**Integrating Family Group Conferences and**

**Care Planning for Children**

**Practice Guidance**

**for Child and Family Practitioners**



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1. **Context**

A Family Group Conference is a family-led meeting in which the family and friends network come together to make a plan for a child. The process is supported by an independent co-ordinator who helps the family prepare for the meeting and chairs the meeting.

Family Group Conferencing is based upon the principles of partnership and engaging and empowering families. It is a voluntary process where families agree to the referral and express their commitment to the process before the referral proceeds. There is an inclusive and restorative approach to decision-making where family members and professionals work together to address harm that has occurred in the family system, using the family's strengths and resources, and respecting the family's culture and values.

Family Group Conferencing is designed to promote family ownership of problem-solving and planning in the best interests of children, and this can be key to improving situations for children and families. This guidance aims to support child and family practitioners by:

* Setting out the Family Group Conference process from point of referral, to convening the Family Group Conference, developing the Family Plan, and setting the Family Group Conference Review;
* Providing guidance around how Family Group Conferences can be integrated into care planning for children. For example, recording the outcomes of Family Group Conferences within children’s assessments, and integrating Family Group Conference Plans within children’s care plans.
1. **The Family Group Conference Referral, Initial Meeting, and Agenda**

Prior to a referral being made to the Family Group Conference Service, the child and family practitioner should consider whether the family’s needs meet the service’s criteria. If the referral is felt to be appropriate, then the child and family practitioner should have a conversation with the family to ensure they are in agreement with the referral being made, and that they fully understand the process. This conversation should involve information about confidentiality, child protection, and the availability of support services.

The Family Group Conference referral form can be found in the ‘Forms’ section on the child’s file on Liquid Logic. The referral should confirm the family's willingness to participate in the process, and highlight the issues that need to be addressed. Once the referral is ‘complete’, this will be sent to the Family Group Conference Team Tray for consideration and allocation.

Where a Family Group Conference is not felt to be a viable option for the family, a Family Group Conference Co-ordinator will make contact with the referrer to explain the reasons why. Where a Family Group Conference *is* felt to be a viable option, the family’s case will be allocated to a Family Group Conference Convenor.

Once allocated, the Family Group Conference Convenor will make contact with the appropriate person with parental responsibility and discuss the referral. If the family decline the offer for a Family Group Conference, the Family Group Conference Convenor will add a case note to Liquid Logic to record this information, notify the referrer, and send a closure letter to the family.

If the family consent to the Family Group Conference, the Family Group Conference Convenor will make contact with the referrer to arrange an initial meeting, and complete the Family Group Conference Agenda.

The initial meeting will clarify;

* + Whether there are any timescales/deadlines/significant dates;
	+ The roles and responsibilities of the service;
	+ Whether the family have been provided with information about Family Group Conferences, and whether the family have agreed to participate in the process;
	+ The referrer’s understanding of the requirement to attend and remain for the duration of the Family Group Conference;
	+ The Family Group Conference Convenor’s role in the preparation and meeting process, and as facilitator of the process;
	+ To discuss any personal safety issues which the Family Group Conference Convenor should know about;
	+ Share any new information relating to the family's circumstances and establish what information has been shared to date;
	+ Any issues of race/culture/language/religion/disability.

The Family Group Conference Agenda

****The Family Group Conference Agenda is completed with the referrer. The Agenda consists of the following questions;

* What are the main focuses for the Family Group Conference?
* What are the family’s strengths?
* What are the main worries and concerns?
* What are the bottom-line requirements?
* The questions at your Family Group Conference to be considered are…?

Examples of these questions could be…

* How can the family support mother to continue to access support for her substance misuse?
* How can the family work together to ensure behaviour management strategies are consistently used at father’s house and grandparent’s house (consider family rules, boundaries and rewards)?
* How will the family work together to ensure the child/ren needs are met (consider a daily care needs plan and who will do what)?
* Can anyone in the family step in and care for the child/ren if there was ever a need to?
* What will the family do if there are any concerns?
1. **The Family Group Conference Preparation**

The Family Group Conference Convenor will undertake preparation work with the family, and this can take between 6 – 8 weeks. They will begin by meeting with the parent/carers and the child to explore their family network. Pictures, photographs, family trees, [genograms](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/genogram.html) and ecomaps are used to support families to remember who could be contacted.

The Family Group Conference Convenor will visit and speak to everybody involved in the Family Group Conference process, whether they are attending the meeting or not. Every family is different and attendees at Family Group Conferences may vary, for example in-laws, step-relatives, neighbours, and community support networks.

Parents and children may have differing views about who needs to come to the Conference, and the Family Group Conference Convenor will negotiate agreement for the inclusion of as wide a family network as possible. The Family Group Conference Convenor will maintain the position that the identified family network will be invited, unless there are exceptional reasons to exclude them - it may be the people the parents or children are resisting attending are the people who will challenge them or offer a genuine solution.

It is paramount that children’s voices are heard and are central to the Family Group Conference process. At all stages, from preparation through to final family planning, the child will be involved in the process and the decisions that affect them.

Children are encouraged to attend their Family Group Conference. This includes younger children, dependent on their level of maturity, their wishes, and the appropriateness of the information being shared. The Family Group Conference Convenor will undertake wishes and feelings work with those children who do not attend the meeting. In these circumstances, a photograph, toy, picture/poster, letter or wish list can be brought to the meeting to maintain focus on the child.

The Family Group Conference Preparation is completed within 6 – 8 weeks. Following this, the Family Group Conference Convenor will record the date and time of the Family Group Conference on the child’s file, send invitation letters to attendees, and circulate the Family Group Conference Agenda.

1. **The Family Group Conference and Family Plan**

There are three stages to a Family Group Conference;

**Stage 1: Information-giving**

At the start of the meeting, the Family Group Conference Convenor facilitates the information-giving stage. Professionals in attendance present their report to the family in clear, jargon-free language, and will set out anything which could not be agreed to as part of the Family Plan. Any plan devised by the family should meet the minimum requirements set out by the referrer and other professionals for safeguarding and promoting the child's welfare, and should not place the child at any risk. At this stage, the child may wish to share their views with the help of their support person or advocate, or the Family Group Conference Convenor can share drawings or written information for them.

The family are then given the opportunity to seek clarification regarding the referrer’s concerns and ask any questions they have. The family need to be well informed so that they can produce their plan to address the concerns.

**Stage 2: Private family time**

Once the family has enough information and is clear what is being asked of them, the Family Group Conference Convenor and professionals leave the meeting so the family can begin to plan in private. It is an important principle in Family Group Conferencing that the family have time to talk amongst themselves, without any staff from agencies being present, and they meet for as long as they wish to formulate their Family Plan. It is however essential the referrer and Family Group Conference Convenor are accessible during this time, should the family need any clarification or additional information.

This is time for the family to talk in private so they can…

* Discuss the information provided;
* Work out and agree a plan;
* Decide who will be responsible for each aspect of the plan;
* Decide what support they need;
* Decide how they can check the plan is working;
* Come up with a back-up plan in case it is needed.

**Stage 3: Agreeing the plan**

Once the family have agreed the Family Plan, they will discuss it with the Family Group Conference Convenor and referrer. The plan will be accepted, unless it places the child at risk or does not address the original concerns.

The Family Group Conference Convenor will type up the Family Plan and share a copy with all attendees within 2 working days of the Conference taking place. They will upload the Family Plan on to the child’s file, and also send a copy of the Family Plan to any Independent Reviewing Officer allocated to the child’s case.

The referrer and family members remain responsible for the ongoing monitoring of the Family Plan. The success of the agreed Family Plan will be dependent upon the family and professionals working together and informing each other about the progress of the plan.

1. **The Family Group Conference Review**

A Family Group Conference Review will be offered to the family within 4 - 6 weeks of the initial Family Group Conference, if the family feel this would be beneficial. The aim of the meeting would be to review whether the Family Plan has progressed, or if any adjustments to the plan are needed. If the referrer or family feel an earlier review is needed, then they would need to contact the Family Group Conference Convenor to request this.

The allocated child and family practitioner includes what happened at the Family Group Conference within the Child and Young Person’s Assessment. This should include what the plan is, and how the family have agreed to work together to meet the needs of the children.

The Family Group Conference then becomes part of the child’s story, and is used to inform the Assessment recommendations and decisions. The Family Plan is integrated in to the child’s outline care plan.

1. **Integrating the Family Group Conference and Care Planning for Children**

After the Family Group Conference has taken place, it is important the Family Plan does not become lost or forgotten about, as this intervention could be key to improving the child’s situation and achieving better outcomes for the family. It is hence important the Family Group Conference process is integrated within care planning for the child, and the following processes take place:

If the child’s case is presented to a Child Protection Conference, the Independent Reviewing Officer dedicates time to discussing the Family Plan during the meeting, and ensures the Family Plan forms part of the child’s Child Protection Plan.

This would be the same for an Independent Reviewing Officer chairing a Looked After Child Review for a child in care.

Progress against the Family Plan is included within any updating assessments to inform next steps for the family / recommendations and decisions.

The allocated child and family practitioner regularly reviews the progress of the Family Plan with the child and family during home visits and statutory meetings, such as Core Group Meetings and Child in Need meetings. This can include checking with the child and the family whether the Family Plan is working, what difference this is making, and whether any adjustments are needed.

 Progress against the Family Plan is recorded within case notes on the child’s file, for example within home visit recordings and minutes of meetings. The child’s views and the family’s views about the Family Plan should be sought and recorded.

1. **Appendices**

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