the family when asked for.

The new concept was not only used for the question of children’s safety but also in case of Youth Justice, for young persons who came in conflict with the law. By facilitating a FGC the young persons were held accountable for their offending, were

⁵ Cf. Government of New Zealand (1989), No. 20 ff

given the possibility to make amends to their victims and to find support and assistance to reduce the offending behaviour.

“Family Group Conferencing became the legal mechanism through which the dual principles of child protection and the strengthening and maintenance of families would be formally addressed.”

(Connolly 2004, p.2)

2.2 “New Zealand's gift to the world”

“The FGC process is New Zealand's gift to the world, and is considered the jewel in the crown of the youth justice system.” (Ferguson n.d.)

Soon after its implementation in the New Zealand welfare- and youth justice system the FGC concept created interest to other nations. Since the Maori criticised social work practices based on British and American models as well as on specialist literature, the critique of the minority group was relevant not only to New Zealand but to a lot of other countries whose social work practice was similar.

It was seen as “a fresh and unique approach in a field of professional endeavour where systemic and practice failures were high and results not encouraging [...] [it seemed] to resonate with the core values of social work that have had a tendency to become submerged in the somewhat adversarial and coercive climate characterising statutory child welfare and child protection social work” (Doolan 2004, p.1).

Today Family Group Conferencing is used in a multiplicity of nations:

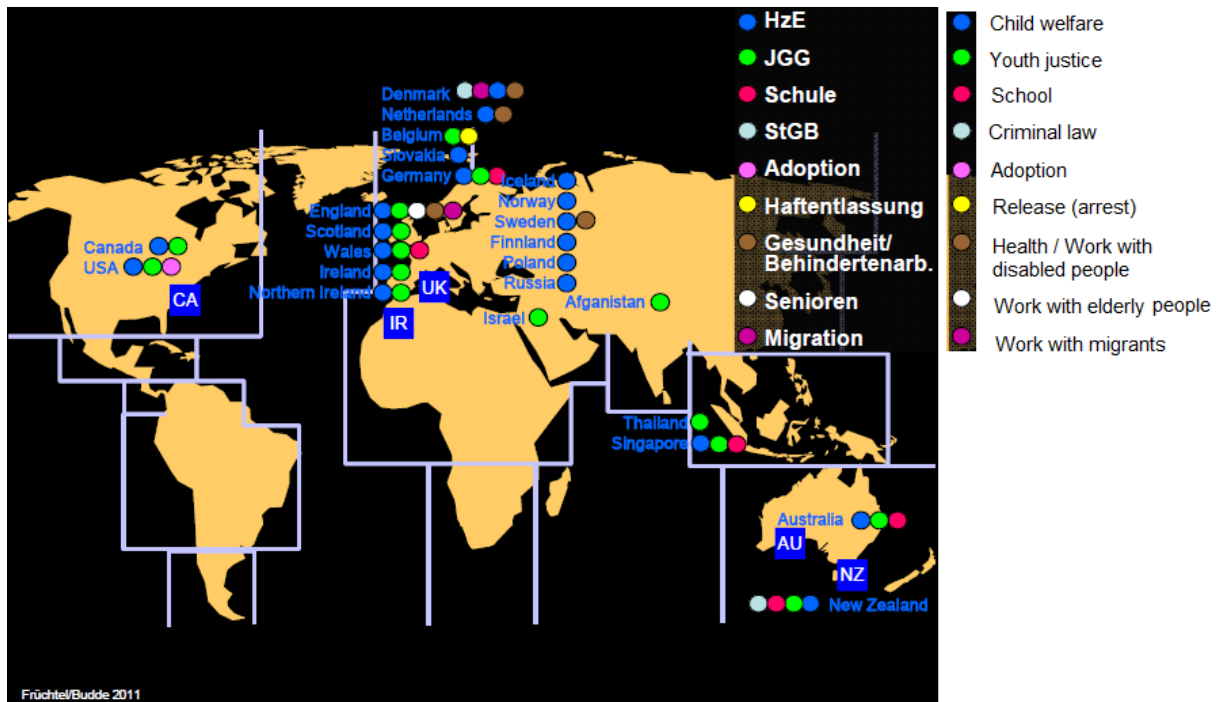


Figure 2 – Expansion of FGC (Früchtel n.d.)

According to “A Survey of International Practices, Policy & Research on Family Group Conferencing and Related Practices” by Nixon et al., Family Group Conferences are also introduced to Brazil, Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia and South Africa.

The original concept of Family Group Conferencing has been transformed into other areas of social work. Being used solely in cases of child welfare and youth justice, it is now adopted to cases that deal with school issues, adoption, health issues, work with vulnerable adults and migrants as well as criminal law and release.

Even though the concept of Family Group Conferencing is used in countries all over the planet for a multiplicity of social work areas, it has no legal basis in each of them. Some nations were successful in following suit with New Zealand and implemented the concept into law. Examples of these are the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada and South Australia (Früchtel n.d.). Among these there are a lot of countries that make use of the concept without specific legislation. In the majority of cases the main

authority for using FGC comes through the organisations supporting the use of conferencing as “best practice” (cf. Nixon et al. 2005, p. 45).

The differences in the mandate for the FGCs are often declared as a significant reason for the variety of FGC practice, since the missing defined legislation offers the possibility to adapt the concept to regional and organisational guidelines as well as to legal and political guidelines and conditions (cf. Hansbauer et al 2009, p. 45).

Differences occurred for example in terms of the model of FGC Service Provision. Firstly the FGC can be facilitated *in-house*, by a separate section of the public agency. Secondly it can be delivered *out-sourced*, through a voluntary organisation or a private agency. Normally the cases are referred through a service level agreement. Or thirdly a voluntary organisation or private agency is paid to run an individual FGC via *spot-purchasing*. In this case the contrast between the referring agency and the coordinating organisation is concluded for this individual case only (Ashley et al. 2006, p.42). In connection to out-sourced and spot-purchased models non-governmental social work organisations were set up to take over the part of the FGC coordination. This role connotes another determination aspect - the professional background of the co-ordinator. While some FGC services chose to hand this job over to professional social workers (e.g. Germany “Jakus e.V.”), others employ non-social work trained people (e.g. England “Daybreak”; Netherlands “Eigen Kracht”). A legal statement that constitutes either way does not exist, so that each FGC service is able to make that decision individually.

The given examples indicate that there is a variety of models to realise Family Group Conferences. Hence, the variants all refer to the underlying philosophy, which will be displayed in the following chapter.

3. Family Group Conferencing and Beyond Social Services – One Mission?

3.1 The philosophy of Family Group Conferencing

3.1.1 A change of responsibilities

Before the time of child protection services, the responsibility to support families with problems in caring for their children was assumed by the family's extended family members, their friends and/or their natural environment, e.g. churches or the neighbourhood. As society has shifted in the past decades, governmental agencies have assumed an increasing role in the protection of children. As a consequence extended family members have chosen to give up their traditional role to the government agencies or have found themselves being excluded from the process of taking care of their family members. Früchtel and Ee describe this effect of professional over-taking as the effect of colonisation. They explain this by using to the "Theory of Communicative Actions" by Jürgen Habermas who describes the society in two systems: the "lifeworld" (here: family, friends, natural environment, community) and the "system" (here: professionals involved in the FGC and their wider structural and political environment). Each is following a different logic (cf. Früchtel & Ee 2010, p. 1-5).

3.1.2 The dissimilarity of System and Lifeworld

The lifeworld follows a rather intuitive and value-based logic in terms of help. In this context it is a construct of relationships within which people communicate about their needs and help each other when their support is needed without expecting a benefit. The given help is usually "concrete, tangible and part and parcel of everyday life" (Früchtel & Ee 2010, p. 4) and realises what feels appropriate for the helper. There is no legal claim for the help to happen.

The system follows a logic which is science-based. A private relationship between the needy person and the helper is not necessary. The motive to help is rational; it is related to a benefit for the helper (e.g. a legal claim, a salary) that is based on an obliging agreement (cf. Früchtel & Ee 2010, p. 5).

In the previously displayed history of the Maori it was described as follows: "***The social work education system of residential child care work which was imposed on the Maori people was based on the arrogant assumption that the culture of***

the Pakeha coloniser was far superior and preferable to the Maori and other Polynesian life style” (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1988, p. 23).

Professional Social Work is part of the system and in doing so follows its logic. In following its structural organisation it often tends to disregard the logic of the lifeworld and tends to impose on what it analyses is the best treatment. As a consequence families often are devaluated and become dependent on the help of the system, instead of being empowered and strengthened to make use of their own resources and ideas (cf. Früchtel 2002, p. 3).

3.1.3 Family Group Conferencing as an interface between the systems

The FGC process helps to break this displaced relation in getting the system together with the lifeworld to interact in “cooperation, collaboration, and communication” (cf. Daybreak 2005, p. 9). In New Zealand the aim of using FGC was to reduce the effects of colonisation to give back the decision-making power to the Maori people. In countries that did not experience the presence of a colonial power, the metaphor is useful to describe the imposing of science-based social work methods on family structures, too. Following the same goal, FGCs are used worldwide to re-accredit families in the decision-making process. The FGC is to demonstrate that they are the decision-makers, that the process is their ownership.

To keep one-self restrained regarding to decision-making is something extraordinary and new for the profession of social work. Connecting the lifeworld and the system in terms of FGC demands a multidimensional approach. It appears consequential that at first the organisation of social work needs to change structurally. A theoretical approach that deals with changes and effects in context of FGC is the “ONE” – approach:

1. “ Effect of **Organisational development**:

The right of family groups and community to take responsibility for their own members has consequences for policy, service planning and service delivery. FGC insists on the dignity and capability of the lifeworld and orientates the welfare state towards it, including political as well as professional solutions.

FGC is an interface between the System and the Lifeworld. It should have effects in both directions: Building Social Capital and Problem Solving in the

3. Family Group Conferencing and Beyond Social Services – One Mission?

Lifeworld as well as improving administrative procedures and service delivery to achieve tailor made solutions and more Lifeworld orientation of the authorities. [...]

2. **N Network** Effect of Building Community and Social Capital:

FGC enlarges the circle of participants and enriches the network of clients and citizens. FGC mobilises professional resources and resources of family and friends in a community- strengthening way. [...]

3. **E Empowerment** Effect

FGC empowers clients to be heard and to and to be acknowledged as decision-makers in the social service system, education system as well as the criminal justice system. FGC insists on professional work '*with*', rather than '*for*' people."⁶

It is shown, that using FGC cultivates, but also requires structural developments to strengthen the lifeworld. But also on the micro-level, the 'case work', in coordinating FGCs, there is need to achieve a change of attitude and working methods to guarantee the family's ownership and their power in the process. This crystallises in the role of the coordinator.

3.1.4 The coordinator as the middleman

This reveals that the firstly simple looking concept of FGC actually is much more complex to arrange. To manage the communication between two systems that follow highly different logics and methods the coordinator has the main role. Thus his participation is based on a profession he has a neutral role in being independent from any in the FGC involved professional organisation and has nothing to do with the decision-making. His task is to empower families to build up their natural network for support, to minimise devaluating consequences of the bureaucratic system for the family and to engage involved organisations to make use of familiar resources instead of pushing them away (cf. Früchtel 2008, slide 25).

The values that are underlying the implementation of FGC in New Zealand have been adapted to and modified in many other countries. They describe principles for

⁶ This is an extract of a compilation created by the thesis' authors, based on the following documents: Ee, et al., 2010; Participants of the "4. Bundesweiten Netzwerktreffens 'Familienrat' 2010", revised by "Netzwerktreffen Südwest 2011", 2011

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the process that affect especially the work of the coordinator. In the following some of the most important values are displayed:

- Children are generally best looked after within their families.
- Given the right environment and the correct information, families know what is best for the child/ren.
- The utilised methods need to be methods of the lifeworld
- Families have access to knowledge and resources that professionals usually do not have.
- A self-created solution motivates to take over responsibility
- A large group of family and friends enlarges the chance to mobilise resources
- The professionals take over responsibility for the process, not for the solution (cf. Lupton 1998 cited in Früchtel 2002, p. 7; McGrath n.d., p. 11)

An example of practice principles for the involved parties is given in the Barnardo's, Family Rights Group, NCH brochure: "Family Group Conferences – principles and practice guidance".⁷ It aims to show what a coordinator needs to do to adhere to the underlying principles. For a practical description, see bullet 4. The Family Group Conference process.

After the philosophy of FGC has been displayed, the following bullet point aims to look at the underlying values of an organisation that uses Family Group Conferencing. By means of the Singaporean organisation "Beyond Social Services" it is displayed how the values of FGC do fit with the guidelines of the organisation.

3.2 How does Family Group Conferencing support Beyond Social Service's mission?

Also in Singapore with the development of the social work profession the effect of colonisation arose and professionals took a significant role in the decision-making for families. Following the strong belief that "people have the ability to help themselves and can successfully reach their goals despite their disadvantages" (Beyond Social Services, n.d. - 1) the organisation aims to reduce these effects in enabling the families to take part in the decision-making process. It has the mission to "curb

⁷ Please refer to Annex II. Family Group Conferences – principles and practice guidance

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delinquency among disadvantaged young people and their families and to move them beyond their problems. [The social workers] want to develop young people who respect the law, value education and seek to become responsible persons” (Beyond Social Services, n.d. - 1).

In order to achieve this, the organisation has the conviction that an effective and sustainable social work does require to work on different dimensions of society (cf. Beyond Social Services, n.d. - 2).

3.2.1 Political and inter-organisational aspects

“Keeping young lives on track is not simply about keeping kids on the right side of the law. It is about building a community where they can grow, contribute and basically believe that they are a part of. For this to happen, our community must believe that by playing a part in restoring troubled young lives; we are creating meanings, principles and values that enrich our lives.”
(Beyond Social Services, n.d. - 2)

Beyond Social Services aims to create a fundament for a more life-world and community - orientated social work. Therefore the organisation acts on the Structural Level to influence policies and work in collaboration with a variety of organisations, which they encourage to be more inclusive of familiar resources (cf. Beyond Social Services, n.d. - 2). Thereby the organisation aims to achieve the **Effect of organisational development**⁸ in regard to the ONE - approach.

3.2.2 Working in partnership as the fundament of case work

Besides the non case-specific social work, Beyond Social Services concentrates on the work with individuals and families who are in need of support. The work aims “to move the families *beyond* the crisis, stabilise them by strengthening their families, connect them to their natural networks and enable them to reintegrate back to their communities. This way the families become resilient enough to handle their problems, while supported by their extended family and community, and move beyond the need for professional support” (Ee 2010, p. 1).

Thereby the mandate from the client, to work on the issues hand in hand, is fundamental. Though the expertise of the professional has a significant influence on

⁸ Words in bold refer to “ONE”-approach, p. 11 f.

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a situations improvement the mandate of the clients remains the fundament for any kind of social work practice, because the clients are acknowledged as the experts of their own lifeworld (cf. Ee 2011).

“Skilled professionals are those who are able to earn a mandate [from the client] and facilitate a problem solving approach where clients play an active role.” (Ee 2011)

The organisation’s case work proceeds in three steps: Crisis & Problem De-escalation, Family Strengthening and Community Integration (cf. Ee 2010, p.1). This way, families get back or strengthen the access to familiar and community resources. A support network shall be established which may enable the family to find a sustainable solution to deal with their issues (**Network Effect**). The work is very much built on people’s strengths instead of remedying their weaknesses, which is for example essential when working with young offenders (cf. Beyond Social Services, n.d. - 2). As a consequence of the strength-perspective families are enabled to take an active role in the case work and its realisation. Thereby they shall be provided with support on side of their community and if requested by professionals as well. The being heard and taken seriously will empower (**Empowerment Effect**) the family to take an active role in caring for their children and youths.

3.2.3 One mission

Beyond Social Services follows the conviction that social work does not only mean to work with a single person or with a single family. They see people in connection to their natural environment and belief that social work can only be effective when the family, friends, community and the political situation someone stands in connection with, are taken into consideration.

Thereby the social workers work very focussed on the strengths and resources of the individuals. The people are taken very seriously in their needs instead of being blamed them for their wrongs. This helps to create a suitable working fundament that allows sustainable and effective help by enabling them to make decisions on their own. In order of these values and principles the method of Family Group Conferencing is acknowledged as “an important tool” (Ee 2011) for Beyond Social Services as it follows the same mission.

4. The Family Group Conferencing process

In this chapter the Family Group Conference-process will be displayed. As previously described, the worldwide expansion of Family Group Conferencing implicated the development of different models of Family Group Conferencing.

In this context several guidelines have been developed to set standards, regarding to actions that have to be carried out to call the meeting a Family Group Conference. With regard to their content the guidelines are comparable to New Zealand's law outline, the Children, Young Persons, and their Families Act as they describe procedures. One of these is the brochure from Barnardo's, Family Rights Group and NCH (2002)⁹ which is the basis for picturing the process. This scheme concentrates on the procedure of FGC and especially on the coordinator's work. Any other prior act executed by service agencies which refer the cases (e.g. case assessment) are not pictured. According to this the procedure of FGC has got the following steps:

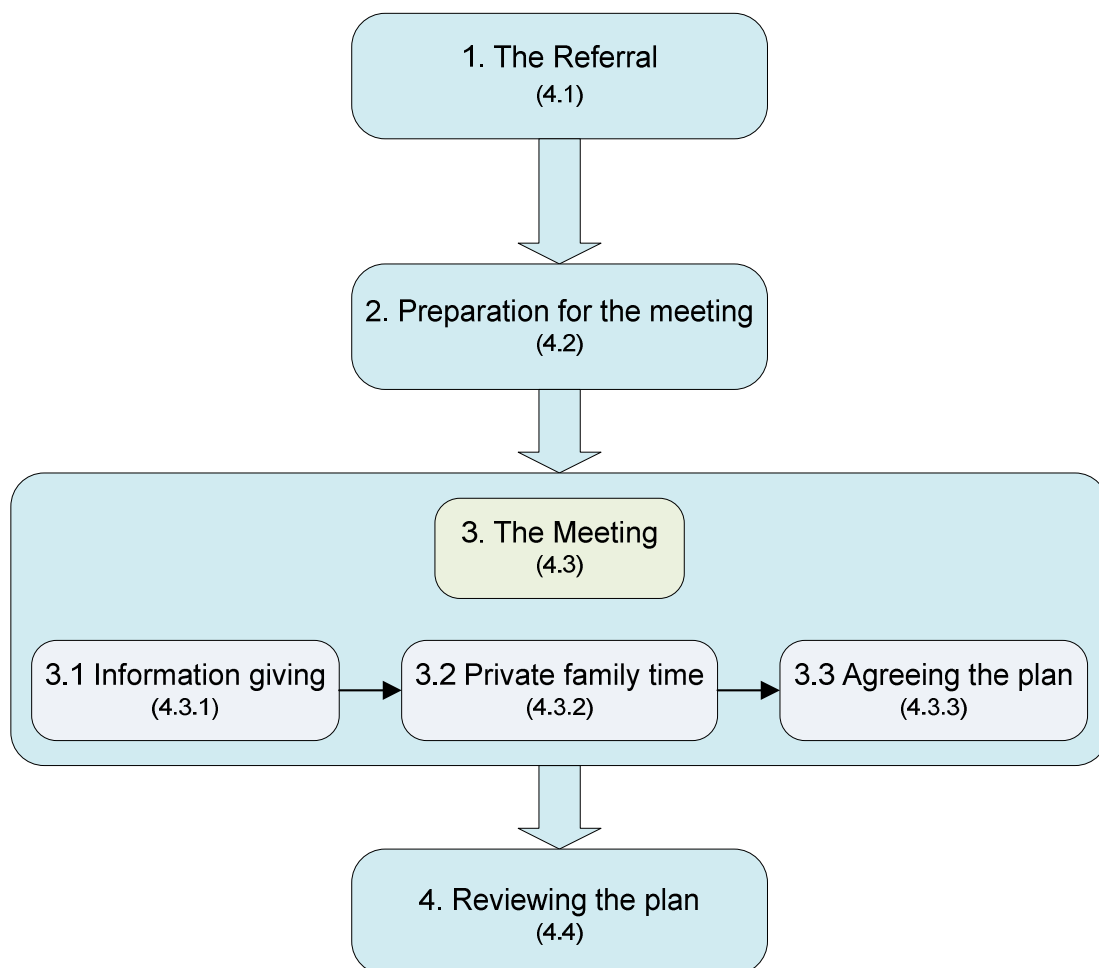


Figure 3 – The FGC process, own graphic

⁹ Please refer to Annex II. Family Group Conferences – principles and practice guidance

These steps from the referral to the reviewing the plan are now described in a practical way. Thereby important duties and responsibilities of the coordinator in the process as well as values of the FGC are described. Additional information is to be found in the footnotes and the Annex.

4.1 The Referral

Before the coordinator comes into action “there [...] [has to be an] agreement between family members and staff from an organisation that a plan needs to be made for a child or young person [or another family member]. An independent coordinator [then] is appointed to work with the family to set up the meeting.” (Barnardo's, et al. 2002, p. 4)

The role of the person who refers the FGC, called the referrer, is important in the process and his role and influence should not be underestimated. To provide a smooth process it is necessary that the referrer:

- “[is] clear about the reason for a referral and the issues [he asks] the family to work on;
- understand[s that] it is the family’s responsibility to make this plan or decision – if there are any limitations to this, the referrer needs to be clear about them from the outset; and
- delay[s] other planning meetings (except in an emergency or if delay would cause a looked after children review to fall outside prescribed timescales) during the period it may take to convene the FGC.” (Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 78)

Hence, it is necessary that the referrer is educated well in terms of FGC philosophy and knows how to refer a case to the coordination in an appropriate manner. Often FGC is a new format and the referrers are not that familiar with it.

The following points could be helpful for the coordinator to ensure a good FGC process right from the start in collaboration with the referrer, by communicating the concerns and the procedures.

A good coordinator:

- “[...] Accepts informal enquiries as to the appropriateness of potential referrals.
- Discusses the referral in detail, ideally face-to-face, or by telephone, and either receives a completed referral form or assists the referrer in complementing the form.

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- Seeks only information that is relevant to the current situation [or for his facilitating role, he does not need to know as much as a case worker].
- Assists the referrer in framing the aim of the FGC process.
- Ensures that the young person and/or their key carer is aware of and agrees to the initial referral. [...]
- Identifies any potential personal safety issues when contacting a family for the first time.” (Hamilton 2007, p. 60f)

This reveals that there are many organisational steps which have to be taken by the coordinator before he is able start the direct work with the family as well.

4.2 Preparation for the meeting

Preparing the FGC is the lion's share in the coordinator's work. Different evaluation studies state a varying amount of time a coordinator needs to prepare a FGC appropriate, from an average of 16 hours to over 20 (cf. Hansbauer, et al. 2009, p. 121f; Marsh & Crow 1998, p. 99; O'Sullivan, McKinney & Gallagher 2002, p. 22).

The aim is it to organise a unique meeting that expresses ownership of the family, puts them in a position that offers the possibility to take charge of the situation. Themes regarding to the content of the meeting and practical arrangements have to be set up ideally in face – to – face contacts with the potential participants. As well the professionals have to be disposed for their information giving part. Once the preparation is well-done the meeting runs by itself.

It is important for the coordinator to be aware that his task is it to assist the family in convening the meeting, he has only organisational tasks; the process is in his responsibility, not the decision.

In the following the steps in preparing a FGC shall be explained; it is differentiated into working with the family (4.2.1), preparation of the professionals (4.2.2) and practical arrangements for the meeting (4.2.3).

4.2.1 Working with the family

The coordinator meets up with the family and explains what a FGC is, gets an idea what the reasons for the FGC are, helps finding and preparing the participants, clarifies concerns of potential participants, arranges a suitable date, venue and

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refreshments, helps designing and sending out invitations, or in brief he does everything which has to be done to arrange a meeting that the family is comfortable with, so that they are in a position to make good and sustainable decisions.

The following points are meant to describe how to prepare a family for a FGC. At first the initial contact shall be described (4.2.1.1), how to elaborate participants with the family (4.2.1.2) and in a next step it is describe how they shall be prepared (4.2.1.3).

4.2.1.1 Initial contact

The unique role of the coordinator is to be explained in the initial contact because it is important for the further collaboration.

In many of the cases families are pressured and on the watch of the public authorities. It could be very helpful for the collaboration and even for the decision-making at all, to show that in spite of the participation of the professionals this meeting is something the family owns. The family members are encouraged to come up with a solution and negotiate this with the professionals hand in hand. Writing a letter is a proven way for making the initial contact:

“[A coordinator] does not make an astonishing home visit, but rather writes a letter, that describes the FGC, its goals, possible processes and consequences. A letter allows the family more possibilities of preparation and responding than a phone call. A letter could be put aside and opened when convenient. It could be read several times; you can think about your response well or talk to a confidant. A phone call is more intrusive and happens normally when suitable for the caller, when is prepared. [The coordinator initiates a first meeting with it.]” (Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 39f, o.t.)

Once the initial contact is made, a face-to-face meeting is needed. The family decides who attends the first meeting; normally the child/young person and his care givers take part (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 83). Optionally there could be a separate meeting for the child/young person¹⁰. The coordinator explains the process and principles of the FGC, talks trough the reasons, gains an understanding of the

¹⁰ For further information regarding preparing children and advocacy see: American Humane Association 2010, p. 29; Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 83; Daybreak 2005, p. 39

family's point of view, and reaches, when possible, a consensus about the FGC (cf. Hamilton 2007, p. 5/61).

According to bullet '4.1 The Referral' the conditions for the plan have to be clear right from the beginning. The coordinator will encourage and empower the family to create an own plan whichever will be accepted by the professionals (in most cases the referrer), except of bottom lines (e.g. children's safety) or illegality (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 80).

"[Further the coordinator] explains that the family...

... has the right to say 'no' to any idea which is suggested by professionals, does not matter as to the process or decisions to be made.

... is in power to decide, who will participate, where, when and most of all how it runs." (Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 40, o.t.)

Normally questions will be raised, if not, the coordinator should ask to make sure that particular things are clear, for example the independence of the coordinator, the solution abstinence of the professionals, that there will be a private family time without professionals and the bottom lines for the plan.

Leaflets can be helpful in explaining, they contribute to a better understanding and opens up the possibility to study by themselves (cf. Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 43f).

Because FGC is mostly a new format of meeting, for professionals and families too, it is indispensable to allow room for consideration. It may take some time easing down the information about FGC and question the objection. The family should not be forced to agree, clearing boundaries is highly natural and should be accepted by the coordinator. Respecting this creates real and practised ownership (cf. Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 39; Daybreak 2005, p. 31).

4.2.1.2 Finding potential participants

If there is an agreement about the concerns and the FGC to be held the coordinator helps the family to identify their network in the first or maybe a second meeting.

It is important to know that the term "Family Group Conference" does not restrict the circle of possible participants on blood relationship. Family is understood as something bigger, a wider network, something that even the family members may define differently. Family can for example mean friends, neighbours, community

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supporters. Basically every person is imaginable to participate (cf. American Humane Association 2010, p. 25).

“The more people attend, the more ideas, clearing inputs and resources are available. That means that the possibility of brushing explosive aspects under the carpet lessens with a growing number of participants.” (Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 40, o.t.)

There are many different techniques to find possible participants, as shown in the following table.

<p>Open questions</p>	<p>Who do you like to attend? Whom do you get along well? Whom would your son want to attend?</p>
<p>Asking through</p>	<p>Ask one central person who could be important for the meeting, then ask all named person for additional persons. The effect is that many perspectives are brought in, important persons will crystallise. You provide a high chance to get many and important people involved.</p>
<p>Genogram/family tree</p>	<p>People often enjoy mapping out their own family, they are experts and get encouraged by picturing their potential supporters.</p>
<p>Eco - Map</p>	<p>Using eight fields (a circle crossed by four lines) is a proven tool to focus on several sections of the life such as school, neighbourhood, friends, antecedent people, professionals etc. Eco-Mapping has its point in delivering a very broad number of persons, by the reason that it meets the plurality of the everyday life. People are able to notice how many persons they actually know and are able to explore the underlying resources within the relations.</p>

Table 1 – Network techniques (cf. Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 40f, 91-104; Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 83; Daybreak, p. 33; American Humane Association, 2010, p. 25ff)

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By identifying potential participants it is unavoidable that several concerns will be raised by the family about other family members as well as about the process itself. To be attentive to these concerns and worries and to take them seriously is necessary to ensure a smooth going meeting. The coordinator has to listen and discover them furthermore to find arrangements for the meeting that will master them; even though it is not his task to clear them up (cf. Daybreak 2005, p. 33; Ashley, et al. 2006, p.83f; van de Horst, et al. 2007, p. 22f).

“This is often one of the most challenging parts of preparative work of the coordinator. [He] must take great care to remain impartial to the various interests of the family. The coordinator’s only task is to prepare the FGC, [he] is definitely not a mediator in family affairs.” (van de Horst, et al. 2007, p.22)

Even at this early point of time it is advisable to find some imaginable dates and list contact dates promptly. This helps reducing the difficulties in scheduling the meeting and the FGC is more within reach for the family, something manifest. (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p.82; van de Horst, et al. 2007, p. 23)

“Often co-ordinators report that finding a mutually convenient date and time for the FGC is a logistical nightmare.” (Ashley, et al. 2006, p.82)

In addition to the referrer’s attendance, other service providers might be needed to inform about issues that are related to the situation and help the family by coming up with a suitable plan. These have to be allocated and discussed in advance. Maybe a member of the local educational counselling services informs the family what a child at a certain age does need. It might be helpful to involve another service if the family does not agree with one they have had bad experiences with (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 86f).

4.2.1.3 Prepare the family's network

Every potential participant needs to be prepared and informed about the FGC process itself and the goal of the meeting. A FGC should not keep surprises at hand for the family, created through the welfare system or any other service provider. They should know in advance which information will be given (cf. American Humane Association 2010, p. 27f).

“Everybody has to know exactly what is to be expected from the FGC and what is expected from him.” (Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 43, o.t.)

At the beginning of the preparation people may not feel comfortable with the idea of sharing and involving others into their problems. Or potential participants doubt themselves in being supportive, because they cannot provide a particular back up. It is necessary to deepen this issue, for example, by asking about former support they gave, emphasise the emotional support their attendance means to somebody or that they may contribute something to a solution they do not know yet (cf. Daybreak 2005, p. 35f.).

Excluding someone or not wanting to take part certainly has good reasons, but maybe the perspectives, resources and possible solutions brought in by these persons will make the difference. People with a high influence are called “‘power-brokers’, [...] such as the grandmother, who once she is aware of the need will ensure her reluctant son comes to the meeting, without too much help from the [coordinator]” (Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 87). These persons of respect may also agree to be responsible for an appropriate welcoming speech at the beginning of the meeting or the moderation and focussing on the matters of concern during the private family time.

However, this implies also the risk of undermining others. If the coordinator gets the impression that somebody could dominate the decision making, solutions of how to stay calm are demanded.¹¹ To find this out it is important to visit everyone in person, if possible, because a better impression could be achieved. The coordinator's task is

¹¹ “[...] when [people] say things like: ‘I’ll tell them loud and clear what I think of this whole situation’ or ‘I’ll give them a piece of my mind if they don’t agree with me’ during the preparation. Ask them: ‘What do you think will happen then?’ ‘How do you prevent yourself from giving people a piece of your mind?’. These people often find whom they respect and who helps them to remain calm.” (van de Horst, et al. 2007, p. 25f)

it to focus on the future and not stuck in brewing old conflicts. So, it should be well-understood that the FGC does not mean...

... “hunting for the reasons of issues, but working out a suitable solution.

... blaming session, but activating supporters for the solution.

... agreeing on just anything, but developing a safe plan.”

(Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 43, o.t.)

Getting in touch with many people of the family’s network also helps the coordinator to get a better impression of the people to avoid conflicts or to ensure better support for “ ‘vulnerable’. [They may feel nervous] about attending an FGC where they may expect to be attacked (verbally if not physically) by other members of the group” (Ashley, et al. 2006, p.87) or they do not feel confident about voicing out their thoughts. Often people feel ashamed for the past and/or talking about it. The coordinator has to persist, in an emphatic way, to achieve his goal to get as much people as possible invited and later to attend. Smart questions are required.¹²

The people who live at long distance are important as well, and should be engaged to attend, even if a contact can only be made via telephone. Taking charge of transfer costs could engage people secondary. Another reason could be that they are not able to attend due to childcare, supervising children may be organised by the coordinator (cf. Daybreak, 2005, p. 36). That shows respect, sincerity and may get them to attend.

If in spite of every effort to engage somebody to attend remains unsuccessful, that does not mean that his input has to be missing in the FGC. The creativity of the coordinator is requested. Maybe a support person to sit next to the vulnerable is sufficient; two rooms for two parties of conflict and a messenger to ensure the solution-exchange; to set up a video conference; a letter; a video message or a telephone call delivers the input of people unwilling to come or absent (cf. Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 42).

¹² “What might happen if that person does show up?’, ‘Regularly a family member or a good friend is asked for extra support, would that do for you?’, ‘What do you need to keep you from getting angry?’, ‘Do you know someone who could help you with that?’” (van de Horst, et al. 2007, p. 23f)

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“Oh no, I don’t want to have to do anything with my sister anymore, I closed that chapter years ago. She still owes me money’. Indeed, this sister did not come to the conference, unlike her husband and her son. After half an hour her husband left the conference and returned with his wife, who had been waiting outside in the car. ‘Please join us, it is about our nephew’.”

(van de Horst, et al. 2007, p. 20)

4.2.2 Preparation of the professionals

FGC is a decision-making process of the family. That consequently means the solution abstinence on side of the professionals. Their task is ‘just’ to provide information. In fact this apparently easy task is a lot more difficult for social workers as it sounds. Often professionals offer their ideas of a good solution in a more or less subtle way and drive families in specific directions. Those inputs lower the chance of individual, multiple and finally suitable solutions created by the family. The coordinator’s job is it to prepare every professional attending the meeting, not to influence the family but to get them informed.

Negative outcomes would be a treatment instead of a decision-making that forces families to fit into the plan and offers of the referring agency rather more than into their own plan (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 77).

There are different professionals who can attend the FGC, the referrer or members of other service providers, like a counselling service, a school teacher, a doctor, a lawyer or a police officer. Most important of all is to ensure that all of them carry out the information giving role, because:

“This is very different from the reports frequently shared at, for example, a child protection conference.” (Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 79)

Referrers tasks in referring a case are described in point 5.1 . Additional to the core task, to name accurate what is concerning, it is necessary at the information giving stage to “provide a brief outline of:

- The family’s strengths – this serves as a warm up to seeing the family as a pool of strength and resources
- Why the agency is involved, and for how long

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- What the role of the staff member is in lay person's terms
- What the main concerns are. Keep it brief
- What the likely outcome is if a plan does not resolve matters (e.g. is legal action probable?)
- What the 'bottom line' is
- What resources, services, information might be on offer for the family to incorporate in their plan, should they wish" (Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 79)

This input should be an abstract of what the family already knows, surprises are to be avoided. At a conference professionals are outnumbered and may feel uncomfortable with that situation. A good preparation helps focusing on the main issues and on resources too (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 79 f).

The input should also be jargon-free, comprehensible and descriptive. The goal is to offer the possibility to the family to understand the perspective of the professionals better. Nevertheless it should invite them to ask questions and develop their plan. There is no need for long speeches, three minutes are enough and manageable for listening. The challenge is finding the balance between voicing the concerns unambiguously and to bolster the family (cf. Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 44; Früchtel 2010, p. 1f).

Participants may enquire, the referrer needs to estimate what possible questions may come up. For example if the FGC is about finding a new place to stay for a young person: What are conditions by law? Who has to agree to the movement? What are his rights to social benefits? Also bottom lines (e.g. in regard to child's safety or legality) and consequences by not elaborating a solution have to be communicated clear (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 80).

"The wider family cannot make a safe plan if they are not fully aware of the facts of the situation." (Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 86)

The other service providers as well as the referrer have the task to give a brief input about strengths they see in the family, their concerns, inform the family about a specific issue (e.g. puberty, patch-work-families) and maybe their standby facilities.

4.2.3 Practical arrangements for the meeting

To fulfil the coordinator's organisational role several practical arrangements need to be met. Also in these measures the ownership of the family should appear. A cultural competence (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 84) or certain tactfulness in respect to family values is to dispense.

"The family should be the 'master in their own house'; however the professionals are 'only' guests." (Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 42, o.t.)

The family directs the decisions on what conditions they can deliver their best performance in decision-making. Even the language the FGC will be held in is their decision, the coordinator may organise an interpreter.

There is a need to deliberate on many other things, like: a date and time, a venue, invitations, food and refreshments, possibly expenses and the beginning and ending of the FGC.

As described, agreeing on a suitable date is a very sophisticated task. According to the Family Group Conferences: principles and practice guidance:

"The meeting will take place at a time, date and place agreed with the family." (Barnardo's, Family Rights Group, NCH 2002, p. 7)

Dates agreed often need to be adjusted, so it is highly recommendable to find some potential dates. The dates and also the times do often not fit in the common working schedule of social workers especially of the referrers. This ideally has to be cleared up before assigning a FGC. Another matter is the duration of FGC, they are on average about four to five hours, but they can have also a longer duration (cf. Hansbauer, et al., 2009, p. 117; Beek 2004, p. 26). This is to be considered in case of, e.g. an FGC in the evening where children are attending.

"In one of the first conferences in The Netherlands, it proved that the time planned for deliberation was much too short. As it got very late, the coordinator asked the family: 'What do you think should happen now?' The family decided to continue the conference two days later." (van de Horst, et al. 2007, p. 40)

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The venue could be the family's flat, rooms of the community, a youth club or the room of the facilitating agency and any thinkable other, especially thinkable for the family. Some service providers set a high value on a neutral place, because families at odds may be rather able to solve something there than at home and even for organising and preparing the room it is less complicated (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 85; Daybreak 2005, p.33f; van de Horst, et al. 2007, p. 28f) .

Some families may demand a neutral venue and others not, it should be a decision from case to case, from family to family, what venue is the best fitting one.

However the venue should satisfy some criteria like: deliver privacy (possible through other users should be avoided), perhaps a second room for children to play is needed (supervising children), good access to public transport, toilets availability, a smoking area, maybe the possibility for preparing refreshments, when needed telephone access (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 85; Daybreak 2005, p. 57).

If the date and the venue for the meeting are fixed, invitations are a wonderful instrument to engage people to come. Maybe a child likes to draw a picture and write some words to make it more personal. A invitation could consist of the following:

- “date/time/place of the FGC;
- set out the reason [or the goal why] it is being held;
- list those invited;
- include a map[, route description];
- offer further help re transport/childcare/access etc. if required;”

(Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 88)

It could be helpful to ask for a confirmation of attendance to find alternatives as soon as possible in bringing in the perspectives of the missing people (see 4.2.1.3).

Food and refreshments are also important. They combine social and physical aspects. Through the duration of a FGC a little strengthening could be helpful to focus furthermore and sharing food shows some kind of unity and lowers eagerness. The coordinator can discuss and provide some food, some families are keen in providing the catering on their own. This also demonstrates ownership and should be considered.

For all the mentioned points covering expenses does empower families. Sometimes a little amount (e.g. for travelling, paying a venue) can offer great possibilities and carries out a message of sincerity (cf. Ashley, et al., 2006, p. 86).

Auxillary to these arrangements also the beginning and ending of the meeting shows whom meeting it is. Embedding rituals could deliver that. The preparation needs to discover them “[by identifying on] how the [family] would like to see their family cultures reflected in the family meeting process.” (American Humane Association 2010, p. 28).¹³ This could be a special meal at the beginning, the decoration of the room, a cup of tea or coffee, a joint prayer, singing a song, somebody giving a welcoming speech or a guest like the preacher is attending (cf. Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 42f).

4.3 The Meeting

Prior to the arriving of the participants the coordinator sets up the premises. This depends on the agreements with the family; maybe one family member is fervent in supporting.

Arriving with sufficient time in the beginning helps dealing with the unexpected. Enough material like pens and flip chart paper should be supplied. Where necessary: toys, colouring stuff and refreshments are also to be provided (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 88).

In any case of hassle, e.g. delay or absence of some important people, it is the coordinators utmost concern to ask the family on how they would like to proceed their meeting.

After welcoming everybody in person the meeting can begin. In the next bullets the three stages: Information giving 4.3.1, Private family time 4.3.2 and Agreeing the plan 4.3.3, shall be specified.

¹³ „Open questions for discovering family rituals

How do banquets or meals at festive days do look like in your family? How do you perpetrate pleasant or sad occasions? What are members of your family are doing when they meet after a long time? Whereby can your neighbours find out that you are holding a family meeting?” (Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 43,o.t.)

4.3.1 Information giving

“This is where staff from agencies give the family the information they have about the child or young person and about services, resources and support that may be available. This part of the meeting is chaired by the coordinator.”

(Barnardo's, et al., 2002, p. 5)

After arriving the coordinator welcomes everybody, thanks for coming and emphasises when appropriate on how tough it might be for some to attend. He introduces himself; explains his tasks and his neutral facilitating role (cf. van de Horst, et al. 2007, p. 63f.).

Further he introduces the housekeeping circumstances (e.g. play area/room, food and refreshments, toilets, smoking area etc.). He asks for a short round of introductions, including a statement about everybody's relationship to the child/young person helps focusing. Repeatedly, the process of the meeting (brief explanation of the three stages) will be mentioned. The challenges of the FGC and the purpose of working out a suitable solution are to be highlighted by the coordinator (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 89).

Based on the personal contact with the participants in the preparation the coordinator gets to know the wishes of the people, what is important for them to feel comfortable at the meeting. The ground rules ideally deal with that. They are to be discussed and an agreement needs to be made. Writing them down visible for everybody helps reminding on them¹⁴ (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 89).

Now the referrer has the say and gives his prepared, brief input (cf. bullet “4.2.2 Preparation of professionals”). The coordinator encourages the participants to ask questions and ensures that the family shares the concerns and the willingness to find

¹⁴ “Ground rules [can] include:

- the central focus is X (the child) and future plans for X; [...]
- allowing each person to speak without interruption;
- not behaving in a way which might intimidate or threaten anyone else present;
- using time-out to cool off if things are getting difficult;
- agreeing that everything said in the meeting remains confidential and cannot be used in evidence against anyone present or shared with anyone else outside the meeting unless the parties agree or the information concerns a child suffering harm and protective action is needed;
- not getting caught up with past events; and
- concentrating on issues which can be agreed, and returning to more controversial issues later.” (Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 90)

a solution at this meeting. This mutual agreement is called the contract and is essential of the meeting, because everybody agrees on helping to find a solution. Then all other service providers give their pre-decided input. The coordinator moderates and is responsible for seeing that the family will not be directed in one possible solution due to the given input. Also he ensures that there are no more questions to be answered (cf. Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 45). Giving the input in a written format to the family may be helpful in the private family time (van de Horst, et al. 2007, p. 65).

“It is not uncommon for a family to start formulating their plan during this first phase of the meeting or for participants to become argumentative or defensive in response to some of the information being shared. Simple phrases such as that’s an important point to discuss in your private family [time] can come in handy.” (Daybreak 2005, p. 17)

The coordinator affirms that the family has got as much time as they need for their decision-making and that he will be around the place if there are any questions, something goes wrong or they are finished. Breaks are possible and refreshments supplied. Reminding the family to develop a plan which denominates the actions that are to be done could help to keep focused on a solution (‘who’ will do ‘what’, ‘where’ and ‘when’ for whom). A person appointed for writing down the plan could also be useful (cf. Daybreak 2005, p. 18).

In the end of the information giving stage the coordinator writes the matters of concern (mostly in a question format¹⁵) on flip chart papers and all professionals leave the family with it. He empowers by showing his confidence towards the families ability to work out a solution (cf. Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 46f).

¹⁵ “Typical assignments [/questions] for the private family time [...]

- How can the mother be supported by educating their children?
 - What has to happen, that mother and child can live together again? [...]
 - How can the child live at home again safely? What can be done regarding food, school, spare-time?
 - Where can the children live in the upcoming six month?
 - Where can the children grow up safely?
 - If the child moves to the mother, how can the relationship to the father be preserved?
 - What needs to be done that the child attends school regularly? [...]
- (Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 51)

4.3.2 Private family time

This phase is what is so special about FGC. Often people describe what happens there as some kind of magic, because it is so individual and miscellaneous, but purely natural.

“Private family time is the core of the meeting”

(Hamilton 2007, p. 54)

The coordinator and all professionals are not attending. It is time for the family to discuss about the problems in private. They have as much time as they need to come up with a plan. This plan should address the concerns raised, by finding support within the network or name where professional help might be needed. The professionals (often just the coordinator and referrer) stay near the place. The coordinator only goes back in if the family asks them to in case of further queries or if the family is finished (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 10/91). It is recommendable to stipulate on phone contact for that.

For any unforeseen circumstances “The golden rule still is: Ask the family!” what to do next (van de Horst, et al. 2007, p. 40). That preserves the coordinator for becoming a counsellor and empowers the family as to their responsibility. An evaluation study from the Netherlands shows that families are able to develop these plans: 98% of the conferences come up with a plan that involves family members in the actions and monitoring while the referrer's concern is addressed (cf. Joanknecht n.d., p. 4).

4.3.3 Agreeing the plan

After calling the professionals back in the family presents their plan. The plan is to be negotiated until it defines explicit actions (‘who’ will do ‘what’, ‘where’ and ‘when’ for whom) which the referrer considers as safe and reliable. The coordinator's task is to moderate and ask questions for clarification. The referrer's task is to make the plan ‘waterproof’ by questioning unclear points and feedbacking whether the plan meets his concerns. He just seeks for clarification and does not overrule the family's plan or influences the solution (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 91).

4. The Family Group Conferencing process

It is also recommended to reach alternative measures and monitor elements. Alternative measures increase the chance of success. They state what to do instead of a not working agreement. Controlling parts are to be bargained to give the family the chance to have an eye on the plan by themselves. They have the best insight into the family and a greater influence to set somebody back on course if something is not working out as planned. It is also to be considered and negotiated who has to be informed about that (cf. Früchtel, et al. 2007, p. 46f). It is also necessary to clarify that the coordinator is not responsible for implementing the plan. Responsibilities regarding to this have to be stated clear.

If the referrer realises concerns unaccomplished he needs to address them. The family has the choice either to reconvene the private family time for discussing or to discuss the problems while the professionals are attending. This depends on the issue and on the families volition. To esteem the plan a meeting for reviewing is needed. Make an appointment with all present people lightens this issue and shows sincerity towards the implementation of the plan. There should always be the possibility to reconvene earlier in case of trouble. It is also to be agreed by when the plan is taking effect (cf. Daybreak 2005, p. 19).

After finishing the plan everybody is invited to sign on a paper/flip chart to show his agreement. This is a symbolic commitment of implementing the plan as agreed. The coordinator also seeks an agreement about who should get a copy of the plan. Often it makes sense to send it even to people who were not attending or to those who have 'only' controlling parts. For sending it out the coordinator writes off the plan. He has to adopt over the language of the family for a better understanding and to pay tribute of the achievement (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 91f). The guidelines from the Family Rights Group may be helpful for typing the plan (cf. Ashley, et al., 2006, p. 91).

At the end the coordinator thanks everybody present for their effort.

4.4 Reviewing the plan

“A review family group conference [...] is often arranged to review how the plan is working and make new plans if necessary”

(Barnardo's, et al., 2002, p. 5)

The timeframe, date, possible venue for the review meeting are ideally set in the first FGC. The effort of the coordinator is a significant minor one. Maybe one meeting with the nuclear family is sufficient; other contacts can be handled via phone. The process of the meeting itself is the same; a private family time is to be provided. Even if it seems like everything is going well there will ever be things to discuss within a family that will not be shared if professionals are present.

In advance the coordinator needs to clarify the current situation (Are there any new problems for the family or the referring agency? Are there new service providers involved?) (cf. Ashley, et al. 2006, p. 93).

If the family comes up with other issues and the plan needs to be adjusted or the family feels in need of another/further review meetings can be arranged.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

The following chapter will provide an insight into the practice of Family Group Conferencing. Therefore the previously outlined organisation Beyond Social Services will serve as the example of the executing institution.

To show the individuality of every Family Group Conference ten case studies that are based on the documentation and record of the coordinators are presented.

5.1 Organisational framework

Since 2004 the concept of Family Group Conferencing was incorporated into Beyond Social Services' work with children, young people and their families.

The cases are mainly referred internal, whereby it is the engaged case worker who identifies the need for a Family Group Conference after consulting with the family. To avoid the confusion of roles between the case worker and the coordinator, the cases are transferred across departments and programmes (cf. Ee 2011).

The conferences that build the fundament for the following case studies were convened within a coordinator training course that qualified the trained social workers to take over the role of the coordination. In this context it is to be acknowledged that the new trained coordinators gained their first practical experience with the concept of Family Group Conferencing.

Beyond Social Services established the course in collaboration with the University of Applied Sciences, Potsdam. The input was given by experienced lecturers, namely Allan MacRae (Children, Youth and Family Service New Zealand), Rob van Pagee (Eigen Kracht Centrale, Amsterdam) and Prof. Dr. Frank Früchtel (University of Applied Sciences, Potsdam). The curriculum consisted of five modules, with theoretical input and practical parts. The first practical part was an observation about another participant's facilitated FGC. The second was to facilitate one Family Group Conference self-reliant. Additionally the participants were required to compose a written documentation about the process as well as to give an oral presentation to the lectures, tutors and colleagues of the course (cf. University of Applied Sciences Potsdam 2010, p. 6).

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

Being aware that these documentations are the coordinator's first steps in facilitating Family Group Conferences we aim to give a reflection on each case study. Thereby we want to point out positive aspects but particularly identify areas of improvement for the further Family Group Conference practice.

As the cases have been chosen for their learning value and the evaluation of the individual coordinator shall be avoided, the names have been made anonymous. Also the names of any involved person were changed.

5.2 Case Studies

I. How Ayla found a new home

A Family Group Conference is called to find a care arrangement for a girl whose father is expected to pass on soon. Through intensively searching a surprisingly familiar, but so far unfamiliar solution can be found.

What leads to the Family Group Conference

The coordinator receives the referral from the social worker, who needs a coordinator who is able to conduct the Family Group Conference in mandarin.

The meeting shall be convened for a 13-year old girl, Ayla, who lives with her father. Her father has been stricken with the terminal stage of lung cancer and is expected to pass on soon. Since Ayla has been living on her own in the father's flat. Hence, the care of the girl is in question as he r parents are divorced for about ten years and she has lost contact with her mother.

The concern of the referrer is: Who will care for Ayla when her father is terminally ill and is staying in a hospice, as well as after her father passes on?

Preparing the conference

Meeting with the social worker

At first, the coordinator meets up with the social worker of Ayla. In this interview the coordinator drafts up Ayla's Eco-Map and genogram to gain a better understanding of her circumstances. Ayla receives help from a school counsellor, has a concerned form teacher and has a good support from her social worker. They discuss the possible next steps and plan how to proceed further.

The social worker informs that Ayla has four aunties and two uncles from side of her paternal family. The social worker has contacted them prior calling a FGC to talk to them about Ayla's care plan as well as the possibility of setting up a FGC.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

Meeting up with Ayla

Next, the social worker introduces the coordinator to Ayla at her father's house. The coordinator explores the girl's thoughts regarding her situation and how she had been coping on her own these recent months since her father's hospital admission. After listening to her attentively, the coordinator shares with her the plan for calling a FGC and asks her for her thoughts about it. She guesses that it would be good and that she is sure about her aunts' attendance. The coordinator also brings up the possibility of contacting her mother and inviting her to the FGC. Ayla appears tentative and dubious that her mother could be contacted. Later the coordinator will find out that this apprehension is because she had not been in contact with her mother for about ten years and her father had always told her, her mother did not want her, while the truth had been her mother was prevented from taking her when the parents got divorced. They agree that the coordinator will try to make contact with her.

The coordinator works further on Ayla's genogram and Eco-Map with her to find out various people whom she would like to have at the FGC. Ayla says that her youngest aunt, Eleanor, is the main influencer in the family.

After that the coordinator talks through the next steps for convening the meeting. For example possible dates are found, bearing in mind that it is her school examination period during this time. They agree on the following things that Ayla will do in preparing the FGC, such as drawing up an invitation card, approaching her school counsellor and form teacher about the FGC, talking to her best friend, Isabelle, about the FGC as well as drafting out her issues, strengths and dreams so she could share these with her family at the FGC. Her social worker whom she has good contact with will assist her.

A visit at the hospital

Afterwards, the coordinator visits the father in the hospital. The father talks about his illness and his worries towards Ayla. Though there are times when he sounds incoherent due to his illness is affecting his cognitive abilities. The coordinator tries to explain about the FGC, but he seems unable to comprehend due to his illness. The medical social worker of the hospital is informed about the FGC and is also willing to attend, but due to the father's relocation to the hospice he is no longer in charge.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

The Head of the hospice in charge informs the coordinator about the medical condition and concerns and also requests to attend the FGC.

Who will be there for Ayla?

After the meeting with Ayla, the coordinator proceeds to contact her family members and introduces the concept of FGC to them. Ayla's youngest aunt, Eleanor, is appointed by her siblings to be the spokesperson and main contact point for the family. Hence, it is her whom the coordinator liaises with. Eleanor has many concerns about Ayla's care plan, which she highlights in the conversations, but she is open towards the FGC. She says that she could help to contact all Ayla's relatives to get them to attend the FGC. She also indicates that the family would not want to involve the father in the FGC as he would not understand what is going on due to his illness. Eleanor is also keen to hear of a possible family who might be ready to take Ayla in with them, Isabelle's family is meant by this. Moreover a couple of possible dates and locations are worked out.

At the hospice where the father is staying, the coordinator meets the family and explains the meeting details; this was arranged by Eleanor. They also agree to hold the FGC at the hospice in a separate room, even if the father is unable to attend but they sense this place as appropriate.

A new family for Ayla?

The coordinator wants to meet with Isabelle's family; who consists of Isabelle, her parents and her two cousins who live with them. The coordinator's goal is it to get an idea of their family situation and their level of interest to take on Ayla's care. At the family's grocery shop she talks to the parents. The father appears incredulous when the coordinator explains Ayla's situation and asks them if they would like to attend the FGC to discuss the care plan and the possibility of them taking care of Ayla.

It becomes apparent that they are not keen regarding this. The coordinator leaves the invitation cards made by Ayla for them as well as for Isabelle to attend the FGC. She mentions that it surely will be helpful for Ayla to have Isabelle present at the conference for emotional support.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

Set the professionals on track

In talking to the professionals, most of them have an idea of Ayla's family situation and the coordinator focuses on explaining the concept of the FGC to them and what their role at the meeting is. They are all very willing to attend the FGC and to share their opinions regarding Ayla's developmental needs and what would be best for her.

Getting Ayla's mother on board

Due to the lack of the contact details, the coordinator is unable to get in contact with the mother. Instead the social worker manages to locate her almost just before the FGC. Surprisingly, Ayla's mother is very keen to attend the FGC, though she has fears of meeting Ayla's father. She wants to be assured that the father would not be present. Ayla's aunts and uncles were informed that the mother would attend the FGC, much to their delight. The mother has three other children from her first marriage.

Convening the Family Group Conference

There are fifteen people attending the meeting:

- Ayla, her four aunts, two of her uncles, her mother and her step-sister
- The social worker, the school counsellor, the form teacher, Head of Pupil Welfare from the school, the Head of hospice and a translator

The FGC proceeds in mandarin, the translator is there to interpret for the professionals.

Information giving

The coordinator commences by welcoming everyone and acknowledging the efforts that they had to make to be present, particularly for those who had to leave off their work place or the professionals who are sacrificing their weekend rest, because it is Sunday. After one round of introducing everyone, the main reasons for convening the conference are highlighted. The coordinator brings up the urgency for developing a care plan in view of Ayla's father's critical condition and that Ayla had been on her own for an extended period of time thus far.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

Then everybody is to be briefed on the format of the FGC and is invited to ask questions. Having none, the coordinator proceeds to invite each of the professionals to give their inputs:

- *The Head of hospice* updates the family regarding the health condition of Ayla's father and that the doctor had given a prognosis of 3-6 months left.
- *The school counsellor*, follows with a brief input of her interactions with Ayla in the school and what had turned up during the few counselling sessions that they had had towards the end of the year, after Ayla's father was warded. She shares that the school's concern was that there should be a minimal disruption to Ayla's life and that there is a need for adult supervision.
- *The form teacher* follows with a brief report on Ayla's irregular school attendance and her academic results. She reiterates the need for supervision for Ayla in her home environment so that she could attend school regularly as well as build up her academic achievements.
- *The Head of Pupil Welfare from the school* informs the group about the financial and emotional support that the school could offer to the family. Other than receiving counselling help from the school counsellor, Ayla could also apply for school pocket money when the new term begins in January 2011.
- *The social worker* shares the support that had been rendered to Ayla since her father was warded in early August. She had helped Ayla with her daily financial needs, including her transportation fares, her electricity bills and food provision. She informs that these forms of help could continue till Ayla's situation was stabilised. Similar to the previous concerns she emphasises the need of minimal disruption to Ayla's life in the care plan, including that she would preferably not have to change her school because then she would need to move to another part of the country.

After the inputs the coordinator asks the family again if there were any questions for the professionals. Then the coordinator invites Ayla to share her thoughts and desires. She is very shy and asks her social worker to read out a letter she had written. In the letter, she expresses her thanks to all present for being concerned about her. She articulates her understanding of her father's condition and her wish to have a stable, supervised family environment.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

Regarding the private family time the coordinator now lists on the whiteboard the various issues that are to discuss.

The issues are:

- How can Ayla be cared of in regard of placing and financial issues?
- Who will help her to pack her belongings, and move out of her father's rental flat?
- What will Ayla's visitation schedule to her father be like?
- Are there any special family occasions every year that the family would like Ayla to attend regardless of who she would be staying with?
- Who would take care of Ayla's father's after-life matters, such as his funeral, returning his house to the government, settling his savings and finances, clearing his medical bills if any?

The private family time

Therefore, the family is left to have the private time. The coordinator checks in on them after 15 minutes, but they are well into the discussion. The family time takes about 45 minutes.

Agreeing the plan

The family finds answers for all the issues presented, so they have decided that Ayla would move to her mother and live with her. Furthermore there are good agreements regarding the family's contact to Ayla, the school matters, the further collaboration with the social worker, the visitation schedule, the father's household clearance and his after live matters.

Most of the arrangements will be monitored by the coordinator. In one month will be the first check on the viability of the plan. If it works out well, there will be no need to reconvene; another check through the coordinator then will take place after two months. If the plan is functioning well till this second and last check up, there will be no need for reviews and this plan will then be deemed as successful. If anything is misfitting everybody could inform the coordinator who will then contact the relevant people.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

Feedback

Ayla's family was appreciative of the FGC as it gave them a chance to reconnect with the mother and gave them the chance to obtain useful information from the professionals. Everyone seems satisfied with the results and even after the FGC, they still spend some time together.

Ayla's mother thanks the professionals personally for their help and she exchanges the contact details with the school personnel.

Ayla's aunts are very pleased with the outcome, expressing that it is the right thing that Ayla should stay with her mother.

The professionals are happy that there would be a minimal disruption to Ayla's education and life as her mother lives near the vicinity of her school. The hospice personnel also feels assured that there is a next-of-kin to take care of Ayla and the family worked out on whom to take care of the father's health matters.

Reviewing the plan

About two weeks after the FGC, the coordinator contacts the social worker to check whether Ayla moved to her mother's house as agreed. This had been done, but there were some glitches encountered in settling the rental flat and the father's finances. In contacting the mother, she assures she would sort this out with the family and keep the coordinator updated. The mother calls a few days later to update that she had sorted out the housing and finance issue with Ayla's aunt and all was well.

A month after the FGC, the coordinator does the next agreed check up. At first she calls the social worker who informs her that Ayla's father has passed on and there has been a quiet and small funeral for him. All related matters had been settled by his siblings as agreed.

The coordinator also speaks to Ayla's mother she shares that things are settling down and the plan seems to work out well, but she struggled with disciplining a teenage daughter. She is also concerned about the custodial rights of Ayla which were meted out to her father at the time of divorce. The coordinator provides her with the contact of Legal Aid to whom she could seek information and help from regarding this legal matter.

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At the last check up Ayla's mother informs her that the custodial rights are now rightly hers. The mother is also about managing the school affairs.

Still nobody from the family or from the professionals had called the coordinator so far. She interprets that everything has worked out well.

Analysis

A Family Group Conference was convened to find a care arrangement for a 13 year old girl whose father is expected to pass on soon. Since the father had to go into the hospital and later in the hospice the girl had to live on her own, with support from her social worker, in the father's flat. There has been no contact with the mother since the divorce of the parents, 10 years ago.

The preparation showed that the girl's current contacts within the family and friends cannot offer a placement for her, for different reasons, while the father's health conditions were downgrading constantly.

The persistence of the collaborating professionals (coordinator and social worker) in organising and involving the mother into the FGC was the turning point and is to see as the major achievement. Even if the other family members could not offer an immediate solution, the coordinator liaised with the person in charge in the family and used her influence well to involve the whole family appropriate. Also the firstly directive appearing professionals are handled tactful and patiently by the coordinator which prepared them according to their considered role adequately. Conducting the meeting in the family's language at a very meaningful place promoted their decision making further.

In the end all addressed matters can mostly be settled. The mother reconnects with her daughter and takes responsibility of the situation. The other family members as well as the professionals can add something to the solution within their possibilities.

As mentioned it is a challenge but important to organise people who seem difficult to organise. Exploring social networks and mobilising them is characteristically for the coordinator's job. Thereby she initiates something new for the family what is suitable for them, but she does not directly interfere in the decision-making. It seems that it

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

was predominantly a gaining of the social worker. Organising the meeting is clearly the task of the coordinator and this is to be assessed critical. It is necessary for the family to know who is there for advising in their problems and who the contact person for organising the meeting is. This is also helpful for the coordinator not to become a counsellor.

Another critical point is the coordinator's openness towards FGC's results. It seems that the coordinator frightens the family of Isabelle by constraining them of taking care of Ayla. What leads to the absence even of Isabelle at the conference. This may be conditional upon the coordinator's problem solving focus. An open-minded and non-directive approach may value the people in what they are and not pressures them with expectations they could not comply with. If they can, they will support but in a way that is related to the lifeworld logic.

The reviewing process makes clear some difficulties. At first it seems to be not enough support as needed for the mother in coping with their daughter she has not have had contact in years. Her needs in reconnecting with her daughter could have been addressed in the plan. And secondly, through the reviewing task of the coordinator she becomes kind of supervisor of the family's issues. Passing these controlling aspects to the family or partly to the other professionals involved, could strengthen the family in their own responsibility further and help the coordinator to stay in charge of their organising role. This could be fulfilled in convening and facilitating a review meeting, that makes decisions regarding further issues or values the outcomes and efforts of the family.

II. The breakfast – which brought the family together for a Family Group Conference

A Family Group Conference is called to find a care arrangement within in the family to prevent the child(ren) from the imminent foster care placement, while the parents may get incarcerated. The well-organised coordinator convenes the meeting within one week to give the family the chance to catch up with their uncertain future.

The Referral

The referral for a FGC is allocated to the coordinator by a Beyond Social Services Safe Kids Community Worker. This programme focuses on families in which children may be at risk of abuse or neglect. The initial referral was made by a medical social worker from a hospital.

The concern of the medical social worker is that due to multiple concerns the family is facing, the children may be at risk of being removed by the Child Protection Service and placed in foster care.

Especially the medical social worker has concerns that the newborn baby, Beena, who was born prematurely, has some medical concerns which needed regular follow-up appointments with the hospital. Further, the family is facing financial difficulties as her parents, Sabah and Vasily are both unemployed and they had been recently caught for participating in 'loan-shark' activities namely, throwing paint at debtors' homes. Both Sabah and Vasily were due to be charged and imprisoned which would have resulted in the maternal grandmother, Tanisha being the main care-giver for the three other children (5, 3, 2 years). This potential care arrangement is unacceptable to the medical social worker as Tanisha is a cancer survivor with medical conditions which makes it challenging for her to look after her grandchildren single-handedly.

The coordinator has to convene this FGC within a time-frame of one week, because of the urgency as the newborn baby has to be sent home and not remain in the hospital. If the family does not come up with a plan immediately, she may be placed in foster care instead of coming home.

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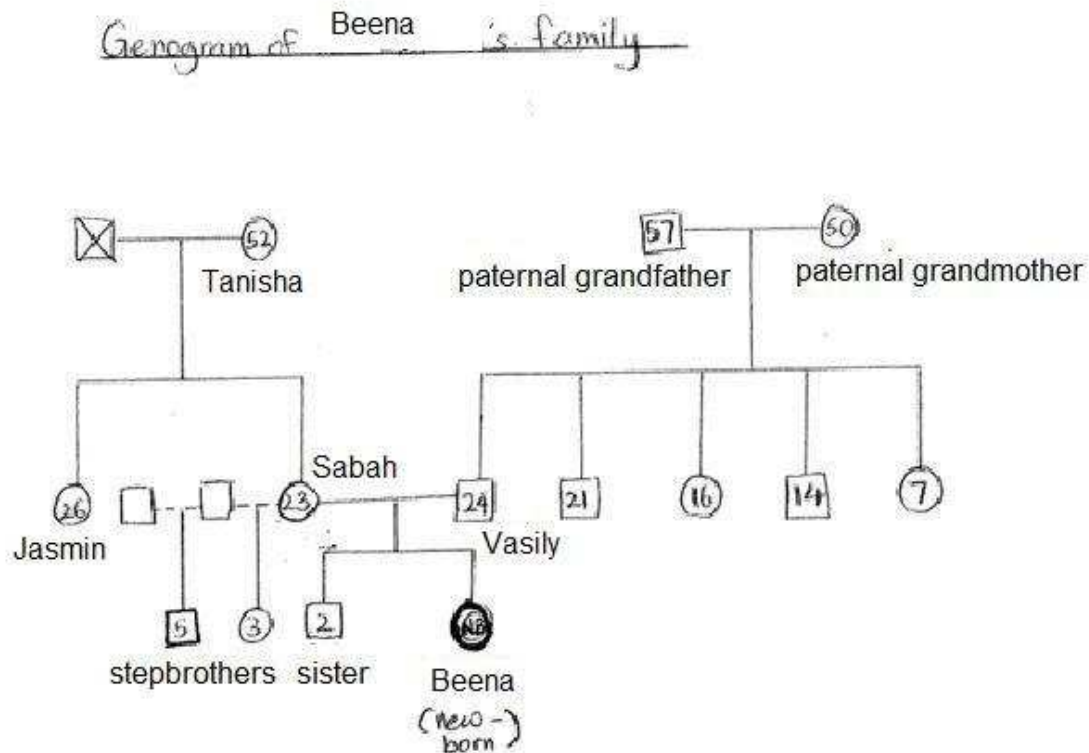


Figure 4 – Beena's genogram

Seven days of preparation

Day 1 – Family Group Conference request

On a Thursday the coordinator receives the request from Beyond Social Services Safe Kids Community Worker to convene a FGC.

Day 2 – Meeting the referrer

On the following day the community worker consults the coordinator whether the family is suitable for a FGC. They conclude that the coordinator will convene the FGC if the family is agreeable.

Day 3 – Medical social worker & immediate family

After the weekend he meets with the medical social worker to tell him about the potential meeting and clears the concerns.

The next meeting takes place in the evening with the immediate family (parents, Sabah and Vasily, and the maternal grandmother, Tanisha) to propose the FGC and to explain the process. The family agrees on having the meeting. The coordinator

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

draws a genogram with them to picture whom they would like to invite, he further gets the contact details.

As the family is Muslim and it is the month of Ramadan, they would like to begin with a breakfast meal. This is of highly religious importance during the holy month. Furthermore the family is Malay speaking as the coordinator is able to translate they agree that the FGC will be conducted in Malay. The meeting will take place at the maternal grandmother's, Tanisha, house, they agree on the following Sunday.

Day 4 – Maternal aunt

The coordinator tries to contact the maternal aunt, Jasmin, who finally replies in the evening. She informs the coordinator that she is busy and due to that she is not available for meeting up prior to the FGC, but she confirms her attendance. The coordinator requests to meet her an hour before the meeting to explain to her the procession briefly, she agrees.

Besides that he calls the paternal grandparents to make an appointment to meet them the next day and to discuss the FGC with them.

Day 5 – Paternal grandparents and Child Protection Officer

In the afternoon the meeting with the paternal grandparents takes place. The coordinator finds out that the paternal grandfather had gone for a heart-bypass two months ago and is reluctant to travel down to the maternal grandmother Tanisha's home for the FGC as he says that he would be tired. The grandfather is also having financial difficulties as he is the main breadwinner of the family and has not been working for two months. The coordinator offers to pay the taxi fare for the return journey. The paternal grandparents reluctantly agree to attend the FGC.

In the evening the coordinator meets up with the Child Protection Officer (CPO) to inform him about the FGC and to invite him. The CPO shares his concerns regarding the family, but also agrees to attend.

Day 6 – Last check up & Family service centre

After contacting and engaging most of the designated persons the coordinator gets together with the parents and the maternal grandmother once again. He clarifies the process again and discusses the food arrangements as well as the timing for the meeting.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

In the evening the coordinator meets with the social worker of the neighbourhood Family Service Centre to explain about the FGC as well as to invite her to participate. She is not sure if she is free at the suggested date but she will let him know if she can be present.

Day 7 - Invitations

The coordinator finally gives phone calls to all the participants to confirm their attendance.

Logistics such as large writing paper and markers are to be prepared as well.

The Family Group Conference - Day 9

The Beginning

On the day of the FGC the coordinator arrives at Tanisha's house at 6 p.m. to meet with Jasmin and explain her as appointed about the FGC. At 7 p.m. the coordinator and the professionals present: the community worker from Beyond Social Services, a volunteer childminder and an observer of the FGC course join the family to their breakfast at 7 p.m. Unfortunately the CPO is not arriving.

A pleasant surprise is that additional family members had turned up to support the family whom the coordinator has not invited (two uncles and a grandaunt). Altogether there are nine adult family members and the four children of the parents, Sabah and Vasily. At the beginning they all share the breakfast which creates a pleasant and conducive atmosphere.

Information giving

At 7:45 p.m. the FGC begins. In the information giving stage the referrer shares the concerns for the FGC. The coordinator also shares the concerns of the CPO who had not shown up yet. The family uses the opportunity to clarify the situation. Besides that the family expresses their disappointment towards the parents for being loan-shark 'runners'. Vasily's father scolds him for his actions but does not dwell on it. The parents express remorse for their actions and promise to mend their ways.

The coordinator ensures that the first phase keeps focus on the reason why they had come together: "Concern for the care of Beena in event of her parents' incarceration."

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

The family accepts the concerns for the pre-mature newborn baby and decides that their care plan should involve all the four children as it would be more holistic. All present agree with the family's decision.

The younger children are entertained by the older children in another room of the home and do not disrupt the discussions and sharing.

Private family time

While the family is having their private time the CPO arrives. The coordinator decides to interrupt the family in their decision-making to get the input of the CPO. Indeed, the coordinator shares his concerns in the information giving, but he thinks that through this serious situation it may be more effective when the CPO speaks to the family face to face. He shares that if the plan would be not suitable, the children may be placed in foster care. Through this clarification three possible future situations come up: Maybe both of the parents get incarcerated, only one goes in or both have to go in. This consolidates the family in working together as they better understand the seriousness of the situation.

Agreeing the plan

In the end the family comes up with a plan that is capable of acting in the foreseeable situations. Care plans are developed in cases that: both parents will not be incarcerated, only the father Mr. Vasily will be incarcerated, both parents will be incarcerated. For every case they made a decision what they want to do, who will work, who will look after the children, how will the medical needs for Beena be assured and where professional help is needed.

The coordinator and the professionals question the plan at some points to make it specific, measurable and realistic. A date for reviewing the plan is fixed and who to inform and what to do if there should be concerns regarding the implementation.

Feedback after the conference

The family shares that they are appreciative that they had this opportunity to come together to plan for the care of their children so that their children could remain within their care.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

The professionals show their impression that this family, despite their differences and challenges, came together to come up with a plan to ensure that their children are safe and well-cared for.

Analysis

The Family Group Conference was initially convened to give the family the chance to find care arrangements for their new born baby, but it turned out to be for all the four children. Due to the multiple issues the family is facing the medical social worker had concerns that the children may be at risk of being removed by the Child Protection Service and placed in foster care.

The only known possibility was the maternal grandmother, but the medical social worker had concerns towards her suitability.

The coordinator started his work promptly. He linked with the professionals involved and with the family immediately. Getting most of the professionals to attend a FGC on Sunday in this short time-frame and this difficult family situation is to treasure highly. But in spite of the urgency the coordinator did respect the family in their opinion about the FGC and showed a high cultural sensibility. He also enables the extended family in a very suitable way. Through his empathic, flexible work he permits the FGC.

In this particular family it seems appropriate to convene the meeting within one week. But such a tough time frame also limits possibilities and increases the chance of disregarding important resources.

So the family seized the chance to come up with a very detailed and applicable plan. This is also a gaining of the coordinator because he showed the family smoothly the possible upcoming situations without forcing them what to do. The plan makes it possible for the family to fulfill their responsibility and to keep the children within the family; safe, well-cared and supervised. Furthermore the family assign by what they need professional support, a balance between the family and professionals was achieved.

III. One Month - two Family Group Conferences

A Family Group Conference is called for Jayesh to settle his offence. The family is very familiar with the processing, because it is their second one within one month.

Background information

Jayesh, a 18 year old, who is in remand due to a offence usually lives with his parents (father 45 years, mother 39 years), his sister (17 years), his godbrother and his brother Abhisu (20 years).

A Family Group Conference for Jayesh's brother, Abhisu, was called due to his reoffending (stealing) under probation, for which a harder sentence was impending. The FGC should give the opportunity to convince the court to continue the probation order, to let Abhisu put things right and to explore on how his social network can support him in preventing another offence. The plan had to be made immediately to be heard by the court. So the coordinator had a very short preparation time. A good collaboration with the referrer, who initiated the FGC and pre-informed the family and reliance to the family's support, was requested.

As the family was very keen in having the FGC, a preparation as good as possible was provided in despite of the tight time frame. Six people; Abhisu, his parents, his sister, his godbrother and a good friend; developed a detailed plan, which combines family and professional resources in a suitable manner. Jayesh was not attending; he was in remand during this first FGC.

The coordinator worked empowering and did focus on the strength of the client's network and how they can be supportive further instead of harping on mistakes. The family felt strengthened and elaborated a plan that addresses all the concerns and develops existing supporting networks. In the end this was a trustworthy achievement for the probation officer and a suitable one for the family as well.

A few weeks later another FGC, with another coordinator, is called for Abhisu's younger brother, Jayesh. He was arrested for setting fire to a schoolmate's front door. He committed the offence with a friend. Before his appearance in court, he has been given a curfew to follow which he did not adhere to. He is subsequently placed in remand.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

One week before he is to be released from remand, the caseworker feels that a Family Group Conference would be a powerful way for Jayesh and his family to address the offence restoratively, as well as keep Jayesh out of trouble for the next three months before he enters National Service. It is also felt that such a plan would help to advocate for a home probation sentence from the court which he is to attend in the following month. The family as well as the probation officer, who is the same that attended the first FGC, concur and the FGC process begins.

Preparation Work

Getting in touch with the family

The Family Group Conference for Jayesh is initiated one week before his release. The family is happy to participate in such a process because Jayesh's older brother Abhisu went through the same process with favourable results. They are familiar with the aims and processing and formulate two questions for the FGC:

- How will Jayesh make things right with the victim and his family?
- How will Jayesh stay out of trouble from now on?

Receiving the probation officers concerns through the Caseworker

This is the referral email:

Hi Coordinator,

Thank you for agreeing to conduct the FGC for Jayesh. The concerns would be:

1. To keep Jayesh meaningfully occupied till his enlistment (April or May)
2. Jayesh and girlfriend to stop mixing around with their previous friends
3. Jayesh's girlfriend to be meaningfully occupied (studies, course or work)

As spoken, the probation officer would like the FGC to be conducted immediately after his release from the remand centre and he has requested for Jayesh girlfriend, Maya, to be at the conference. Please liaise with the community worker to get Maya's information and invite her and her mother for the conference.

Jayesh's family is staying at [REDACTED], the father can be contacted at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Please feel free to let me know if you need further information or assistance.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

At first glance, this referral gives the coordinator much cause for concern. The focus seems to fall on Jayesh and his girlfriend, Maya. It is even stranger for him that it is the probation officer who requests the presence of Maya and wants the girlfriend to be meaningfully occupied as one concern. Aside from that, the concerns, phrased in this way, seem the coordinator too prescriptive, as they leave not much up to the discretion of the family.

Getting back to the family

A little confused about the formulated concern, the coordinator calls the family. The family makes many things clear. It seems that the parents feel that Maya was very influential in Jayesh's life. Sometimes they feel this influence was not particularly good. Despite that, they see how happy the couple is together and do not want to break them up.

The coordinator understands how the family feels, but he sees his job in preserving the process. He starts by asking how the family feels about making clauses pertaining to Maya in the FGC plan. Immediately, the father reports that such clauses would be inappropriate as Maya is not his daughter. The coordinator then describes how it might seem to Maya that she is being made the scapegoat to Jayesh's offence. If Maya feels blamed during the conference, not only it is possible that she would not be supportive of the plan, but it could also detract the conference away from Jayesh taking responsibility for his actions and staying out of trouble. Ultimately, the family distills the problem into a choice of two approaches:

- Maya is part of the problem and the family is clearly not in support of the relationship. In such a scenario, the coordinator suggests it would be the best not to invite her; as such a conflict would not be constructive to the aims of the conference.
- Maya is part of the solution and must be present to support the plan. In this scenario, the coordinator suggests the conference should focus on Jayesh as far as possible.

The coordinator thinks that Maya is probably both, part of the problem and the solution, it is decided that for the purposes of this FGC, the conference should maintain its focus on Jayesh, and involve Maya to see how she can support the plan. Any other concerns about Maya's own behaviour can be addressed through other feasibilities with Maya's own social worker.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

Matters regarding the conference are also to be planned with the family. This appears very easy for the coordinator. They chose their participants and decide to make the invitations to the family on their own. A support person for Jayesh, as well as for Maya, is explored, given that there was a risk that this process might be confronting for either of them. The parents request the coordinator to invite the professionals involved, namely the various social workers and the probation officer. The coordinator also explains the three stages of the FGC once again to them. He asks whom they want to stay in the room during their private family time. It is a testament to the social workers that the family firmly requests both social workers to stay during private family time. The coordinator explains what the private time is for and the family agrees to disclaim their idea.

A date and a venue are set for the FGC. Initially the family wanted to hold the conference in their own home, but due to renovation, the venue is shifted to Beyond Social Services' premises. They are not particularly concerned about a seating arrangement and decide to let it run naturally. The parents want to provide some food for tea during the private family time and they would like to start and end the FGC with a prayer, like their first FGC. They will also find transportation by themselves. The coordinator is requested to settle refreshments such as coffee, tea and water, as well as to provide markers and flip chart paper for their plans.

The parents then go on to describe all the things they want to plan for Jayesh at the conference. The coordinator smiles and keeps silent.

The coordinator meets with other attending members of the family to elaborate a bit more upon their roles in the conference, it is quite superfluous for most of them as they had gone through a FGC before.

Negotiating with the probation officer

The coordinator then proceeds to re-communicate the matters of concern with the probation officer, even though he is a little shy in doing that. He sends him the following email:

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

Dear probation officer,

I'll be the Family Group Conference Coordinator for Jayesh's case. I've already liased with Jayesh's father and will be meeting him tomorrow afternoon to plan for the conference to be held sometime next week. I would really like to meet with you or talk to you to go through your concerns as soon as possible. The questions which we want to broadly put to the family are as follows:

1. How can Jayesh put things right with the victim?
2. How can Jayesh stay out of trouble from now on?

I understand that you have some suggestions about Jayesh not meeting his old friends and being meaningfully occupied for the next three months. It would be great if you could share these suggestions at the conference so that the family can hear how this would benefit Jayesh's case. I also understand that you would like to see Jayesh's girlfriend, Maya, meaningfully occupied. While I understand the effect that Jayesh's girlfriend has on him, I'm not entirely confident about whether the family will feel that it is right to put demands on his girlfriend. It might give rise to a large conflict of interest between Jayesh and the family if the family is trying to break them up and using this as an opportunity. I would appreciate your thoughts on this.

Please feel free to contact me at any time on [REDACTED].

Yours Sincerely,

Family Group Conference Coordinator

Hence, the coordinator receives no reply he manages to reach the probation officer by phone the next day to discuss the various issues with him.

While the probation officer has clear ideas of what needs to be done, the coordinator explains the need to let the family have more discretion and encourages him to share his ideas as suggestions during the information giving stage. The coordinator declares that at the end of the meeting, he will still have the chance to speak up if the plan is, in his opinion, inadequate to appeal to the court for home probation. The

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probation officer accedes to this and comments that as long as the two main questions are answered, it would satisfy him.

An agreement is also easily reached regarding the issue of Maya's involvement. The probation officer understands that this conference could not practicably make demands on her, and that the focus should be on Jayesh with Maya's support.

Managing latest developments

The date, the venue and other arrangements are concerned. While the preparation period by necessity had to be squeezed into one week, the coordinator is fortunate that most of the issues are resolved and the conference was coming together. Unavoidable obstacles are emerging that have to be brazened through. Firstly the victim does not want to attend or participate at all. Secondly, the probation officer is unable to attend the conference. Thirdly, Maya's mother, who is her support person, does not want to attend.

Lacking the victim's participation would make the conference less compelling and the coordinator's anxiety grew. Additionally, until Jayesh comes out of remand, the coordinator could not know whether or not Jayesh was truly remorseful or willing to take responsibility of his actions.

The lack of the probation officer is less troubling, in the coordinators point of view. The caseworker is familiar with the suggestions that the probation officer has in this particular case, as well as the general principles that the plan had to address if it is to appear in court as compelling advocacy. So the caseworker would play the role of the probation officer, sharing ideas in the information sharing phase and "approving" of the plan at the end. Finally, the plan would be sent to the probation officer for his agreement. The other social worker involved in the family would assume the role as the family's social worker and Maya's social worker would attend as her support person. The social workers are briefed on their roles.

Jayesh is picked up by his family in the evening on the day of his release one day before the FGC. They bring him out for a meal at night. The coordinator feels a little uncomfortable intruding on their reunion with the prospect of a challenging conference the next day. He did so anyway, because time is of the essence. The coordinator speaks to him over the phone and explores a support person for him.

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Ishaan, a good friend would be invited. The impression that the coordinator obtains is that Jayesh seems remorseful but intimidated by the upcoming conference.

The Conference

The second time within one month the family comes together for a FGC. They are one and a half hour late due to the rain. In a sense the coordinator is thankful that the probation officer has not come and so he has not to rush off before the family came. It seems that with all his young-ish siblings, cousins, friends, and girlfriend around that Jayesh chose to hide his fear with bravado, joking and making fun of different things. The coordinator notices that he did not pay that attention to the ages of the participants as he should have, maybe asking for more uncles and aunts to be present. Furthermore, the victim and the probation officer are not present to instil a sense of seriousness and remorse.

It is agreed that the coordinator will formally read out the charges of mischief by fire from the Penal Code and the related penalties during the information giving phase.

The Information Giving

The information giving phase proceeds smoothly. After the opening prayer, the atmosphere changes to all seriousness when the charges are read out. The FGC and the stages are explained and the two main questions are posed:

- How will Jayesh make things right with the victim and his family?
- How will Jayesh stay out of trouble from now on?

The caseworker speaks as the probation officer as agreed.

Private Family Time

The coordinator does not know what happens here other than the fact that there is no shouting, and it lasts about 45 minutes.

Agreeing the Plan

The family has tried its best to put together a plan for Jayesh that would satisfactorily answer the two questions. However, it is initially very messy; certain clauses are comingled with others, making the clauses too unspecific. This is easily ironed out.

The 'probation officer', asks questions to tighten the plan. The family reflects on these concerns and adds the necessary changes.

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

The coordinator points out that the courts appointed curfew might interfere with Jayesh's plans for work, and that a back-up plan might be needed. The family works out a back-up plan.

The coordinator assures that each portion of the plan would be monitored and that avenues for review were in place so that the FGC could be reconvened if necessary. Once this is done, the various parties agree on the plan. The meeting is closed with a prayer and the family kindly offers to share their food with the professionals involved.

After the Family Group Conference

The coordinator types out and submits the plan to all the parties involved. The real probation officer voices a little concern about the plan and requests to be updated. He does comment that the curfew at 10 pm is too late and should be earlier at 9 pm. This, along with the mandatory programmes that Jayesh has to attend, began to interfere with his work at the carwash and the back-up plan does come into play. While the entire conference is not reconvened, the parties involved in that section made the necessary arrangements to follow through with the back-up plan.

Analysis

The two Family Group Conferences were called for the two boys of the family who came in conflict with the law. The conferences should give the opportunity to put things right, convince the courts to commute the sentences and explore on how the social network can give support in regard to prevent them from re-offending.

In both affairs the plan had to be made immediately to be heard by the court. So the coordinators had a very short preparation time. As the family was very keen in having the FGC, a preparation as good as possible was provided in despite of the tight time frame. These FGCs show also that family's have the ability to develop plans on their own. The family appreciated to have a second meeting with another topic; it seems that it was helpful and well fitting for them. This indicates that Family Group Conferencing is a lifeworld-participation procedure that can create suitable outcomes for families as well as for the professionals.

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The second coordinator for Jayesh's conference linked well with the professionals and prepared them appropriate for the meeting. The described FGC shows a very good work from the coordinator as he adjusts the probation officer's ambitious concerns to realistic ones by asking the family what their focus is and negotiates them with the professional.

Also the coordinator had to be very creative by improvising the experienced social worker as a substitute for the probation officer, because he was not attending. In doing so he tries to compensate the input of the system. This is important because both, system and lifeworld, have to collaborate to achieve a successful FGC.

Both FGCs resulted in a plan that addresses all the concerns and develops supporting networks. In the end they were largely trustworthy achievements for the probation officer and suitable ones for the family as well. It also is shown that developing these plans is a hard business for families, even in the second FGC, and is to be valued.

The FGCs show also something that is to be seen critically. Convening a FGC in such a short time (one week) is always a tough task, because some unknown supporters can be overseen as there is not enough time for exploring the network. To refer a FGC earlier surely can create more effective outcomes due to more time that allows a more intensive preparation work.

This also appears reasonable in regard to preparing the key persons. There is the risk of passing them over, what of course will have a strong impact on the outcomes.

IV. “To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often”¹⁶

The Family Group Conference was called to stabilise a young man in the community so that he is able to stay out of trouble. It turns out that changing for the better is harder than expected, but a support network is established.

A Family Group Conference to stay out of trouble

Nayyar (aged 22) has recently come out from the Restorative Training Centre (RTC). He is staying with his mother, Mdm. Elisha, who is the main caregiver. She is not working and has non-malignant breast cancer and diabetes.

The problem is Nayyar's non compliance to curfew that has been set for him by the Senior Restorative Officer (SRO) as he has been on tagging and being monitored at home with an electronic device. Apart from the curfew Nayyar strictly must not commit any crimes and is supposed to find a job to keep him out of trouble.

The aim of the Family Group Conference is to stabilise Nayyar in the community so that he does not get recalled back to RTC. The case worker wants to give the family the chance to involve their network, because she feels that Nayyar and his mother need support to ensure that Nayyar may be able to stay out of trouble.

Involving the family

The coordinator meets with Nayyar and his mother Mdm. Elisha to talk about the FGC and its process. Both Nayyar and his mother Mdm. Elisha agree to have a Family Group Conference. They discuss who they wish to invite or can support either of them. The genogram is completed and the coordinator gathers information about Nayyar's lifeworld and support persons. Being from a Malay family Mdm. Elisha does not want the coordinator to contact the family but wants to invite them herself. The coordinator goes along with her and offers to support the mother in explaining the process to her siblings if they need more information on the process. Mdm. Elisha promises to inform the coordinator of who the attendees. She also mentions that there is no need for any drinks as she got a lot at home and the snacks as well she does not want the professionals to help her provide. They choose Mdm. Elisha's

¹⁶ Churchill, Winston (n.d.)

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place as a venue where everyone could sit on the floor. Also it is agreed that the meeting will be held in Malay and that an interpreter will be used.

The coordinator and Nayyar arrange to meet up together with Nayyar's friends he wants to invite to prepare them further for the FGC.

Nayyar and his peer group

When the coordinator meets with Nayyar to speak to his friends unfortunately only Nayyar's girlfriend attends. She mentions that she is willing to be present for the FGC meeting. Nayyar's other friend cannot come to the FGC but when the coordinator spoke to her over the phone she mentioned that she will continue to support Nayyar by being of listening ear to him.

The compromising about informing the extended family

The coordinator gets back to Mdm. Elisha to check on who among her siblings will be attending the FGC meeting. As the mother is busy with her job she was yet unable to call her siblings to get confirmation. The coordinator offers to help and thereby she highlights not to force the sibling in coming but only share about the benefit of the FGC and will leave it to them to decide. Mdm. Elisha allows the FGC coordinator to give it a try but requests that the husbands of her siblings shall not be invited as she does not wish to get them disturbed and involved. Instead the coordinator manages to speak to one of the Nayyar's cousins who confirms her attendance and offers to explain the meeting to her mother (Nayyar's aunt) and her brother. Also she gets in touch with the other siblings who are not sure whether they are able to attend.

Professionals

The coordinator takes effort in calling the prison counsellor and the Senior Reformative officer, but without success. In consequence she emails them to invite them for the FGC and to explain the process. The prison counsellor cannot make it while the SRO agrees to come but is not sure if he will be able to stay until late.

The coordinator arranges a meeting with the case worker to get him to prepare his presentation of the concerns, strengths and dreams.

Further the interpreter was informed about background information of the case and about her role.

What happens at the Family Group Conference

After 13 working days of preparation the FGC takes place. The coordinator gets informed that the Senior Reformative Officer will not be attending the FGC because he has to attend a wedding. In contrast to these professionals Nayyar's family attends the meeting. Only the girlfriend calls to say that her daughter was sick. Nayyar seems to be sad about this cancellation since his girlfriend was also seen as his support person. Nayyar decides to sit next to his uncle who is very supportive to him. Surprisingly the aunty and uncle who were not sure to attend actually show up. The uncle left from work earlier to be able to attend and the aunt came though she is having fever. From a group of 4 confirmed people the FGC is conducted with a group of 8 family members (Nayyar, Mdm. Elisha, 2 uncles, 3 aunties, 1 cousin) and three professionals (case worker, interpreter, the coordinator). The coordinator experiences for the first time the power of family presence.

The information giving starts by the coordinator introducing herself and explaining her role in the meeting. She then goes forward to invite the family and the case workers to introduce themselves and share how they are related to Nayyar. The family is asked if they want to start the meeting with a prayer but they wish to continue with the meeting. The coordinator feels that the family members seem to be in a rush to end the meeting soon as they all are sharing about what they have to do after the meeting is over.

The coordinator informs about the FGC process and the three stages. Then the case worker is asked to present the reason for the FGC: to create a plan that stabilises Nayyar in the community so that he does not get recalled back to RTC. Also the family is to consider about how they can support Nayyar to help him stay out of trouble. The case worker shares the concerns (e.g. Nayyar's problem to deal with stress), strengths (e.g. Nayyar's leadership ability) and hopes (e.g. to stabilise the family structure so that issues can be discussed without hurting each other) for Nayyar. Following that the family is asked for their concerns and the strengths they see in and hopes for Nayyar. The family is open to share and the categories appear very useful in this Family Group Conference as it allows to also share the positive things which also seems to be empowering for Nayyar. So they value Nayyar to be very cooperative and willing to make up with his mistakes.

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The case worker covers for the SRO and shares to the family on the rules that Nayyar is supposed to follow, to keep himself out of trouble and to complete his tagging.

The information sharing takes very long and when the family already starts discussing about the potential plan, the coordinator leads over to let the family have their private family time.

After a while the family calls the professionals back in for the agreeing of the plan. The plan aims to address the concern to stabilise Nayyar in the community. The family chose Nayyar to write the plan as they felt that it was related to him and they also wanted him to share the plan as well. The plan is geared to the categories in which the participants shared the information and so is split into “communication”, “hopes and dreams” and “concerns”. It is very short and not detailed enough. The coordinator asks questions to clarify and to help the family make the plan clearer and measurable.

To ensure that the negotiations the coordinator wrote down are what they wanted to be written the coordinator summarises the plan for the family and professionals once again. All the participants agree on the plan.

The plan

After the agreeing the plan stage the plan does consist of 18 details of which 15 make clear demands on a change of behaviour on side of Nayyar. The details are related to Nayyar’s supervision, finding a job, activities in social groups and living a more self-consistent life. For example he is to return home every day by 7.30 pm as the curfew demands and to volunteer for a welfare organisation. To realise this he gets support by his family members and professionals. Also the plan includes details in regard to strengthen the family structure, such as attending an anger management course together with his mother as well as to go out with her for dinner, movies or similar and to organise gatherings for the whole family to come together. The plan will be reviewed in three month time.

The FGC coordinator checks with the family on who wants to have the FGC report in English or rather in Malay.

After this the coordinator closes the FGC.

Feedback

The case worker felt that the FGC brought the family together and allowed the family to support Nayyar and his mother.

Also the family was grateful to have been given the possibility to discuss and plan. They share that they were expecting more responsibility from Nayyar to progress and to improve himself. Some of them state that it appears to be difficult to find the right balance between supporting him and letting him take responsibility.

Outcomes

A few weeks after the FGC, a big fight happens between Nayyar and his mother. The argument is regarding to Nayyar being in touch with his father, which his mother does not appreciate. Nayyar manages to call his aunties and uncles to come down and help settle the issue with them. He leaves the house that night and stays at his auntie's place. On the following day a meeting between the coordinator, the SRO, Nayyar and two of his aunts one of whom Nayyar has been staying with, is arranged. The family members decided that Nayyar will remain with his aunt at first but then move to his other aunt. Some weeks later, another family meeting was arranged and Nayyar moved to his other aunt.

While staying at his aunt's place, Nayyar was initially doing well but after some time he started coming home late and even missing to come home, saying his new found work place was too far and would often just sleep at his friend's place. Since the quarrel between him and his mother both are not in touch and reject to realise the plan details that would strengthen their relationship. Also Nayyar did not attend meeting with the SRO and after a while stopped attending the religious classes that were part of the family's plan.

Analysis

The Family Group Conference was facilitated to stabilise Nayyar in the community to help him staying out of trouble.

The FGC seemed to be rather jumbled since the group of participants was formed by cancellations and unexpected attendees. In consequence the coordinator was

5. Family Group Conferencing in the context of Beyond Social Services

requested to explain the process in detail and later on to concretise the plan made. Maybe the timeframe for the preparation stage (13 working days) was set too shortly and taking more time to find and prepare the right and important participants could have eased the run of the FGC.

It is a challenge to decide whether the FGC should have been cancelled and rearranged when exploring that the professionals and the support person could not attend and the other participants seemed to be in a rush. Asking the family whether they wanted to begin with the meeting or reconvene it would have been appropriate.

The plan that has been developed by the end of the meeting was very complex and though it included many supporting offers within the family, it looked more like legal conditions for Nayyar than as a support plan. Looking at the outcome it seems that indeed it was too much to achieve for Nayyar immediately. This shows the importance of plans being realistic and achievable, to go step by step, because it does not help to leave people overstrained with their own plan. It seems that the participants expected him to be perfect. Maybe Nayyar's girlfriend, who he had chosen to be his support person, would have helped to keep the plan realistic and achievable for Nayyar, because she knows him very well.

The major achievement of the FGC is the consolidation of Nayyar and his extended family, who indeed offered him immediate help when needed. Although the problem solving aspect will need revision, the FGC built up Nayyar's network. Unfortunately the FGC was not able to help rebuild the relationship between the mother and his son.

It seems that the family explored the facilitating of family meetings as useful since they arranged several ones after the FGC to plan the future. It seems that social work helped the family to use this as a tool to support each other as a group and to develop new plans when the others did not work out.

V. Helena needs a home



A Family Group Conference is facilitated to help Helena whose parents became homeless to remain with her extended family members. The process brings the family back together; but Helena has to change houses again.

Figure 5 – Helena's invitation

The history and the reason for the Family Group Conference

Helena (9) is the daughter of Mdm. Mages and Mr. Alif. Shortly after her birth in 2001 she has gone into foster care where she remained for 5 years. After she ran away from her foster family she was placed in a children's home for one year. Helena then returned to her parents and lived with them. Because the family lost their home they presently do not have a permanent place of residence. As a result Helena is being placed with her father's sister, Mdm. Hanna. There she lives together with her two female adult cousins, their husbands and all in all 12 children. Her parents change their stay on a daily basis. Getting an accommodation will take some time for them. Moreover Mdm. Mages is ill and currently physically affected.

The child protection service and the school are of the opinion that Helena is not suitable to stay with the present caregiver, Mdm. Hanna, as the family's children have care and protection issues that are monitored.

Another issue is that Helena has stolen in school and repeatedly got suspended. The police have let Helena off with a warning and referred her to Child Guidance Clinic for assessment. They did not see the offending incident as a punishing issue but rather one that may need medical assessment and attention.

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The case worker proposes a Family Group Conference to allow the family to come up with alternative care arrangements for Helena so that she may be prevented from being institutionalised. Also a stable environment shall be found to manage Helena's stealing problem.

The first contact with the family

The assigned coordinator firstly meets with Helena's parents. In this meeting she explains what a FGC is and its purpose. She aims to explore the resources within the family. Both parents state that they want to stay together with Helena and acknowledge to have made attempts in looking for a flat. They agree to have a FGC. Both, Mr. Alif and Mdm. Mages are very resourceful as they can point different people that are part of their family network. Their hesitation is whether these people could help them or would come for the FGC as they had recent misunderstandings with them. Helena's parents are dependent on people around them for their day to day survival. This made the parents get used to get in touch with them in spite of what they may think of them. Patient and willing to receive whatever support can be provided for the care of their daughter, they allow the coordinator to contact the named family members.

Helena helps planning her meeting

Also Helena has an amazing insight into her family's network. She knows the ones who love her and who can support the family as her suspension from school has allowed her to spend time with different family members. Helena hopes that she can live with her parents. Also she feels very comfortable with the current caregiver and hopes that she can continue to stay with them if a return to her parents is not possible. The case worker assists Helena in writing down her thoughts regarding to issues, strengths and dreams. The coordinator is impressed about her understanding of her parent's plight and about her active involvement during the preparation. The coordinator invites the 9-year old to draw the invitation for the FGC; her picture clearly reflects the focus of the FGC (see Figure 5 – Helena's invitation, p. 67).

The seesaw in exploring the network

By exploring the extended family members the coordinator gets informed about strained relationships within the whole family. After a quarrel, contact had been lost for a long time and Helena's parents were initially embarrassed to meet anyone.

The maternal side

The coordinator gets in touch with the maternal side of the family. Some of the mother's relatives are disappointed that she did not contact them earlier to inform them about her living conditions. However Mdm. Mages' elder sister (Mdm. Paulie) agrees to attend and offers her house as a venue. Her children will also attend. The younger sister of Mdm. Mages is interested, but has to work and cannot attend.

Other relatives on this side of the family do not want to be involved or all ill and unable to come.

The paternal side

The coordinator gets in touch with Helena's current caregiver, Mdm. Hanna (Mr. Alif's sister), her two female adult cousins, their husbands and their children. They all confirm their attendance.

Friends and other relatives

The sisters link the coordinator to one of their friends, who might be open to care for Helena. Because the friend's husband disagrees, so this option was no longer available. Also they link the coordinator to the cousin of Mr. Alif (Mdm. Hoa), who agrees to attend the FGC.

Moreover a friend of Mdm. Mages is contacted. He finds it difficult to help as an outsider, but offers to support Mdm. Mages when she needs help in talking to her sisters. Another friend also states that the difficulties between the sisters should be clarified for a better relationship.

Another option, mentioned by Helena's parents, is Mr. Alif's ex-wife, who had lived with the family for a while. Though there are problems, she could imagine caring for Helena under conditions of Mdm. Mages involving more intensively in Helena's life and Mr. Alif going to work. Also she suggests that the parents should marry so that

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they can purchase a house. The coordinator arranges a meeting with the nuclear family and Mr. Alif's ex-wife in which the option is discussed. But later, after a conflict, she retakes her offer to look after Helena and does not want to attend the FGC.

Foster family

In a meeting with the school it is suggested that Helena could return to her prior foster care. The school argues that the foster family was prompt in Helena's needs and that the stealing problem did not exist when she was in their care. The foster family does not wish to offer help since they thought they could adopt Helena and then were very hurt when Helena ran away from them.

Inspirit family communication

It takes the coordinator about a month to work on getting family members on board. The time frame appears useful as the family group takes time to accept one another coming together. After the quarrel, the preparation stage encourages phone conversations of the family members. They begin to find out more about one another. The parents appear insightful and sensitive to relatives' expectations of their role as parents. The relatives also prefer the regular keeping in touch, which Helena's parents are not so good at.

The coordinator tries to build a consensus on the problem. Since the different family members all have their own way of doing things they have different perspectives of the problem and different opinions of Helena's needs. However the FGC will be a good platform to discuss these.

Professional perceptions

The professionals like school and the child protection service have reservations about the FGC, more so about the parents' responsibility to care for Helena. The school does not want to be present and leaves it to the child protection service to handle the matter. They are tired of managing Helena's behaviour in school. However they are ready to help Helena with her homework after school and information on after school care and bus transport. The child protection service

appears rather cautious as the current caregiver's grandchildren are under care and protection order. However they agree to give the FGC a go.

The Family Group Conference

9 family members, 6 professionals (Helena's tutor, 2 officers of the child protection service, the case worker, the community worker, the coordinator) and 1 observer of the FGC Diploma training course attend the FGC. The coming together begins with food to set the mood going. It is special for the family members to come together again after many years without seeing each other. The participants welcome each other and introduce themselves. The information giving begins. Helena starts the session on presenting the issues, strengths and dreams of her family. For example Helena describes that her parents and other family members love her a lot and she is a pretty and polite girl. Her issues are the stealing, the housing and money problem and the school problem and she hopes to have a house and a puppy to play with. The family shares the wish of the family that Helena should be cared for by the family rather than being placed in an institution or a foster caregiver. The parents explain their experiences from the past.

Though Helena prefers to stay with her current caregiver; the officers of the child protection service state that it is not suitable. Further they seem to question the credibility of the family and seem to be keen on placing Helena in an institution and. The coordinator struggles to manage the situation at that point. She says that the options of Helena's place to live are now presented and that the family will have time to discuss that in private family time.

Moreover Helena shares that she was tempted to steal so that she can have what her friends have. She realises that it is wrong and hopes not to do it again. She is open to guidance and discipline to help reduce offending behaviours. The family group recognise her efforts and affirm her honesty.

The coordinator shares about the police's and the clinic's assessment that Helena's stealing problem was rather to be seen as a call for attention than as a crime. The family group state that more money would help Helena not to resort to stealing.

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The private family time begins after the professionals leave the home and wait outside. Later on the family calls the professionals back in and shares their plan within the agreeing the plan – stage.

The family's plan is constructed under the statement that *the family wants that Helena to stay with and be cared for by the family*. The plan appears detailed. It defines the areas of Helena's everyday life and who is responsible for what. Also the professional support offers are included especially in arranging school issues, e.g. the Child Protection Officer will liaise with school to arrange for Helena to resume schooling as soon as possible. The main plan details are:

1. Helena will remain staying with her current caregiver Mdm. Hanna (Mr. Alif's sister), until school holidays.
2. Helena stays with and be cared for by Mdm. Hoa (Mr. Alif's cousin) by the start of the school holidays.
3. The parents of Helena will take responsibility for their daughter's welfare with immediate effect.

Instead of asking questions and modifying the plan the child protection service officers again highlight the option of a Children's Home. The parents of Helena do not want to scare her further by letting her stay under another form of care. Helena's mother also would have difficulties visiting her daughter due to her illness.

The officers of the child protection service share that the family's plan is only a proposal as the officers would have to discuss it with their management before accepting the plan. Helena's family group again and again express their hesitations about Helena being place in an institution and the discussion enrolls again. The child protection service officers try to coax the child to agree to go in an institution. A specific time frame for child protection service to end their investigations and review the plan is not set. However until child protection service declares their decision family's plan is used as a workaround. In terms of monitoring the caseworker will monitor the plan while Helena is under the care of Mdm. Hanna and Mdm. Hoa fortnightly by calling them. Helena's cousin and her husband will help to monitor Helena's educational needs by calling her once a week and checking with the form teacher once a month. The family will meet to review the plan after the child protection service's assessment and at the end of the school term.

Outcomes and further developments

The family of Helena follows the care plan of the FGC. Helena continues to stay with Mdm. Hanna. Mdm. Hoa is not keen on continuing with the plan. She proposes that the family should stay together and the family group should help the family to pay rent until they can manage.

The child protection service takes some time to get back on their outcome. After interviewing the parents and current caregivers again, the child protection service allows Helena to remain with Mdm. Hanna.

Helena steals again in the child protection service is involved, they make the decision to send the girl to an institution. The child protection service prefers that they will monitor the situation from then on. They feel that placing her in an institution will be a more helpful environment and that it will also help Helena to improve on her stealing behaviour. Helena has been keeping in touch with her parents through phone calls.

Analysis

This Family Group Conference was convened regarding to child protection. Its purpose was to find an alternative accommodation for a girl within her family circle until her parents found a new residence instead of placing her in an institution. Moreover Helena's behaviour in school was to be dealt with.

The coordinator did put great effort in preparing this FGC. Thereby she tried to resolve issues between family members and discussed options prior to the FGC. The FGC itself is a more appropriate surrounding for these discussions, there all the participants could offer their options, discuss them and make a decision. To strictly relegate this discussion into the private family time of the meeting helps the coordinator to prevent him from mediating and counselling family affairs.

Maybe a more open question like "What can we do for Helena, so that she can remain living within the family's network?" would have engaged people to attend although they are not able to take her home with them, but offer other support.

However, the coordinator was able to make some familiar and professional resources available for Helena and her parents. The family created a detailed plan that

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answered the question of Helena's place to live until her parents found a new residence and dealt with school issues. The aspect of the parents finding a new accommodation was not part of the plan (support, timeframe etc.), although this is an important fact for the child's situation. Maybe the questions agreed by the referrer and the coordinator were too confined.

Further this case clearly indicates the importance of a positive attitude on side of the professionals towards the FGC. Though there were grave doubts, the child protection service finally agreed the family's plan, to let Helena remain with Mdm. Hanna. Bearing in mind that the officers of the child protection service stated that this care arrangement is not suitable, the FGC process seemed to have provided confidence in the family's strength. Unfortunately after a small incident, they lost their gained confidence and decided to cancel the family's plan. They may have expected the family to succeed immediately.

The FGC itself and its outcomes appear as a great achievement for the family, in regard to the strained relationships. In this connection the system's timescale seems not compatible with the family's.

It seems unrealistic to expect that the 9-year old could change her behaviour immediately; neither do the parents' circumstances. Maybe an alternative, like "what happens if Helena steals again" -plan detail could have helped handling the situation.

The coordinator needs to inform himself and the family about non-negotiables / bottom lines that the family needs to respect in the process of planning. The family needs to know them exactly right from the outset. Maybe this was a reason for complications in this FGC process. The family experienced disempowerment when their plan was rejected. To ensure an agreement of everybody present further, the plan needs to be discussed in detail and if needed modified in the agreeing the plan-stage.

However the plan did not proceed, the FGC has strengthened the familiar solidarity and thus perhaps also can be supportive in further decision-making in respect to Helena's care arrangement.

VI. “My friends are my family”

A Family Group Conference is convened to support a selfless and young single-mum in caring for her four children. A back up plan is generated that offers support through the circle of friends when the family is in need of help.

A single mother needs support

Marina is 22 years old. She is the mother and main caregiver of four children one aged 5, 4-aged twins, and a 2-year old. Her husband is in prison due to drug-related offense. The family lives in a two room rental flat. After a long search Marina found a job that starts contemporary. Despite the challenges of a single mother, Marina has a strong will to be independent and sacrificially for the need of her children who are prone to sickness.

The concern was raised by the case worker when Marina left the children unsupervised one afternoon. Being alone and locked inside the house would put the safety of the children at great risk.

The FGC is considered to identify options of support for Marina in terms of taking care of her children (supervision, medical needs) and in caring for herself.

The case is referred to a FGC coordinator who firstly gathers data to recognise issues and strengths of the family in talking to the social worker.

The coordinator then meets with Marina and explains to her what Family Group Conferencing is all about; its process and benefits. She uses a brochure for a better explanation. Marina agrees to have the meeting.

Who is important?

The coordinator talks the gathered information through with Marina and completes her genogram and Eco-Map. Marina is an only child. Her mother is staying in a welfare home due to her medical condition. Marina is certain that she would be attending the conference. Though the mother is not able to offer support due to her bad health condition at the moment, her presence is to be seen as an emotional support for Marina. When her mother recovers she will be moving in with Marina and her children, but the point of time is unclear. Marina is quite reserved in saying things about her dad who is an alcoholic and is away most of the time. She does not want to

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involve her father because his presence is inconsistent. However he is present for special occasions of his daughter's life.

Although she has a few relatives like aunts and cousins, she does not want to involve them. According to her, her aunts only wanted to take advantage of her mother in the past, which overshadows the relationship. According to the social worker, Marina used to be close to her two cousins. One cousin helped her financially; however she is now unable to get in touch with her. The other cousin betrayed her by having an affair with her husband.

Despite her biological family she identifies some of her good friends. She says: "My friends are my family." It seems that she has a good emotional support from them. She is proud and certain that her friends will come and support her for the meeting. The coordinator gets in touch with Marina's friends and her mother by calling them and sending out e-mails. Some of them are difficult to reach. Others prefer to discuss the FGC on the phone which appears to be more complicated than preparing them face-to-face.

Aside from these social networks, three social workers are involved with this family. A medical social worker is to attend with the children's medical needs, a social worker for the family's welfare and a safe kids worker to ensure children's safety all the time.

Also the coordinator speaks to the children to prepare them for the meeting. She explains that her mother's friends and grandma will meet together talk about who would take care of them when mommy started to work. She asks them to draw a picture of their family. The drawing is nice so the coordinator suggests using it as an invitation for the conference, Marina agrees.

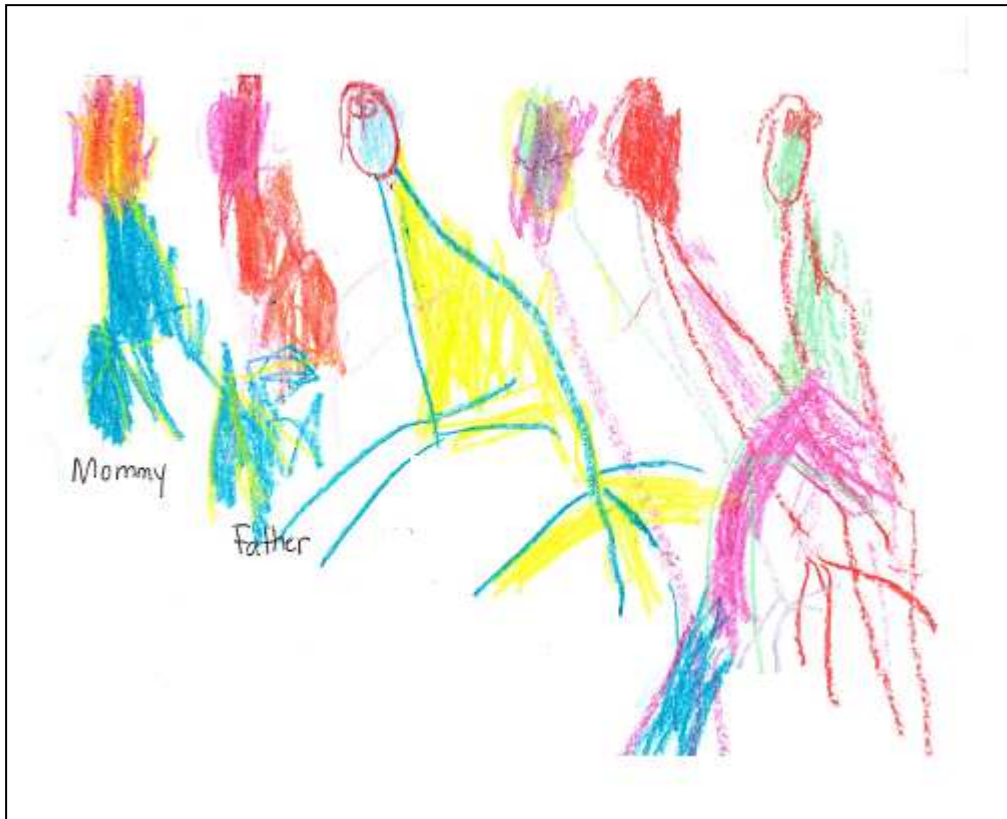


Figure 6 – Childrens' invitation

How do you wish *your* meeting to be?

Since most of her friends are working, Marina decides to hold the meeting on a Sunday for the convenience of most participants and suggests the Beyond Social Services premises as a venue. She also recommended the meeting could be done after a lunch with her family. She loves to cook and would not mind to prepare a meal for them. She wants the meeting to start with a prayer. She appoints the safe kid worker to lead the prayer because she feels not confident to do it.

The Family Group Conference and its plan

The coordinator arranged for the family and friends to come together by the company van. They appear to be happy and prepared but it has been problematic in the morning as some friends changed their minds on the last minute. However, Marina and the social worker manage to convince them to attend. All in all, the mother and her children, 4 friends, the grandmother, the coordinator, 2 social workers, 1 observer and a child minder attend the FGC.

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The family and friends have their lunch. Marina is serving food to everybody and is proud of her cooking. After they are finished and having enjoyed a short rest all the participants gather at the conference room.

The room is well set-up and very conducive for the family meeting. There is a play-station for the children, the pantry area where coffee and snacks are ready and the white board and table for the meeting. The sitting arrangement is in circle where everybody acknowledges individual's presence.

The entire process begins with a prayerful moment like Marina wished it to be. All participants, except the children who are playing with toys, stand in a circle and recited the prayer. This gives rise to the moment of silence and thoughtfulness.

Then the first stage begins. The coordinator introduces herself and explains her role for the meeting. Then the participants introduce themselves and their relationship to the children. The social worker presents her concerns, the family's hopes and wishes and their strengths of the family. The family agrees with the presented information about the concerns, namely the supervision and medical needs of the children. Also they agree on Marina's strengths and her dreams especially in pursuing her children's interest in music and dance. The social worker then provides further information about the community resources such as medical social services and childcare arrangement for the children. It seems that the information is clearly understood by everybody, as there is no demand for further clarification.

Marina and her friends show a little anxiety in regard to the developing of a plan without the professionals. The coordinator emphasises and reminds them on the community resources that they could tap on and coordinate it with their own plans. She assures that the professionals are readily helping them if they need clarifications so that the family group now symbolise confidence to make plans for the children. The professionals leave the room to let the family be in private family time.

After 20 minutes the coordinator checks on the developments of the plan. The atmosphere inside the room is relaxed. The family discusses and everyone appears to be contributing in making the plan. Since no re-focussing or clarifications are needed the coordinator goes out again.

After an hour, the family group calls the professionals to return for the last stage. A friend presents the created plan which is appreciated by all the attendees. The professionals ask questions and the plan gets more detailed in regard of time frame, persons involved and monitoring.

The plan consists of four parts, which consider the following settings.

1. Care Plan while Marina is not working

1.1 When the children are well

1.2 When the children are not well

2. Care Plan while Marina is working

2.1 When the children are well

2.2 When the children are not well

3. Care Plan during hospital appointments

4. Plan for Marina's self-care

In all settings the children will attend child care. For the rest of the day Marina will take care of them on her own. If for any reason Marina is unable to care for them or needs support her friends will step in. It defines that if none of her friends is available, Marina will arrange a babysitter.

In regard to Marina's self-care the plan offers some spare-time for her personal development and recreation. Therefore her friends will supervise the children and take Marina out. The safe kids worker will be assisting on the return of Marina's mother to the family and facilitating family strengthening activities if needed.

This plan will be reviewed in 3 month time.

Feedback

Before ending the coordinator asks for feedback from each participant. The resonance is positive. Marina expresses how grateful she is to her friends. They state they felt a deep sense of relief and achievement saying that at last the Family Group Conference is successfully convened. One of the friends shares that she indeed felt very tense at the beginning of the conference. She did not know what to expect. Another family member was surprised that the professionals were not allowed to make decision for the family.

Marina appears empowered as a mother and as an individual. She comments "I have my own plans but never thought my friends could offer help for me. It is also good to write it down so it is clear and I know what to do."

The referrer shares that she now feels confident that the young persons for whom the conference was convened would be well cared for since there was enough support of

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friends. More importantly, she shares that she feels that the worries and concerns were eliminated.

However the coordinator feels that the plan could have been better if more social network was involved and other professionals were present.

Outcomes

One month after the FGC the mother appears grateful because the family's plan was working accordingly. She is not working yet at this time and her children start going to the childcare. With regards to supervision, her children are always with adults in the house. During weekends, she continues to spend time with her children and when her friends come and visit, they go out and bring the children to have fun.

Analysis

The Family Group Conference was facilitated with respect to Child protection to find solutions to eliminate the mother's overstraining and to ensure the children's wellbeing.

The mother showed a great will to live independently and appeared very responsible for her children. As a consequence she also took charge in creating a suitable surrounding for her family which shows the ownership of the family. Another important component of the FGC was the successful involvement of the mother's friends who are the life world supporters. This indicated impressively the importance to widen the definition of "family" as is characteristic for the method of Family Group Conferencing.

Nevertheless the friend's support offers are limited so that a greater family involvement would have been helpful. It is part of the coordinator's role to work intensively on finding the right and necessary support persons within the family. An involvement of the children's father's point of view (who remains in prison) for example could have been helpful, so could the grandfather's or Marina's cousins involvement. To deal with these issues within the FGC process may have made a re-activating of the relationships possible and would be a more sustainable help.

The plan appears like a back-up plan since, in all variants; Marina basically takes care for the children on her own. Most of the plan details come into action only if she feels overstrained again. Although it provides guaranteed help, this could be

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disempowering for the mother because she only receives help when she fails. Though this format of plan supports the mother's will to live independently a more constant and preventive plan may have been more empowering and effective.

In terms of Marina's self-development the plan already has such design and offers some spare-time for her. The same applies to the children attending child care which is a major professional support.

Regarding the concerns it is remarkable that the housing conditions were not addressed. In consideration that five people share a 2-room flat, which seems to complicate an appropriate cohabit, the referrer should have highlighted this issue to be discussed within the FGC.

Nevertheless this FGC broadens the support for the young mother and ensures the children's wellbeing by mobilising the mother's friends. Further defining can be dealt with within the booked review meeting.

VII. An accident with consequences

The 16 year-old Laila accidentally hurt another woman physically, which lead into court proceedings. The Family Group Conference is called to provide her with supervision and support from her family to show that she is to advocate rather for home probation than for being placed in an institution for young offenders. The process brings in new information, but the decision is not exactly what the family planned.

What led to the Family Group Conference?

Laila (16 years old) and her two sisters (18 and 8 years old) are living with their father. Since the parent's divorce, he is the sole breadwinner and the care-giver for the girls. The children's mother lives in Malaysia and stays in touch with the family via mobile phone and occasional visits.

The family does not use their house fully alone, but rent out a room to two female tenants.

When Laila and her elder sister had an argument, Laila threw a cosmetic set in the direction of her older sister. In doing so the cosmetic set hit one of the tenants. Both sisters view this as an accident and Laila regrets her action. She immediately apologised to the tenant and also wrote a letter of apology to her. However the tenants moved out and reported this incident to the police and Laila has been charged for causing hurt by an act which endangers personal safety. She is to attend court one month after the accident happened. The District Judge has called for a probation report.

A FGC is referred by the involved case worker to a coordinator to provide Laila a safe, structured and supervised environment so that she would be placed on probation, rather than in an institution and has the chance to put things right with the victim. Because of the court hearing the FGC is to be facilitated as soon as possible.

Preparing Laila and her father

The coordinator meets with Laila and her father, Mr. Chand. He informs them about the reason for the referral and the FGC process. They agree to it and Mr. Chand proposes to hold the FGC after Deepavali, the festival celebrated by Hindus. He also

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wants it to be held on late evenings as he would be working in the morning. Laila names her mother, her maternal aunt and her maternal grandmother as those whom she wants to invite. Mr. Chand agrees the named participants and does not add anyone. He has no contact with his side of the family. The coordinator leaves the family in telling them that he will contact them again once he has spoken to the mentioned family members.

Who will be there for Laila?

The coordinator speaks to the maternal aunt and maternal grandmother via telephone. Both of the family members state that they are concerned about Laila and that they would like to be involved in the FGC. The coordinator suggests to the aunt that maybe Laila could stay with her. They ask the coordinator to call back them back so that they have some time to consider. When the coordinator calls back a few days later, the grandmother is supportive. She agrees to talk to the maternal aunt about the FGC further and has no one else to invite for the meeting. She declines to seek assistance from her network support, citing strained relationships as a reason.

When the coordinator calls the maternal aunt to ask her for her ability, she said that she is not keen to attend as she feels that it is the responsibility of Laila's mother to care for her. Another reason was that her husband would not allow her to attend the FGC. She tells the coordinator not to call her again.

The coordinator gets back to Laila's father and grandmother to inform them about the non-involvement and to set a date for the FGC.

The coordinator calls Laila's mother to inform her and invite her for the FGC. The mother says that she was unable to attend the FGC as she was in Malaysia with her boyfriend. Further she was not sure about her entry into Singapore. Therefore, she requests to proceed with the FGC without her presence. The coordinator asks her if there is anything she would like to say. Laila's mother states that she loves her daughter and does not want her to be placed in an institution. She also promises taking the effort to come back to Singapore in the near future and care for Laila.

Professional involvement

Despite the family members, the coordinator also contacts the professionals who are involved with Laila and her family. Therefore he speaks to the education officer of the school where Laila is studying. Also he gets in touch with the professional from the programme where Laila receives counselling as well as with the probation officer. The coordinator explains the FGC process and informs them about the date, the venue and the time to have the FGC. Also a translator is employed because the FGC will be held in Tamil. Though the participants also understand English, they prefer their first language.

After the coordinator found a date that was suitable for the participants, the father calls to rearrange for another date since he has an important meeting on the planned date. They agree on another date and the coordinator calls everyone to check and agree on the date.

What happened at the Family Group Conference?

On the day of the FGC all the planned participants attend. The lifeworld does contain of Laila, her father and the maternal grandmother, while on side of the professionals the referrer, a translator, Laila's education officer and the probation officer are present. Before the FGC starts the coordinator tries to make family members feel comfortable by chatting with them in their native language Tamil. The family brought food and the coordinator values their culinary skills. By the time, the FGC started, the family seems to feel comfortable.

The information giving starts with the coordinator explaining the purpose of the FGC and thanking them for their presence. He emphasises with the family and the professionals that this is not a blaming session but an opportunity for the family to come together and make a plan for Laila to be in a safe, supervised and structured environment, whereby the professionals will raise their concerns and provide support whenever possible.

The family and the professionals then introduce themselves. After that, Laila apologises for her actions and mentions that she has written a letter of apology to the

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tenant. She also mentions that she would like to be with her family and enrol in a hair dressing course.

Afterwards the other family members agree that they do not want Laila to be placed in an institution either; they wish to rather care for her. The father is putting up a brave front but though he seems very worried to be separated from his daughter. The maternal grandmother says out loud and clear that she loves her granddaughter and wants her to be within the family. Both adults share their difficulty that they work full-time but then would do whatever possible to provide the care for Laila. During the time when her family members share their views, Laila keeps her head down and seems embarrassed.

After the family members shared, the professionals now share their views. The probation officer says that she is concerned about the lack of supervision and structured environment at home. She also mentions that Laila might be placed under probation, Girl's Hostel (for young offenders to give them guidance and offer rehabilitation) or Girl's Home. And of the three options, Girl's Home would be the harshest. The education officer says that Laila was a capable person who would do well if she continues her studies. He also shares that she does not mix with bad company but rather keep to her-self and listens to the teachers. The probation officer seems surprised about Laila not mixing with bad company. The information sharing is crucial as it helps the family to see the situation and possible consequences. After the information sharing, the family was given private family time.

After their private time, the family members call the professionals back in for the agreeing the plan – stage. When Laila presents the plan, she and her father disagree over her hair dressing course as he wants her to study in a mainstream school. The grandmother took charge in pacifying both of them and advises Mr. Chand to allow Laila to do what she wants. Other than that, the family members and the professionals agree upon the whole plan:

The family has appealed that Laila be placed on probation as they believe that they are able to provide her with a safe, supervised and structured environment.

To put things right she wrote a letter of apology to the victim.

- Laila will ask permission from her father if she wants to go out and will keep

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him informed of where she is going to.

- Laila will enrol in a hair dressing course
- Laila will work on a part-time basis at schools, packing and selling uniforms, till the end of December 2010. She would work twice a week, Monday and Wednesday, from 9 am to 3 pm.
- Laila will do volunteer work which is sorting out donation-in-kind
- Laila will contact her father or the social worker through their mobile phones when there is a likelihood of argument with her sister. They will mediate over the mobile phone. If it is not resolved, then they would go to the place of residence immediately to mediate between them.
- Laila will meet her social worker once a week to update and share her progress.
- Laila's father will seek support from the Community Welfare Worker and the social worker in regard to his children's behavioural issues. He will share and discuss with them and the maternal grandmother to regards of way to manage his children.
- Laila's maternal grandmother has agreed to call home, 2 to 3 times daily, which she has been doing previously, so as to talk to Ms Laila, provide support and guidance to her grandchildren.

After the FGC, the family members take time for eating and talking with each other. There is no tension in the air and the family seems hopeful and happy.

The conference will be reviewed after 6 month or before that if things are not working well, to consider how to proceed further.

Outcome

The probation officer recommends her to be placed in a Girl's Hostel that is for guidance and rehabilitation of "chronic offenders" aged 7 – 16 years. The District Judge accepts the suggestion and Laila is placed for a period of 12 months, followed by a 3 months home probation. During her stay, she would be able to leave the premises for valid reasons such as studies or work but she is subjected to a curfew. During the weekends, she is able to come home.

Analysis

The FGC was conducted to enable the family to come up with a plan by which they will provide Laila with a safe, supervised and structured environment. The purpose was to convince the probation officer to recommend Laila not to be placed in an institution.

Only three family members attended the FGC which limited the support offers. In preparing the aunt the coordinator suggested the solution of that she may care for Laila. Later on the aunt explained that she is not ready to take this responsibility and due to this would not attend the FGC. A more open question without suggesting solution might have engaged her to attend, because ideas and emotional support could have also helped the situation instead of providing the one solution based the coordinator imagination on how to solve the problem.

Further it could have been helpful to include people who were not able to attend (Laila's mother, Laila's sister who was involved in the accident) appropriate, e.g. via telephone or letter to hear their input and ideas. Also it might have been useful to consult with the victim to hear what she expect Laila to do to put things right which could have also convinced the probation officer or the judge further.

However the family was able to create a plan for Laila to supervise and guide her.

In the end the family's wish to put Laila under probation and care for her on their own was not granted. Though the appraisal of professionals and family may have prevented her from being placed in a Girl's Home, which would have been a harder sanction.

It seems that the requirement of what needs to be done to achieve the probation was unclear for the referrer, the coordinator and in the end for the family as well.

Preparing the probation officer towards setting explicit minimum requirements could have helped the family to create a more convincing plan. Moreover in the agreeing the plan stage, the plan made by the family was not modified further to make further agreements to achieve a better supervision and structure. Maybe in the discussion with the professionals, especially with the probation officer, necessary changes or additional decisions could have bring the family forward in creating a plan that was acceptable to place Laila under probation.

VIII. Help for a young man being in remand

A Family Group Conference is convened to create a supervision and care plan for a young man of low intelligence who is on trail. The conference takes place without the young man and the professionals, but the family group finds a solution for him that may be mitigating and a way to keep him out of trouble.

What leads to the Family Group Conference?

Marty is 22 years old and lives together with his elderly parents. Both parents are chronically ill and unable to secure a full-time job. Marty has been charged in court for four counts of loan shark harassments and one count of giving false statement to the police. His lawyer assumes that Marty may be of low intelligence, thus he could be taken advantage by others to commit crimes on their behalf and get away scot-free while he has to bear the full consequences. Therefore the lawyer soaked for assistance at Beyond Social Services and a case worker for Marty was deployed.

Marty's case worker put great effort in understanding the case and how she could work together with the lawyer to help and advocated on Marty's behalf. The case worker arranged a job and spare-time activities to help Marty to stay out of trouble and a psychological test to assess and determine his intelligence level. The test result attested the suspicion of low intelligence and may be used as a mitigating factor for the lawyer to advocate for Marty to remain in the community to receive help and treatment rather than being sent to an institution.

After the police men have finished their investigation and after several court hearings, Marty is being placed in remand for three weeks at Prison. The judge has called for a probation report to be submitted to the court for consideration before passing a sentence. A probation officer has been assigned to interview the family members and different stakeholders to gather information and assess if Marty is suitable to be placed under probation. Marty's court trial is held at the court for civil and criminal matters, instead of the Juvenile or Family Court, thus his chance of being sent to Prison is high. So the case worker requested for a Family Group Conference to be convened to formulate a care and supervision plan that may be included in the probation officer's report to address it to the judge before passing sentence for Marty's.

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The case is referred to a coordinator who is asked to facilitate the FGC as soon as possible, as the court hearing takes place two weeks later.

Contact with the family

The coordinator, immediately contacts Marty's father via telephone, introduces himself and shares with him the purpose of the phone call. During the telephone-conversation, the father is worried that Marty will be sent to Prison for his offence and asks for help to try to prevent it. The coordinator sets an appointment to meet up with the family the following day to share with them about Family Group Conferencing and how they can be involved in helping to advocate for Marty to be given the opportunity to stay in the community to receive treatment and help.

Giving Marty another chance? A successful dealing with doubts

Marty's parents and his cousin (Ellen) who lives two units away are present. The coordinator shares with them what a Family Group Conference is, who they would like to invite, when and where they would like to hold the conference. Both parents are old and sickly, thus the parents had a hard time managing Marty: Ellen plays the disciplinarian role in Marty's life. The parents and Ellen are feeling helpless and frustrated about the situation as they are in a dilemma over whether to help Marty or not because this is not the first time that he has offended and the family had tried formulating their own care and supervision plans to help Marty but it was unsuccessful. They have doubts if the Family Group Conference plan will succeed since Marty cannot be around for the conference himself as he is in remand at Prison.

The coordinator tries to find out more about their previous family plans, explores and discusses with the family about the possible reasons why prior plans did not succeed. The coordinator also explains to them what a Family Group Conference is. Plans are formulated by the family which can and will be supported by professional partners. The family agrees to have the conference and promise that they will try to invite other relatives and family friends to attend the conference.

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At the home visit, the coordinator is given the chance to speak to Marty's eldest uncle via telephone to introduce, share and invite him for the conference. He agrees to attend the conference and will try to support Marty in whatever ways he can.

Getting the probation officer on board

The coordinator contacts the probation officer to introduce and share with him the Family Group Conference process and invited him for the conference. He also shares with him that Marty is assessed to be of low intelligence and could be made use by others to commit offences. The probation officer is surprised to hear that and has not been informed yet by the court or through police documents. The probation officer agrees to include the Family Group Conference plan and educational psychologist report to the court for the judge's consideration before sentencing Marty's case, but is unable to attend the FGC.

Explaining and exploring

Also the coordinator gets in touch with Marty's former employer to share, introduce and invite them to attend the Family Group Conference. Also it is explored with them how they can contribute to the conference plan if they cannot make it for the conference. The employers shared that nobody kept them informed of the court outcome and Marty did not show up for work and they did not know that it was because he was locked up in remand at Prison. The coordinator explores with the employers if they could give Marty another chance but sadly they could not as they had already found a replacement and could not afford to employ another staff. The employers apologise for not being able to help and attend the conference as they had prior appointments.

The day of the Family Group Conference

As the family has no special request on how they wanted to start the Family Group Conference, it starts off by doing a round of self introduction and why people are at there. In the beginning there 5 family members, in the end there are 7 family members as some of them turn up unexpectedly (Marty's parents, 3 uncles, 1 aunt, cousin). In addition to these one of the uncles participates in the conference via telephone. Since Marty is placed in remand, he is not present for his FGC. The

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coordinator is the only professional since both, the PO and the case worker (short notice cancellation due to illness) are unable to attend.

The family members are eagerly willing to help Marty and speak of nice and positive memories they have experienced with him. Also the coordinator shares about his pleasant experience and about Marty's strengths and his willingness to learn new things and going the extra mile for others. Then the case worker's concern about the possibility of Marty being sent to Prison and how Marty may be kept meaningfully occupied in the community if he is given probation, is shared by the coordinator. The group fears that Marty may be taken advantage to commit crimes due to his low intelligence; that he may have difficulty finding a job in future due to his low intelligence and his criminal record if he is being send to jail. Moreover the family members are worried about the strained relationship between Marty and his parents. The family is sent to have their private family time with the task to create a safety plan for Marty in regard to supervision, support in finding a job and support that may keep him out of trouble on a sustainable perspective.

Before the family go into their private family time, the coordinator reminds the family to be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and define the time line by formulating their family's care and supervision plan for Marty.

The coordinator leaves the family's house and tells the participants to call him if they encounter any problem. They agree on a time when the coordinator shall come back for the next stage. He does not go back to check with the family if they are doing ok as they had previous experiences of formulating their own family plan and they appear to be confident of doing it on their own.

The coordinator returns to the flat at the agreed time for the agreeing the plan – stage. Ellen presents the plan that includes the following:

- Marty works in his uncle's car shop.
- Marty will attend church once in a fortnight.
- Marty will do outdoor activities or volunteer work together with his uncle or aunt once in a fortnight.

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- Every night Marty and his parents will have dinner together. He is not allowed to leave the house after 7 p.m.
- Marty and his parents will work on their relationship and Marty's development with help of the social worker and attend the Family Bonding Camp at Beyond Social Services.

The family wants to execute the plan after Marty is being sentenced but the coordinator suggests for the plan to be immediately executed once Marty is out on bail so that he can show to the court and probation officer that he is sincere in changing for the better, has a purpose in life and his family members are able to manage him in the community. The family is agreeable to the suggestion and will immediately implement the plan when Marty is out on bail.

The family has been undecided in where to send Marty to work as they had two places in mind: One is to work as a dishwasher at an uncle's shop while the other is to be an apprentice at another uncle's workshop. After much discussion about the pros and cons of both options, the family decides to arrange for Marty to work as an apprentice at the uncle's car workshop as he is able to pick up a skill and the working hours are more suitable for him. The Family Group Conference ends with everyone feeling satisfied with the agreed plan and family is feeling more motivated and confident to manage Marty's behaviour.

What are the outcomes of the Family Group Conference?

When the probation officer looks at the plan he feedbacks that it was a good plan and he was happy to see so many family members coming forward to show concern and willingness to help Marty and family. The probation officer will include the Family Group Conference plan in his probation report to be submitted to the court. Different family members will help to monitor different parts of the plan and Marty's father will update the coordinator on every last Friday of the month on the progress of the plan. As this is a six months plan, the outcomes have not been reviewed yet. Thus far, after Marty has been out on bail for the last two weeks, he has been following the plan and father has feedback that he is doing well and has no problem managing him.

Analysis

The Family Group Conference was convened within a youth justice context. Its goal was to create a supervision plan for Marty to keep him meaningfully occupied should he be given home probation. The plan shall be made part of the probation officer's report.

Since Marty's criminal offence he has experienced great support on side of the professionals (e.g. the committed lawyer, the helping social worker) and on side of his family. The commitment and positive attitude was also characteristic for the process of the FGC, which was valued by all the participants to be a good chance for Marty. Also the coordinator put great effort in preparing and facilitating the meeting. Thereby he successfully dealt with the family's doubts about creating a plan when former plans did not work out. The independent and organisational role of the coordinator could have made a difference as he initiated a dialogue between the system and the lifeworld. For example he tried to mobilise resources, such as the former employee, and included the input of people who were not able to attend physically. This enabled the family to create a plan without Marty or the social worker and the probation officer being present. Nevertheless the reason for not involving Marty's point of view is unclear. As he is to realise the plan made by his family, it would have been helpful to ask him for his opinion and agreement. Working with him on potential participants may have made accessible more resources, such as friends.

Given the feeling of being taken seriously, Marty's family also demonstrated a very engaged and supportive attitude. They were willing to give Marty another chance and in finding a job for him, made a resource available that would have been hard to be managed by the professional system due to his low intelligence diagnosis and his criminal record. The plan aims to stabilise Marty in the community by offering possibilities for spare time-activities, a job and working on bonding the family structure. Surely this plan is not a magic one, which will change Marty's behaviour immediately. However it is to be acknowledged as a step in the right direction as a small sense of achievement may empower Marty further to work on his weakening.

The plan was included in the probations officer's report and after Marty has been out on bail for the last two weeks, he has been following the plan. Probably the family

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knows Marty well enough to create a plan that Marty feels comfortable with. The plan also may be modified and matched with his wishes in the booked review meeting.

IX. A Family Group Conference to deal with multiple issues

A family with multiple issues – financial, employment, family functioning, rejection and isolation from family members – convenes a Family Group Conference to gain more lifeworld support. The coordinator puts great effort in the Family Group Conference, but the problem solving focus undermines developing a supportive community.

What led to the Family Group Conference?

The family is already known by the social service and comes across with some welfare experiences. The initial referral is made to Beyond Social Services for social intervention in early 2010. The concern is that the safety and well-being of the three children (7, 5 and 1 year old) at home is being compromised. The discipline methods towards the children are said to be harsh and mental issues of the mother, Mdm. Olivia (32 years), are raised. Her husband, Mr. Stewart (33 years), has a history of drug use. After meeting the family the case was closed by the case worker. Later in 2010 the referral re-surfaced. The case worker referred the family to the FGC-coordinator. The referral labelled multiple issues:

- Financial difficulties and an unstable employment of the husband
- Family functioning and emotional distress
- Disconnection from extended family members

The coordinator comes into play

The coordinator calls the family to introduce himself and to make an appointment for a preparation meeting. He tries to create a convenient atmosphere by coming together at the family's home environment. In the following two meetings the coordinator explains his facilitating role towards the meeting to prevent the family to recognise him as a case worker. He validates individual strengths and their important roles within the family to change their perception about their family. Further he highlights to the family members that everything that they will talk about will be kept confidential and talks about the issues and concerns raised by the referrer with the family members. He discovers their reaction towards the issues and concerns.

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Mr. Stewart is the sole breadwinner in the family. He works as a cleaner at a shopping mall and gets hourly payment. He can hardly put a meal on his family's table. The family has had financial difficulty for many years. Mr. Stewart expresses that he would like to get a full-time employment and earn a better income to support his family. Mrs. Olivia said that she would like to work as well when her youngest child enters childcare. They acknowledged that they are stressed and worried about their employment and money.

The family disagrees about the concern regarding to their ability to ensure the safety and well-being of their children, even though Mdm. Olivia agrees to the facts that there were concerns towards her method of discipline on her children. But they state that the concern is exaggerated and that no child-imperilling incident has happened. However, she says that she never meant to harm her children.

Another significant issue is that the family is quite isolated from the extended family, they are also emphasising that they feel dejected because of this situation. Mr. Stewart voices out his frustration that his relatives look down on him and his family to the extent that left them depend solely on community charity which provides food rations.

Why have a Family Group Conference and who to attend?

The coordinator explains that a FGC could be a good opportunity to reconnect back to their relatives. The aim of the conference is to garner support from the extended family members and friends to support Mdm. Olivia and Mr. Stewart in their financial difficulty and care for their children.

He explains the process of the family meeting in detail. By using simple English for explaining the process he aims to make it understandable for the parents. The coordinator also highlights the three parts of the Family Group Conference: the information giving, the private family time and the agreeing the plan.

After explaining the process of the FGC, he asks the clients about who they would like to invite to the meeting. Promptly they identify some friends and relatives whom they have not contacted for a long time.

Further the coordinator asks for drawing a family genogram together, because there seem to be many relatives existing, without regular contact persisting. Mdm. Olivia comes from a big family but she did not grow up with her biological mother. Her

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godmother looked after her since she was young. Even though, she has got many siblings, she does not have regular contact with them either. Mr. Stewart on the other hand comes from a small family. He has only one brother whom he does not have contact, but he is close to his father. Besides their extended family members, the family identifies several close friends around the neighbourhood. They sense their friends as very supportive and helpful since they all come from similar social background. All in all a list of thirteen potential participants is being developed. The coordinator obtains the phone details of support network people and contacts.

Let's get practical (When, Where, catering, etc.)

Then, he discusses possible dates and times to convene the meeting. After a long discussion, they come to a conclusion that the only suitable day and time is on Saturday afternoon, because of Mr. Stewart's working schedule.

Having agreed on the day and time, they make an appointment about the venue where the FGC would be held. The family is given options such as their home, community centre, and the Beyond Social Services premises, they choose the last one.

The coordinator is talking about food and drinks for the FGC. Because the family could not afford to spend this on their own, they come to an agreement: Mdm. Olivia would like to prepare a dinner for the participants while the coordinator comes out with the budget. Since Mdm. Olivia would be free the whole Saturday, she would go earlier and prepare the meal. She is quite happy that she would be making a dinner for her friends and relatives.

Contacting the network

After meeting the family, he contacts the extended family members as agreed. The coordinator manages to call and to meet the relatives one by one and explains what a FGC is and why it will be convened.

During this he encounters much resistance from the relatives. They respond that they were busy with their own problems and work. Others say they have to look after their children. He really needs to convince every individual that they are important for Mr. Stewart/ Mdm. Olivia and his/her family. However, he manages to persuade the most

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significant people whom Mr. Stewart and his wife identified to attend the meeting. Even though the relatives voiced out their reluctance towards getting involved in the problems and try to help.

Engaging the friends and neighbours to come to the family meeting is easier. There are friends who are willing to come, but there are also some who are not able to attend.

Two friends of Mdm. Olivia declare to help her with the food preparation. Moreover there will be many children present at the meeting. Therefore the coordinator arranges a movie to be screened just outside the meeting room.

The family group request for assistance with transportation as they do not have the extra money for travelling to the venue. The coordinator has to arrange for the transportation to pick up the family and send them after the conference. Everything is made easy for the family in order to encourage them come to the Family Group Conference.

At last the coordinator sends out invitations, including a map, to everybody.

Contacting the Professionals

It is another difficulty to convince the professionals involved. The officer from the Family Service Centre is quite supportive, but is unable to be present at the meeting because it would be held on a Saturday. Even though he is not able to attend, he provides information alternatively on how he had supported the family. One of the case workers will attend the FGC.

The Family Group Conference

Mr. Stewart and Mdm. Olivia feel joy in their friends who turn up for the meeting. Mdm. Olivia shares that she is grateful for the opportunity to bring her family and friends together and that she did not have this opportunity to do something for her family for quite a long time.

There are a few relatives who do not turn up. Mr. Stewart's father called a day before the FGC that he could not make it. Mdm. Olivia's sister calls a few hours before the

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meeting to say that her children are not well and that she would not be present at the meeting.

In despite of the call offs there are 12 adults of the lifeworld present and just as much children:

- Mdm. Olivia, her godmother, her stepbrother, her sister, her two cousins and four of her friends, and;
- Mr. Stewart and a friend from his working place.

Also professionals are attending:

- The case worker, the coordinator and two observers of the coordinator course.

The atmosphere is very active because of the many children, some are watching the movie and some are keeping their parents busy. The chairs are arranged in a horse shoe shape. Some of the family members are late but the coordinator and family decide not to wait for them. The meeting begins.

Information giving

After the round of introductions, the case worker presents the concerns and issues as well as the strengths of the family (e.g. Mr. Stewart is working, Children are active and keen for learning) and the dreams (e.g. Mr. Stewart wants a stable job and higher income, Mdm. Olivia wants to work also, To have a happy family).

The case worker also explains in detail the professional resources available for the family, e.g. for employment, the family can contact the Community Development Councils (CDC), and for early childhood education, the Family Service Centre can continue helping the parents in food supplies, electricity bills and children's tuition. So the family is well informed about the matters addressing the financial.

There is time for the family to ask questions or for clarification and everyone comes to a consensus about the concerns. The coordinator proceeds to explain the next stage of the meeting, the private family time. Mdm. Olivia stepbrother assigns himself to write down whatever they will agree on. The coordinator also points out that they could take as much time as they need and that he is waiting outside the meeting room. If there were any questions, they could call. The professionals leave the room and the private family time begins.

Private Family Time

After 30 minutes, the coordinator walks into the room to observe what is going on and to provide further refreshments. He notices that the stepbrother takes charge of the meeting. The godmother is blaming Mr. Stewart for all the things that happened. Mr. Stewart is being victimised during the private family time. The coordinator intervenes and stops the blaming game. He takes the opportunity to explain that it is time to discuss the issues and to come out with plans. They resume the discussion after a quiet moment. The coordinator tells them that he would leave the room again and that they can call him when they are finished with the discussion. After 20 minutes, Mr. Stewart comes out to call the coordinator.

Agreeing the plan

The family does not come up with concrete plans. The formulated plans are rather ambiguous. After negotiating the plan was more actionable, for example:

- Mr. Stewart has to find a permanent job. He will seek support from CDC regarding to employment.
- After Mr. Stewart has settled with the new job, he will also go for skill upgrading in IT course with CDC support.
- In addition to getting a new job, Mr. Stewart will find a part time job during weekends.
- Mdm. Olivia will look after her youngest son at home on daily basis until he is 18 months old. Her friends will support her with that. By March 2011 Mdm. Olivia will decide whether she will enrol her youngest son to childcare.
- Mdm. Olivia will work from home by cooking (e.g. Kuey, Nasi Lamak) and deliver to her friend's food stalls.
- The stepbrother will monitor the plan every 3 months and will stay in contact with Mr. Stewart. He will also report to the coordinator after three months.

During this stage the coordinator tries to engage the relatives and friends to support, in vain. Mr. Stewart relies solely on the Community Development Councils for work support and financial support. The coordinator feels that the family and friends seem to have pinpointed the issue was solely the husband's accountability, if he gets a

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better job all their problems would be rectified. Only Mdm. Olivia gets some support in caring for the children and is valued in her cooking skills.

The coordinator aims to redirect the family's real issue (family functioning, lifeworld support) since they are only concentrated on their financial difficulties. He struggles and tries to give the family more time for further discussion to be able to come up with a plan that would benefit the children. Nonetheless, the family was not open with the idea of further discussion and the family plan has been made already.

After the meeting the family and friends have dinner together, the tension lightens a little. They are chatting and looking happy except for the husband. It seems that he feels the load of making the family better is his burden to take.

Analysis

The Family Group Conference is held within a child welfare context. The family referral labelled multiple issues: financial difficulties and an unstable employment of the husband, family functioning and emotional distress, disconnection from extended family members. Based on the formulated plans, one could tell that the FGC did not achieve the desired outcomes, but was it realistic to expect that this meeting is capable of solving the long lasting multiple issues of the family?

Indeed, the coordinator puts a high effort in convening this FGC. He really concentrates on arranging a meeting format the family appreciates (e.g. the meal the mother prepared or gathering the network at all). In contacting the relatives he had a hard job convincing them to come, even if some cancelled in the last minute. This effort made the FGC possible in the end.

But the resistance he experienced in the preparation continued in the meeting. The relatives were unwilling to support in financial issues and the friends were unable to. The plan mainly does not include what support could be given beyond supporting in financial issues. Maybe it was a lack of keeping focused on the multiple concerns and the goal of the FGC clearly. It seems that the family almost worked on the most manifest concern. The outcome is that the hard working breadwinner of the family is being victimised and not valued in his everyday work, rather he is pressured and does not come up with more support as he had before the FGC.

On the other hand it became apparent that there is a strong bond within the network, especially regarding the friends. That is shown in the family voicing out that they are

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very happy having everybody being present together. This refers to a high emotional support which the plan does not reflect; the problem solving aspect towards the financial concern is predominant.

The FGC shows that focusing on social networks and involving those does not inevitably mean that they can solve everything right away. But the existing bonds within the network could have been strengthened further in using the meeting to focus on what the relations mean to everybody and work out a prospect of what they want to be. It is curious that the people present had this community experience after the FGC when they had a meal together and not in the meeting itself.

The coordinator's describes himself as relieved after conducting the meeting. It seems that the difficulties and resistance in the preparation exhausted him and that he adopted the despair procured by the relatives and he got frustrated. Without fail this attitude is to be passed on the family and the meeting as well. Highlighting the social values in this network and not to stuck in the awkward financial situation of the family maybe could have created another outcome (for example this is shown in the mother's support supplied by their friends). An outcome that also will not solve all problems, but one the family is supported further.

X. A new beginning

A Family Group Conference is called to discuss the future care arrangement for four children whose mother is coming out of jail. By involving family- and professional resources the plan fulfils a desire and offers the way for a new beginning.

A family discussion for the children's future

The case is referred by two social workers from Beyond Social Service who are involved with the family for about two years. The immediate family comprises Mdm. Sarah and her four school-going children. Her third and current husband is serving time in prison (Figure 7 – Genogram Mdm. Sarah, p. 104). Since the children's mother has been in prison too, due to drug abuse, the children were accommodated with their maternal grandaunt Mdm. Sharon. The grandaunt expressed difficulties in managing this financially. Now that the mother is released from prison soon the FGC is considered as a platform to discuss the future care arrangement for the children.

The referrers appraise the mother to have support from her family so that she could assume care of her children and provide for them to the best of her ability. They also highlight that the children had expressed to their maternal auntie that they do not want to continue staying with their current caregivers, and would like to stay with their mother when she is released from prison.

The referral is allocated to a FGC coordinator. Within the case allocation the professionals speak about the main family members that were points of contact.

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The coordinator then starts contacting the named potential participants – the children’s grandaunts and granduncles. One of them rebukes the coordinator to his sister who is the current caregiver of the children, Mdm. Sharon. Mdm. Sharon would then contact everybody and share the information. They neglect a separate meeting with the coordinator. So the coordinator contacts Mdm. Sharon. In this meeting Mdm. Sharon expresses that she does not want the children to be in touch with their mother because she fears it would not be safe. The relationship between Mdm. Sharon and Mdm. Sarah appears to be strained. However in regard to the family’s future she wants to be part of the FGC. She also names her siblings as potential participants and wishes to get them to attend on her own.

Involving the children’s perspective

The coordinator also conducts a meeting with the children. They are getting on well with their grandaunt but state that in future they want to be placed with their mother. In respect of potential participants none of them names any significant persons from their school or their student care centres as sources of support.

Professional support

The dialogue with the family members is suggestive of that currently there is more professional support than natural support. Beyond Social Services has been a great support to the Mdm. Sarah, her children and Mdm. Sharon in terms of care giving arrangements, the children’s education and financial needs. The family values the support they are receiving from the professionals.

The day of the Family Group Conference - A meaningful reunion

The Family Group Conference is convened in the house of Mdm. Sharon.

The coordinator is surprised by the large group of family, because a lot more people attend than she had known of. They were invited by the Mdm. Sharon but their presence has not been discussed with the coordinator. The group of extended family member span over three generations. All in all 16 adult family members, 10 children

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and teenagers (Figure 7 – Genogram Mdm. Sarah, p.104) and 4 professionals attend the FGC (current caseworker; supporting case worker; future caseworker and coordinator). For organisational reasons the coordinator decides to arrange the chairs in an inner and out-side circle whereat the inner one is for the people she indicates as most important, like the mother and their children.

The atmosphere is very warm and emotional especially when Mdm. Sarah walks in with her children, it is heartening to see her being embraced by her uncles and aunties after her 1-year of absence. It is a sight of Mdm. Sarah which the social workers have not seen before, and they too appreciate the moment.

The first stage starts by Mdm. Sharon taking charge and addressing the group by thanking everyone for coming for the FGC. Again this has not been planned and the coordinator feels surprised by the extent of the leadership role the grandaunt plays within the family. The coordinator values that there is a family member taking charge at this platform since this is the family's meeting. However, she feels that there is also a need to keep her in check as she does not want it to take over the main purpose of the conference. The coordinator decides to ask the grandaunt respectfully what else she plans to do and how much time she does needs. After clarifying, the grandaunt proceeds to share a slideshow of pictures of the children which she had taken for the past year. She also hands out achievement awards to the three children for being successful in various activities in school. This is received well by the family and it reflects the children being affirmed and appreciated.

Afterwards the coordinator explains to the group the purpose of the FGC, the basic rules of listening to one another, and that they can take a timeout when they need to, and reiterating that this is not a blaming session. Also the three stages of the FGC – the information giving, private family time, and the agreeing the plan stage are defined. She then invites the group to introduce themselves and say their names and how they are related to the Mdm. Sarah and her children.

After the introduction the social workers share a brief history of what had happened a year ago when Mdm. Sarah was arrested, and how the family had come together to give their support which prevented the children from going into state care. The social workers also share that Mdm. Sarah is sincere and willing to change and would need

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the support of the family to succeed. The social workers then share the 3 houses, including – the worries and concerns (e.g. Mdm. Sarah's substance dependency; the care of children to have food and clothes), the strengths (e.g. children are respectful of adults, Mdm. Lenny is verse in speaking English), and the hopes and dreams of the family (Mdm. Sarah wishes to live with her children, Mdm. Sharon and Mdm. Addi wish Mdm. Sarah to be a responsible mother), to which the family does not add much.

After the coordinator clarified queries the professionals now leave the room to let the family have their private family time to create their plan.

After an hour the family calls the professionals back in for the last stage of the FGC. Again Mdm. Sharon represents the family group in introducing the plan and explains that Mdm. Sarah had shared with them during the family time.

The family's plan consist of two pieces of which one reflects on the mother's *responsibilities, mentality, religion, vision* and her *upgrade*. The second part is about the four children in regard to *love, family, food and clothes, school and education, care and support, finances* and their *home*. The family group and the professionals clarified and concretised the plan made by the family members.

In the end the agreed plan includes the following main points:

1. Physical Care Arrangements of children

All 4 children will go back to Mdm. Sarah, who is the main care giver. The family resides at Mdm. Abbi's house until they have a new flat.

2. Education of the children

Mdm. Sarah is responsible for any educational needs, such as the arrangement of school transfer.

3. Love for children

The family group agreed that the children need to be showered with love from the caregivers and the extended family members. The whole family will conduct family events on a monthly basis.

4. Financial situation

The family group is encouraging Mdm. Sarah to find stable employment and to learn budgeting. Beyond Social Services will also continue the School Pocket Money Fund assistance for the children.

5. Mdm. Sarah's plans for herself and the Recovering from Addiction Workshop

Mdm. Sarah wants to start a new life, to be a new Sarah, and to be a good and responsible mother to her children. She will attend a recovering from addiction-workshop at Beyond Social Services.

6. Religious and silat classes

Children will enrol in religious classes and continue attending their silat classes.

In regard to monitoring and review it was agreed that the grandaunt calls the mother once in a while to check on how she is doing. Moreover the support through the social workers will continue. The coordinator will call the social workers once a month for the next three months. If things are going well, this Care Plan need not be reviewed, and a further conference will not be necessary.

One of the family members closes the Family Group Conference with a prayer and then the much awaited meal is enjoyed.

Feedback

Some of the extended family members express disappointment and sadness towards Mdm. Sarah because they hoped that she would not take the children to live with her since they were unsure whether it was safe enough. The professionals acknowledge that that there were family members of whom some did not play a part during the conference. Moreover they state that Mdm. Sharon was leading the group and fear that the plans might not be something which Mdm. Sarah wants. The feedback from Mdm. Sarah was that there were people there whom she did not know. She felt overstrained to have the FGC immediately after her release from prison and felt that it should have been done later.

What has been achieved yet?

Two month after the FGC the coordinator calls the referrer for an update. The children have returned to their mother's care, and both mother and children reside with Mdm. Abbi. Following that, Mdm. Sarah attends the recovery from addiction

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workshop and works as a cleaner. The Children are all still attending the same school as before the FGC, but they are on the waiting list at another primary school. The social worker is looking into placing children in a student care. The children also attend the extended family events as agreed.

Analysis

This Family Group Conference was convened in regard to Child protection. It dealt with the well-being of four siblings and the question of their future home. In connection to the mother's ability to care for her children the handling of her drug misuse was another relevant issue for the FGC.

The FGC was characterised by a large number of participants who symbolised that they care for the family. This way several resources were made available that helped creating a safe plan. Nevertheless the coordinator needs to ensure that everyone feels comfortable though there are family members with strained relationships. Therefore a more intensive preparation seems to be necessary. Moreover a professional explanation shall be offered to everyone prior to the FGC to make clear the expectations. Also in this period there must be room to talk about ideas how the family wish to shape the FGC creatively, so that these can be planned.

That the mother retrieved the responsibility for her children was achieved though some extended family members were concerned about this reunion. This indicates that the mother's and the children's will was heard and was supported.

Moreover the point of time to have the FGC appeared to be too early. The positive intention to prepare the family for the time after the release overstrained the mother directly after coming out of jail. It would be appropriate to discuss the options with her and to consult professional assessment before setting a date. Also a support person for the mother could have helped the mother handling the situation.

The organisation of a review meeting would have ensured a higher quality. It would have given the family the possibility to talk about how things were going and to have the chance to modify their plan if needed. The concerns that the participants

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mentioned past the FGC could have been addressed and dealt within the review. Moreover a review can congratulate and empower families for successfully realisation of plan details.

5.3 Case Analysis

Though each of the displayed case studies amounted to a unique Family Group Conference-process, they possess similarities. The following will conclude results, peculiarities and especially refer to areas in need of improvement.

Thus the case studies point out that the outcomes of Family Group Conferences are very much related to the family's knowledge of what their plan needs to address. In detail this means that as the decision-makers they must be informed about those so called non-negotiables or bottom lines clearly to be able to create a suitable solution. These state minimum requirements that the plan needs to achieve to be accepted by the professional(s) in charge¹⁷. In this context also the questions for the Family Group Conference proved to have a great impact. They should precise point out the main goal(s) of the conference. In our opinion best results can be achieved when the families as well as the coordinators are informed about plan requirements right from the start of the process. Following that the coordinator needs to fulfil his role in reviewing them with both parties in the early part of the preparation stage.

An important fact to mention hereby is that often the referrer, here the social workers of Beyond Social Services, are not in charge and do not decide whether the plan comes into action or not. Instead other governmental agencies that are in charge of making this decision are 'just' professional participants and not the 'real' purchasers. To avoid confusion this requires the coordinator to negotiate about the conference's purpose and conditions with all the involved parties.

During the whole process the coordinators were confronted with the great challenge of keeping the balance of 'only' organising a meeting as a coordinator and counselling families, in respect to their professional social work background. As a consequence it occurred that during organising the Family Group Conferences, coordinators drifted from their organising role to a mediating family affairs role. Social workers have an appreciation for identifying mandates family's give them and are trained to meet these and offer their skilled help. To change hands on the decision-making and consequently strengthen families in their competencies becomes a hard

¹⁷ The representative of an agency that is involved in the Family Group Conference and is thorough legislation or other regulations instructed to agree the plan. For example a probation officer who will compose a recommendation for the court or a child protection officer who has to decide whether the children are safe or not.

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business. It seems indispensable to be aware of this to be able to master the facilitating role.

An obstructive factor in regard to this was the close collaboration between the families'/youths' social worker and the FGC coordinator, as they referred among one another and supported each other in coordinating and partially counselling. A blur of the boundaries ensued that may cause confusion for participants.

The case studies show that in exploring social networks and engaging people to attend, many achievements could be made. Thereby the broad definition of "family" also boosted successful outcomes. Members of the lifeworld could be involved in the decision-making process and further supporting. The resources available were suitable and could make a meaningful difference to professional help. For this reason the inputs of important people necessarily should be brought in e.g. through letters, telephone or even videos.

A challenge in this regard turns out to be the short time frame of the preparation that was apparent in many cases. Even though the coordinators succeeded in convening the Family Group Conferences within a very short period of time and used the time effectively, lifeworld resources and preparation work were limited through these conditions. In consequence families had to relinquish on some potential participants because the network exploring part could not be accomplished enough. To consequently focus on lifeworld connections and reserve a sufficient amount of time in the preparation seems necessary. This is characteristic for Family Group Conferencing and enables the revitalising of relationships which makes a difference. Eco-Maps and genograms are useful tools in regard to that.

The lifeworld logic is something difficult to understand and unpredictable, also in its resources and possible solutions that it can come up with at a Family Group Conference. The preparation in searching and inviting potential participants revealed that putting expectations and suggesting solutions rather frightens off people than persuades them to attend. This is conditional upon a professional problem solving focus, their need to deliver demanded solutions and maybe the time frame as well. An open-minded and non-directive approach values people in what they are and not pressures them with expectations they could not comply with. If they can, they will support in a way that is related to the lifeworld logic. In this context it became

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apparent that, beyond problem solving, emotional support given through attendees of the FGC already would have had an empowering effect for family members.

Also the short time frame caused that participants have not been briefed in the concept of FGC prior the meeting. The time restrictions further made it difficult in some cases to involve key persons in the planning of the meeting as well as support persons for them to feel comfortable in regard to strained relationships or personal insecurities. This caused that they felt overstrained with the conference, e.g. because it was convened immediately after their release. Referring Family Group Conferences as early as possible to be able to prepare them well seems appropriate for the coordinating of the whole process, because many difficulties arising in the process can be traced back to the preparation.

It is to maintain that the meetings themselves had a strong meaning for the participants itself as it has an immeasurable social value. A great result is that in every single Family Group Conference the family came up with a plan. The conferences were minted through a strength focus and a great diversity in regard to venue, number of attendees and cultural aspects. As characteristic for lifeworlds, unexpected events happened at the conferences, last-minute cancellations of important people, unexpected participants and people in a hurry to end the meeting. In such difficult situations coordinators should pass the decision to the family, whether and how the meeting should proceed or be postponed.

The agreeing the plan stage showed two difficulties. One the one hand a few of the professionals in charge did not take a high effort in negotiating. They rather took the compiled plans as proposals for the professional system. Instead of doing so by the end of this stage the plan should be modified if necessary, so that it is acceptable for everyone involved. It seemed that the professionals were insecure about the conditions to accept the plan, which is also related to setting minimum requirements for the outcome from the beginning. Some families experienced great disempowerment when their plans were rejected. Certainly they would have developed something better if they would have known what is implied. This is connected to the fact that often the cases have not been referred directly by the agency that finally decides whether a plan comes into action. Making a lifeworld –

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system compatible solution possible is a challenge the coordinator faces right from the referral, due to this diffusivity of competencies this was complicated further.

On the other hand some cases showed the contrast. In these FGCs the family's plans were very much changed and filled with details. Maybe for the purpose to prove the credibility of the plans to institutions that are involved in the decision whether a plan is accepted, some of the plans set high demands on individuals that appear rather ambitious. There is a risk that individuals may be overstrained or that the plan is estranged so that it becomes a plan they do not completely identify with it which may weaken the will to realise it. Further it is to be questioned whether people can change their way of living ad hoc. It seemed difficult for the professionals in charge to engage with the lifeworld's sense of time. A higher integration of how existing relationships can support individuals by achieving their goals could have helped people further than to-do-list similar plans.

Even if the plans were not as ideal as they could have been, many of the families were empowered through the process and were activated to use family meetings further for their future planning.

A monitoring and reviewing was agreed in most of the case studies. For valuing the efforts of the family and where needed adjusting the plans a review meeting is indispensable. As mentioned before the balancing act between coordinating and counselling appeared hereby difficult as well. The reviewing task should first of all be in the hands of the families and the professionals involved. A coordinator could prevent himself from becoming a counsellor in passing this over. He is 'only' responsible for convening the second meeting.

6. Final Remark

By means of its historical context it was shown that Family Group Conferencing is a complex method of social work which has grown in New Zealand and arranges the communication between two systems. Therefore it became apparent that using Family Group Conferencing is highly related to its underlying philosophy which is similar in all of the countries that applied the method to their social work practice. In regard to Beyond Social Services the thesis testifies that this condition is given and defines that Family Group Conferences pose a meaningful tool to further pursue the organisation's vision.

Because of its complexity and lifeworld orientation, Family Group Conferencing requires social work to be flexible on a structural as well as on the level of the social worker. In this context the coordinator's work, facilitating the Family Group Conference, appears to be a complex task with all of its facets during the whole described process.

As proven on the organisational level, the evaluated case studies affirm the actability of Family Group Conferencing at Beyond Social Services, too. Looking at the cases it is to be acknowledged that in each of them a Family Group Conference leading to a plan was convened successfully. Nevertheless the documentations revealed some areas where improvement is helpful for the further implementation.

Thereby it seemed challenging for some coordinators to fully engage with their new role that differs massively from the counselling social work practice. The perception about the extensive and demanding job of coordinating, that became apparent in the theoretical disquisition, becomes proven in the case studies, too.

As such the preparation was acknowledged to be of importance as many achievements could be made within. Also exploring networks and finding creative ways to include absent people was challenging. In terms of collaboration between the professionals involved, it appeared that setting the plan requirements turned out to be difficult, especially because the professionals in charge did not refer the cases. During the process, the problem solving focus often was predominant which influenced the network mobilisation as well as the decision-making. As another condition many coordinators faced a short time frame which often gave away potential resources from being brought in.

In face of this the conferences convened by Beyond Social Services were a meaningful event for the families whose plans involve support on side of social networks and advanced to strengthen relationships. It thereby became visible that the collaboration of both systems within the agreeing the plan stage is important to create efficient and sustainable results, as well as convening a review meeting.

The authors suggest on the level of the coordinator's work to advance professional exchange and guidance for practice issues to safeguard quality and develop it constantly. These could include the identified areas where improvement is needed. On a structural level further promotion and education in regard to Family Group Conferencing seems necessary, and in connection to this, further empirical studies are seen as helpful to implement the method purposive.

In regard to the central question of to which extend the method of Family Group Conferencing can be transferred into practice, the thesis basically found that the exemplary chosen organisation Beyond Social Services possesses, as far as the authors were able to explore, an appropriate organisational framework for the implementation of Family Group Conferences. Also the practical realisation of Family Group Conferences, as displayed in the case studies, corroborates this assumption, as the Family Group Conferences follow the method's basic guidelines. Following the given suggestions may refine an appropriate transferring of the method into social work practice.

Although Family Group Conferencing demands social work to fulfil a lot of determining factors the results, especially recognisable in the case studies, testify that the effort in consequently making use of the procedure is a great gain for young people and their families.

Annex

I. ONE – Approach

ONE: Standards of Family Group Conferencing

Family Group Conferencing is a restorative social policy, and thus not an intervention, but a planning and decision making process. If done in a good quality it has three main effects:

O	Organizational development: It leads to a combination of lifeworld and professional support, which insists on a re- or a further development of so far standardized helping offers.
N	Network (community) Effect: FGC widens the circle of citizen's networks and thereby mobilizes resources of the informal as well as of the formal system.
E	Empowerment Effect: FGC empowers clients to be heard and to and to be acknowledged as decision-makers in the social service system.

O Effect of **Organizational development:**

The right of family groups and community to take responsibility for their own members has consequences for policy, service planning and service delivery. FGC insists on the dignity and capability of the lifeworld and orientates the welfare state towards it, including political as well as professional solutions.

FGC is an interface between the System and the Lifeworld. It should have effects in both directions: Building Social Capital and Problem Solving in the Lifeworld as well as improving administrative procedures and service delivery to achieve tailor made solutions and more Lifeworld orientation of the authorities.

1. In principle there are no “unsuitable cases”, hence FGC is not an option the system may choose, but a right of clients to interact in a self-determinate, autonomic manner and to cooperate with their social network in regard to professional helping offers.
2. There need to be an adequate amount of time and financial resources to inform clients, and to prepare and conduct a FGC.
3. Coordinators and service providers need to be trained in regards of the philosophy and the method of FGC. Coordinators need to be given the possibility of professional supervision.
4. FGC is not a single event but a process of preparation, conference, implementation, evaluation, further conferencing or other collaboration between professionals and family / community.
5. FGC are always scientifically evaluated. Processes, plans and implementation will always be documented and analysed to allow methodical improvement and to identify structural problems that arise of individual cases.

N **Network** Effect of Building Community and Social Capital:

FGC enlarges the circle of participants and enriches the network of clients and citizens. FGC mobilises professional resources and resources of family and friends in a community- strengthening way.

1. FGC contributes to enlarge the circle of involved people, who are chosen by the family members. Child care and the absorptions of travel expenses are organised if required. If someone is unable to attend personally, his participation is to be ensured in an alternative way.

E Empowerment Effect

FGC empowers clients to be heard and to and to be acknowledged as decision-makers in the social service system, education system as well as the criminal justice system. FGC insists on professional work "with", rather than "for" people.

1. The co-ordinator must be independent from the government care and protection casework as well as from the programmes of NGOs and the family's interests in order to be neutral enough for being the guardian of the FGC process. The co-ordinator is for the quality of the process not for the outcome.
2. It should be established a high variety of coordinators to meet the requirements of different families. Whenever possible and desired by the family, a coordinator should be chosen who is able to conduct the FGC in the family's native language and who is well versed in their religion and culture.
3. The private time for the family system is indispensable. Decisions are made, solutions are developed, relationships are cleared up, strengthened or/and broadened and plans are created. The private family time ensures the autonomy of the family group and inner familiar transparency. The professionals support these plans in providing the family with relevant information in regard to their concern, strengths and potential of the family as well as professional knowledge without participating in the decision-making.
4. The family has a right of their plan being accepted if it is lawful and meets the bottom lines that were communicated beforehand.
5. The FGC should take place as a home ground game for the family (in terms of time, venue, participants, culture, refreshments and language).
6. The safety of each participants and the strengthening of weak interests, especially the interest of the children, needs to be worked out within the preparation stage.
7. Assuring results and obligation:

- a) The created plan needs to be made manifest in a written form and needs to be available to everyone involved.
 - b) The plan includes agreements in regard to the allocation of tasks, back-up plan-details and a date for reviewing the FGC.
8. Family members who experienced a FGC shall be given possibility to contribute in the strategic and practical development of the method of “Family Group Conferencing”

II. Family Group Conferences – principles and practice guidance

Family group conferences: principles and practice guidance

Family group conferences – the model

How is a family group conference set up and who does what?

STEP 1 THE REFERRAL

- There is agreement between family members and staff from an organisation that a plan needs to be made for a child or young person.
- An independent coordinator is appointed to work with the family to set up the meeting.

STEP 2 PREPARATION FOR THE MEETING

- The coordinator, in conjunction with child, young person and immediate carers, identifies the family network which can include close friends.
- The coordinator sends out invitations and agrees a venue, date and time for the conference.
- Family members and friends invited to the conference will be contacted by the coordinator who will let them know what the meeting is about and discuss any worries or concerns they may have.

STEP 3 THE MEETING

a) *Information giving*

This is where staff from agencies give the family the information they have about the child or young person and about services, resources and support that may be available. This part of the meeting is chaired by the coordinator.

b) *Private family time*

Staff and the coordinator are not present during this part. The family members have time to talk among themselves and come up with a plan that addresses the concerns raised by the staff in Part 1.

c) *Agreeing the plan*

The coordinator and staff rejoin the family to hear the family's plan. Any services or support from the agencies needed to make the plan work are discussed. The plan should be agreed by agencies unless it places the child or young person at risk of significant harm. Everybody decides how they will check if the plan is working and what they will do if it is not working.

STEP 4 REVIEWING THE PLAN

A review family group conference or other meeting is often arranged to review how the plan is working and make new plans if necessary.

Principles and practice guidance

The following Principles and Practice Guidance are intended to let families know what they can expect from a family group conference. They are also an important guide for agencies offering or working with family group conferences, to enable them to check that they are providing families with a good standard of service.

The **Principles** sets out what families should expect.

The **Practice Guidance** describes how the principles will be met.

Principle 1 Families have the right to clear, appropriate information about the family group conference process.

- Practice**
- a) Families must be given clear information about what a family group conference is and why they have been offered a family group conference.
 - b) Families must be informed about timescales and possible delays.
 - c) Information must be available in a way that meets the needs of the family.
 - d) All family members invited must be told who they can contact if they have any questions about the process and about how they can make a complaint.

Principle 2 Families have the right to be involved in the planning of the meeting.

- Practice**
- a) Where possible, coordinators should reflect the local community and families will be offered a coordinator who speaks their language and who has an understanding of the way religious beliefs, cultural traditions and other lifestyle issues influence how the family operates.
 - b) A coordinator who is independent will work with the family to arrange the family group conference. 'Independent' means that they have not and will not be involved in making any decisions about the child.
 - c) The meeting will take place at a time, date and place agreed with the family.
 - d) Adults and young people will need to consent to information held by agencies being shared at the meeting.
 - e) The coordinator will work with the family and young person to decide who needs to be at the meeting.
 - f) The family will decide what language will be used at the family group conference, with interpreters provided for the others present as needed.
 - g) The coordinator may decide to exclude individual family members from the meeting if there are concerns that their presence would be a risk to anyone's safety.

Principle 3 Family members have the right to be acknowledged as decision-makers in the family group conference process.

- Practice**
- a) The agency that referred the family for a family group conference must be clear about what decisions, if any, they may be unable to support and must give reasons for this.
 - b) The child or young person and any other family member who requires it will be offered someone to help them make their contribution throughout the process. This person may be called an advocate or supporter, and may be someone within the family network or someone outside the family. They will not be someone who is able to make decisions about the family.
 - c) The family must be given relevant, factual and jargon free information about the agencies' concerns and the resources available.
 - d) Parents must be given written information about the agencies' concerns at least 24 hours before the conference.
 - e) Reasonable travel costs and other expenses will be paid for family members who need it.
 - f) Family members will have the opportunity to share their concerns and have their questions answered before and at the meeting.
 - g) Family members unable to attend for any reason will be supported in contributing in other ways.

Principle 4 Families have the right to private family time and a supportive and safe environment to make plans.

- Practice**
- a) Families must be given time to meet on their own without the coordinator or staff from agencies being present.
 - b) The coordinator must ensure that there is a suitable area and time allocated, with appropriate refreshments, for the family to make decisions.
 - c) Childcare provision should be available if required.
 - d) The coordinator will work with everyone to enable them to make a plan that meets the needs of the child.

Principle 5 Families have the right to have safe plans agreed and resourced.

- Practice**
- a) The referring agency must agree to support the family's plans unless it places a child at risk of harm and must provide reasonable resources to make it happen.
 - b) All family members and agencies who attend the conference will receive a copy of the plan within a stated time. The plan will include details of what resources the family needs and how the proposals in the plan will be carried out and monitored.
 - c) The family, referring agency and coordinator will agree how the plan will be reviewed and whether a follow-up review should take place, and who will be responsible for making this happen.

- d) Every effort should be made to respond to the family's plan at the meeting. Families will be informed who will give them a written response, and when and how, if the plan or some of the resources cannot be agreed at the conference.
- e) Agencies whose support is required to carry out a plan should respond within ten days to say whether they can provide the support requested and, if necessary, how long this will take to provide.

Principle 6 Families have the right to be involved in the development of family group conferences.

- Practice**
- a) All families will be offered the opportunity to give their opinion of the service they have received.
 - b) Where possible, families will be kept informed about changes made as a result of their comments.
 - c) Families should have the opportunity to have contact with other families who have used the service.
 - d) Families who have attended a family group conference should have the opportunity to be involved in developing policies and practice about family group conferences.

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