

Family Network Meeting (FNM) Practice Guidance

Introduction

In West Sussex, we want to work with and alongside families, rather than taking decisions about them in isolation. Family Network Meetings are a way to work with families and their networks to ensure that all those connected to the child who can be a source of emotional, physical, mental, spiritual or cultural support are able to engage with workers and those caring for the child. This will provide opportunities to make a positive difference to the child's everyday life and give support where required, and to have a relationship with the child where this would be in the child's long term best interests

Principles

1. Every child/parent has a family and/or network and they can be found if we try
2. A meaningful connection to their family or network helps a child develop and/or maintain a sense of belonging
3. The single factor most strongly connected with positive outcomes for children is meaningful, lifelong connection to their family and/or network

Purpose

Family Network Meetings are a key part of safeguarding as they provide the opportunity to explore the family and friends' network that already provide safety and support and those who could become part of the safety or care plan for each child. The meetings enable the family and friends' network and professionals to develop and agree outcomes that they want to achieve.

When to Hold Family Network Meetings

This section requires further discussion by Service Leads and Principal Manager QA

Family Network meetings can be helpful at any point in our involvement with the child and family and where possible should be convened at the earliest opportunity as part of robust safety planning and throughout our intervention with a child (from the front door through to permanency arrangements). However, some key stages where a FNM could/should be convened for the first time (if not already happening):

- *During CFA*
- *Before an ICPC*
- *Prior to Public Law Outline*
- *As part of any reunification plan*

Where FNM cannot be held as suggested above, this needs to be discussed with the manager and a rationale included on the child's file and a clear plan as to when the FNM will take place.

Family's consent to taking part in a FNM will be a crucial element in ensuring these take place and if consent is not given workers should revisit this with the family to promote the benefits of a FNM for the child.

Establishing a Working Relationship with the Family

Building plans that are meaningful and sustainable will require a robust working relationship between professionals and the parents/family. The simplest way to create a good working relationship with parents is for the professionals to continually identify and honour the parents for everything that is positive in their everyday care of their children. In this way, parents will be much more likely to listen to the workers' views about the problems and more likely to work with them through the challenges involved in building a lasting plan.

A Straightforward, Understandable Description of the Concerns

Beginning the process depends on professionals being able to articulate the concerns they see for the children in clear, simple language that the parents (even if they do not agree) can understand and will work on with the professionals. Clear, commonly understood concerns are essential since they define the fundamental issues that the plan must address.

Agreeing Goals

It's important for families to set goals for themselves. For families, the act of choosing their own direction can contribute greatly to their sense of ownership and motivation for reaching the goal. Professionals may need to help the family in ensuring the goals support addressing the concern identified. The identified concerns should form the basis to articulate straightforward goals to help families and networks understand what is needed to be satisfied that the children will be safe.

Involve an Extensive, Informed Friend and Family Safety Network

Every traditional culture knows the wisdom of the African saying 'It takes a village to raise a child'. A child who is connected to many people who care for him/ her will almost always have a better life experience and be safer than an isolated child. So planning work almost always involves requiring that the parents get as many people as they can involve in helping them create a plan. One of the most important aspects of involving an informed and naturally occurring network around the family is that this breaks the secrecy and shame that typically surrounds situations of child abuse or concerning behaviours.

Negotiating the How: Developing the Details of the Plan

When developing the details of any given plan it is important to give parents and everyone else involved (both layperson and professional) a vision of the sort of detailed safety plan that will satisfy the statutory authorities. With this done, the professionals' role is then to ask the parents and network to come up with their best thinking about how to show everybody, including the child protection agency, that the children will be safe and looked after well. This is an evolving conversation as the professionals constantly deepen the parents' and networks' thinking about all the issues the professionals see, while at the same time exploring the challenges then parents and network foresee. The trick here is for professionals to break the habit of trying to solve issues themselves and instead explain their concerns openly and see what the parents and the network can suggest and do.

Process

1. Workers working with the child will set up a network meeting.
2. The child (depending on age and understanding) and the parents (all those with parental responsibilities) will be invited at the earliest stage to involve their wider networks in the meeting to help them put a plan together that will keep the child safer/promote their wellbeing.
3. The worker, working directly with the child and parents will identify members of the network that could be involved in planning and support. A practice guide on 'Questions to assist in finding networks' is included below for when families may be struggling to identify their network.



Questions for
Finding networks

4. Once the members of the network are identified, the worker should encourage the parent to lead on contacting the network members to see if they would be interested in attending a meeting to help the child and family (this contact can be made by the parent themselves). The meeting should happen at the earliest point possible, while respecting network members caring or work responsibilities
5. At the first meeting ground rules suggested by the members will be established. The first meeting should be used to see if anyone from the network has been missed out who could helpfully be included. There will be discussions why the network is there and the support they can offer to the family.
6. The worker may wish to present 'bottom lines' to the family. These can be used to highlight the fundamental or important issues that must be adhered to, in order to keep the child safe.
7. It may be helpful for professionals to step out of the meeting for an agreed amount of time so that the family can freely communicate together and develop the (safety) plan.
8. The (safety) plan is written up and shared with all those attending, and any professionals involved with the family.
9. All family network plans must be regularly reviewed to check on progress. This could take place during formal reviews that are already in place such as CIN reviews or Core groups.

Suggested Agenda

- Introductions & Welcome
- Purpose of the meeting
- Ground Rules
- Worker provides overview of why here/bottom lines
- Strengths & Safety
- What are we worried about
- Putting the plan into place
- Pulling it together
- Safety rules for the children
- Approving the plan

Practice Tips

Identifying the Network

- Is there anyone else supporting you at the moment?
- Can I talk to them as part of your support network?
- Have you told anyone about this before? If so has this helped?
- Could they help again now?
- Is there anyone in your network who could or already does help to look after the children? (this can be a few hours, weekends, babysitting etc.)
- Who would you go to if you were poorly and needed someone to help with the children?
- Do you have people you can talk to about your worries? If so, who are these people?
- Who cares about these children? (even if you don't get on with them!)
- Who would the children want involved?

Safety Planning Tips

- Identify key safety people who the children can contact if they have any concerns
- Identify people to assist the parents and who will monitor children's safety
- Identify people who will help out particularly if/when the primary carer is ill, under stress, or unavailable
- People the family/parents need to avoid
- Arrangements for stressful situations such as anniversaries, parties, celebrations or when parents wish to use alcohol and/or drugs
- Signs that parents/carers are not coping and what the safety network will do in these circumstances
- Child development and how the plan needs to change as the children grow
- What does the child need to know and how can the plan be shared with them?

Remember!

- Encourage the network to attack issue, not the person

Review / Contacts / References	
Document title:	Family Network Meeting Guidance
Date approved:	4 June 2020
Approving body:	Policy & Practice and QA Steering Group
Last review date:	May 2020
Next review date:	August 2022
Document owner:	Deputy Director Children's Services
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