

Family Group Decision Making

- Introductions

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Family Group Decision Making is a unique practice that places family as the primary decision makers. It is strength based and empowers the family to take control of not just their present situation but also to plan for their future. The practice allows the family to pull together their natural resources to create a plan that will work best for them. I love offering this to families as it is exciting to see a family grow and transform throughout the process and gain strength and confidence along the way.

**What does the Referral Process look like from a referring workers perspective?
How are Family Group Cases selected? And how are Family Group Decision Making meetings utilized in different Children and Youth departments?**

Referral Process:

- In selecting cases for FG there are very few limitations. This practice benefits families in so many different circumstances and throughout the various stages of involvement throughout our systems.
- Intake: when a family is in the intake process of CYS, for example they could be referred for a Family Group Decision Making Meeting to identify and utilize the natural supports to prevent further involvement with our agency.
- Protective: a case in our on-going or protective in-home unit may use Family Group Decision Making to help them develop and accomplish the goals they themselves have identified and can be incorporated into their Family Service Plan.
- Permanency: a family whose children are not in the home can plan for their safe and successful return home that can be sustained.
- No matter what stage this case is across our agency this practice needs to be shared with our families in manner that is continuous and consistent. Every family is not ready to come together at a particular time -- the key is for workers to engage families and keep them engaged so that when they are ready we can respond quickly to their need.
- This is a way for our system to "do business differently". Family Group Decision Making encourages teaming to occur across our systems. When all those involved with a family; formally and informally, come together to plan the family feels supported and empowered to make a change in their everyday lives.

Categoricals making FG Referrals:

- Juvenile Probation
- Adult Probation
- Schools
- Self-Referrals* → self-referrals allow families to plan for

Understanding the significance of family, connectedness and permanence - Family Group Decision Making assists by creating an environment where a lifetime network of family/supports can be discovered, created, and fostered. Just as Amy indicated it involves various strategies to help the referring worker and coordinator “widen the circle” of support for the family. These tools not only make our invite list bigger but they expand our definition of family to involve anyone in the life of a child or those family members that may be or have ever been a support to them.

While Family Finding is a process that happens throughout the entire life of a case, there are several decision making points where Family Group Decision Making fits in perfectly to address concerns and/or help that family group come up with a plan for the identified child/children.

For further information: www.senecacenter.org

Examples of who you might see at a FG conference include but is not limited to the following: identified child, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, step families, god parents, baby sitter, PCP, neighbors, grandparents, great grandparents, friends, service providers, referral source, faith leaders, church members, foster parents, foster siblings, co-worker, principals, teachers, coaches, school staff, and community supports

Once all the family supports have been identified, contacted, explained the process and a date has been set:

- the coordinator will work with the family to identify a location
- invitations will be sent to each participant
- coordinator will book a facilitator and space for the meeting, arrange catering, and guest speaker (as needed)
- hold a follow-up meeting

The average length of coordination for a Family Group Decision Making referral is approximately 30 hours and is most often, scheduled within 30 days of referral; in the case involving sexual abuse or domestic violence it may take longer to ensure for safety. The average length of a FGDM conference is 4 hours. The average time the referral source will need to invest in this practice is 15 minutes for the referral, 45 minutes for the pre-conference, 4 hours for a conference, and 1 hour for follow up meeting, totaling 6 hours of the referral sources time.

Rapid Safety Meetings are also available for families in emergency situations, they are:

- Coordinated in 24-48 hours
- Followed up with another meeting including extended family and supports.

There are times when key supports identified by the family are not able to come to the conference, it is still important to include their support and and/or participation by phone, web-cam, or via letter.

Each meeting is run by a facilitator who is *neutral*. The coordinator also serves as the co-facilitator and scribe during the meeting.

The structure of the Family Group Decision Making Meeting:

- Family Ritual (optional)
- Information Sharing – introductions, guidelines, purpose, roles, discuss strengths; discuss concerns, bottom lines, and resources
- Meal
- Family Private Time ***This is the most important part of the meeting and what truly sets this practice apart. Private Family Time puts the planning into the hands of the family. Family members take on the role of “experts” in determining what is best to meet their needs. Agency representatives take on the role of “consultants” and share concerns, information, and resources. This practice functions under the belief that families know themselves better than we ever will and as such are able to plan much more creatively and effectively when on their own. Families are often more strict on themselves and more detailed in their planning than providers. Private Family Time increases the family’s ownership by having the family and extended resources take over the decision making and bring accountability back to the family. It allows the family in a safe environment to discuss and resolve issues that exist within the family dynamic that might otherwise hinder them from going forward to working together for a successful future. This process ensures for plans that will specifically fit the needs of the family and family is more likely to follow a plan that they created over a plan an agency created for them.
- Presentation of the Family Plan and Acceptance
- Family Ritual/photo
- Conclusion and follow up meeting set

After the Family Group Decision Making Meeting the coordinator types the family plan within 5-7 business days and mails each participant a copy of the plan.

There is a **follow up meeting** if needed in 4-6 weeks after the first meeting to ensure:

- the longevity of the plan, discuss if the plan is working for the family, make changes as needed, and note progress made.
- Any participant can request that a follow up meeting be held earlier
- The follow up family plan is typed up including additions and sent to each participant

What does the family plan include?

The family plan includes detailed and measurable steps the family members agree to take to address a bottom line.

- Family will state when and how these steps will be taken and who is responsible.
- The family plan will include a family volunteer who is willing to help monitor the plan
- All bottom lines that the families are to address have been indicated by the referral source and support the Family Service Plan.

Does Family Group Decision Making increase cooperation by family and compliance with the service plan?

How the Family plan and FSP are incorporated:

- Family Group Decision Making is a voluntary process that when utilized by families, gives them the ownership of their future and their involvement with the system. Compliance and cooperation to follow their service plan and resolve the concerns the Agency has is multiplied when a conference occurs – because it gives family meaningful and achievable steps to success.
- It also fosters independence from the government agency; helping the family to identify and utilize informal resources that can assist them to get out of our system and hopefully stay out.

How to measure a successful conference?

Measuring a Family Group Decision Making meeting is done in several ways.

Some ways to measure success are:

- The family creating and following their plan to improve current issues in the home
- Increased family supports and involvement long term, re-connecting family members
- Children fostering and strengthening family connections
- Children being returned home from placement or foster care quicker
- Additional family members identified to be a resource for a child in foster care
- A parent entering rehab to address ongoing D&A issues
- Increase family awareness and supports for medical issues
- Eliminating truancy
- Obtaining and maintaining services needed (i.e., mental health)
- Decreasing involvement in formal systems and repeating offenses
- Decreasing housing issues/homelessness
- Increases family stability and decreases hostility
- Decrease court involvement and prevents placement
- Establish and increase a positive relationship between families and case workers

Has Family Group Decision Making improved the outcomes for children in Dauphin County?

JusticeWorks YouthCare Outcomes

- Since inception of the FGDM program in March 2009, JusticeWorks has served 220 families. 154 have gone to conference – 70% successful completion of conferences
- Time Lines for Conferences
 - 5% Rapid Safety Conference
 - 32% Less than 30 days,
 - 48% 31-60 days,

- 15% 60 days or more. Please note Domestic Violence and sexual abuse conferences typically take longer than 60 days due to safety measures that need to be taken
- Out of those 220 families those referral reasons were:
 - .5% GPS,
 - 19% Reunification,
 - 34% Preservation,
 - 6% Custody Issues,
 - 10% Truancy,
 - 15% Aging out of Care,
 - 3% Prevent Recidivism,
 - 13% Other

- New last year is an initiative between Dauphin County Adult Probation and Children and Youth focusing on truant youth whose parents are involved with Adult Probation. Identified families and students participated in a Truancy Elimination Meeting and were offered a conference. Since 2009/10 there were 37 Truancy Elimination Plan Meetings and 12 family group conferences. As a result, 75% of the students who participated missed three or less days of school after the family group conference.
- Along with increasing community based supports and services, Family Group Decision Making has been one of Dauphin County's "key strategies" to safely reduce the number of out of home placements. Since October 2008: Juvenile Probation as been able to lower their number of placements by 32.9%, Children and Youth have lowered their placements by 32.7%.
- With numbers this high success cannot be refuted.

Alphabet Soup

Family: anyone in the life of a child or those family members that may be or have ever been a support to them.

Family Group Decision Making/Family Group Conference: a decision-making practice that empowers the family to be in the forefront of the planning for their future.

Rapid Safety Conference: a quick-response conference held between key participants in a case to resolve immediate safety risks/concerns. This meeting usually occurs within 24-48 hours and is followed up with a larger meeting that includes the families extended supports and resources.

Family Finding: a process developed by Kevin Campbell to help the family identify and incorporate extended kin to serve as a connection and possible support.

Family Service Plan: a state-mandated plan developed between the family and the agency to identify goals that could mitigate the safety/well-being concerns in the home.

Information Sharing: the first part of a Family Group Decision Making Meeting that allows for all participants of the meeting to share the same understanding of the case.

Strengths: listed during the information sharing phase, strengths are identified in the family and support network that could help mitigate the agency's/families concerns.

Concerns: listed during the information sharing phase, concerns are identified by the family and service providers present as areas to work on and plan for throughout the conference.

Bottom-Lines: identified by the referring Agency at the end of the concerns section, bottom-lines are non-negotiable items to be planed for during Private Family Time.

Resources: additional community supports and resources that could be utilized throughout the planning process, usually identified by the referring worker/services providers.

Additional References:

Family Group Decision Making:

Family Finding: www.senecacenter.org – Kevin Campbell

American Humane Association – www.americanhumane.org

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