



Family Group Conferencing Evaluation Project

Summary of Project and Recommendations

In July 2005, the Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia (CYO), in partnership with the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), initiated a joint project to evaluate the family group conferencing process as applied in the child welfare context in British Columbia. The impetus for this project was two-fold. First, both the CYO and MCFD have viewed the family group conferencing process as a promising practice in terms of its ability to empower families to develop effective plans to help keep their children safe, and to strengthen relationships between families and the professionals working with them. MCFD identified family group conferencing as a practice that is consistent with its service transformation goals. The CYO felt encouraged to examine family group conferencing as a process that has the potential to increase the meaningful participation of children, youth and families in planning and decision-making taking place on their behalf. Second, it is hoped that this project will demonstrate the importance of evaluating emerging programs and practices, taking note of evaluation findings and implementing recommendations as part of the child welfare system's continuous quality improvement cycle.

Family group conferencing is a collaborative planning process being used in jurisdictions throughout North America and in other parts of the world. The process brings together families, service providers and other professionals with the goal of collaborative decision-making. A primary underlying assumption of the family group conferencing process is that the family itself is best able to understand and articulate its strengths, challenges, resources and supports, therefore plans created by the family have a higher probability of success. As such, a key component of the family group conferencing process is private family time, in which the family, apart from the professionals involved, is given the opportunity to create a plan that addresses the issues or crisis confronting them. The professionals then have an opportunity to comment on the plan and to assist the family in identifying the resources and supports necessary to implement it. In the child welfare context the social worker approves the plan to ensure child safety.

In undertaking this evaluation project we sought to determine if family group conferencing as implemented in the child welfare context of British Columbia reflects best practices, benefits families and should be recommended as standard MCFD practice throughout the province. While family group conferencing can be used in a variety of circumstances including transition planning for youth in care, and permanency planning, the particular focus of this evaluation was the application of the process to the child protection context, specifically, supporting families to create safety plans for their children.

This evaluation project was planned and implemented by a working group, representing the CYO, the five MCFD regions and the MCFD provincial office. The project consisted of an extensive literature review of the historical development of the family group conferencing process and its application in various jurisdictions across Canada and internationally (Appendix I), and the adaptation¹, implementation, and analysis of a province wide survey.

Surveys were conducted in the five MCFD regions (North, Vancouver Coastal, Fraser, Vancouver Island, and Interior) in British Columbia. Forty-four family group conferences were sampled. Two hundred and fifty conference participants, including family members, friends, service providers, social workers, other professionals, and conference coordinators, responded to the surveys.

An outcomes-based evaluation approach was used as a means of assessing the degree to which family group conferencing benefits families and others involved in the process. The benefits were determined by three categories of results including: a family-created plan; an agreement to the plan by Ministry representatives; and, the quality of the experience of the family group conferencing process for all participants.

The evaluation findings that are set out in the Report Card provide a compelling argument in favour of family group conferencing as a practice worthy of increased use within the Ministry. The evaluation found that:

- the process is highly valued by participants and is one they would recommend to others;
- the process is being consistently applied in regions across British Columbia;
- the process is leading to the creation of family-based safety plans;
- plans are being supported by the Ministry; and,
- the process is experienced positively by all key participants.

¹ Adapted, with permission, from the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program Family Group Decision Making Surveys, University of Pittsburgh

The findings lead to the conclusion that family group conferencing has the potential to provide great benefit to all participants, and in particular to children and families, involved in the child welfare system. Through this process the unique strengths of families are acknowledged and families are encouraged to use those strengths to ensure their children's safety. The process is likely to increase the problem-solving capacity of families by introducing them to a constructive approach that draws on their natural network of support and is applicable to other difficult circumstances that families may encounter. Additionally, through creating a climate of trust and cooperation, the process may be instrumental in improving relationships between families and professionals in the child welfare system.

The findings also highlight factors that are critical to the success of the family group conferencing process. For example, the dedicated role of the conference coordinator is crucial in terms of informing participants about the process, organizing the meetings, ensuring that the meeting is conducted using the guidelines(??) established for family group conferencing, creating a respectful meeting environment, supporting the full and meaningful participation of participants in the process, and following up as required. Another critical factor is the quality of the family-created plan that is produced through the process and its long-term sustainability. Plans created by families often require unconventional resources and supports. The success of these plans is largely dependent on the availability of these resources to support them.

A number of important recommendations flow from the evaluation project. Most recommendations came directly from the analysis of the survey. Other recommendations are based on the experiences and observations of the working group as they engaged in the evaluation process. Key recommendations include:

1. Establish further evaluations of the family group conferencing process, at various intervals, to confirm implementation and assess the sustainability of plans over time.
2. In future evaluations, supplement the survey method with focus groups and individual participant interviews to develop an in-depth understanding of the factors that lead to a positive experience of family group conferencing, the factors that create barriers to participation, and the indirect and/or long-term benefits of the process.
3. Family group conferencing coordinators, social workers and other participants in the process should ensure that children and youth meaningfully participate in the process.
4. Evaluate the use of the family group conferencing process with Aboriginal and ethno-cultural minority families and communities to determine its applicability to diverse contexts.
5. Explore the use of the family group conferencing process in other child welfare situations including prevention and transition planning.