

Family Group Conferencing and COVID-19

COVID-19 and the resulting public health orders has created uncertainty amongst Permanency Support Program (PSP) casework staff around whether family group conferences (FGC) can occur. This document outlines some common questions and answers to assist PSP service providers to continue with FGCs and support continuity of casework.

Can FGCs Occur During COVID-19?

Family group conferencing is considered an essential service and must still be considered throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The process of referring families for FGC remains the same.

Can Face-To-Face FGCs Occur During COVID-19?

Wherever possible, face-to-face meetings should be limited, and participants supported to attend via phone or video conferencing. Ensure the FGC facilitator speaks with the family and PSP casework staff to determine whether participants attend by phone, video conferencing or in person. FGCs can be run with a combination of these options.

A face-to-face component may be necessary, particularly if:

- participants do not have access to the technology required and this is not able to be supported by the PSP service provider
- the family strongly express that they do not want to participate by phone or video conference
- family dynamics require that certain participants attend in person with the facilitator or support person present.

Regardless of medium, FGCs should be conducted in ways that support safety and align with NSW Public Health Orders, restrictions, and guidelines. See the latest information about COVID-19 at the [NSW Health website](#). You should also explore your own PSP service provider's COVID-19 plan.

How Can You Ensure Face-To-Face FGCs Are Safe?

For FGCs conducted face-to-face, you will need to ensure the safety of participants. Ensure the FGC facilitator contacts all participants prior to the conference to ask:

- Have you or anyone in your household returned from overseas within the last 14 days?
- Do you or anyone in your household have a fever, cough, breathing difficulties or any other flu like symptoms?
- Have you or anyone in your household been told to self-isolate?

If any participants answer yes to the above questions, the FGC should be postponed to a later date or arrangements made for participation via phone or video conference.

If participants answer no to the above questions the face-to-face FGC can proceed. The FGC facilitator and participants must continue to meet the public health restrictions during the conference which include:

- observing social distancing by sitting 1.5 metres apart
- limit the number of people in a room based on 4 square metres of floor space per person
- ensuring health and hygiene is upheld as per NSW Health recommendations (regular hand washing, cough etiquette etc.).

For further information see: [Steps you can take to protect your wellbeing, stay safe and stop the spread of COVID-19](#)

How Will the FGC Facilitator Support a Successful FGC Via Phone and or Video Conferencing?

Have a conversation with the FGC facilitator to understand how they will support all participants when the FGC is being held via phone and or video conferencing. Some suggestions for how a facilitator might do this include:

- arrange for participants to test technology prior to the FGC
- explain to participants about what they need to know when communicating by phone and or video conferencing

- ensure that participants who may be attending from different time zones have the correct time to join the meeting
- work with participants about who will scribe the family plan information
- ensure that participants have breaks throughout the FGC.
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How is the Confidentiality Agreement Signed When an FGC is Held Via Phone or Video Conferencing?

FGC is covered by the confidentiality provisions of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998. All participants are required to agree to confidentiality prior to or at the beginning of the FGC meeting. The FGC facilitator will explain this to all participants including the permanency support caseworker.

If the FGC is held by phone or video conference the FGC facilitator can obtain agreement by:

- posting the confidentiality agreement to participants beforehand and requesting a signed copy. This may be provided by post or taking a photo and sending it to the FGC facilitator by text message
- having a conversation with participants about confidentiality and receiving their agreement by email or text message
- having a conversation with participants about confidentiality and documenting and dating the conversation
- reminding all participants about confidentiality at the beginning of the FGC and seeking verbal agreement and documenting and dating the conversation.

It is important that PSP service provider casework staff understand that they are participants in the FGC and that the FGC facilitator will lead the conversation. The FGC facilitator will be able to support you with further questions.

What Can I do to Support Children and Families to Participate in FGC During COVID-19?

As PSP service provider caseworker, you can support children and families to participate in FGC by:

- being informed about FGC and sharing this information
- utilising the FGC Brochures available on the PSP Learning Hub
 - [FGC Brochure for Children and Young People](#)
 - [FGC Brochure for Parents and Carers](#)
- knowing the child and family's needs and sharing this information with the FGC facilitator
- supporting children and families to be able to access phone and technology needs if required
- reassuring families about the importance of developing solutions for challenges and making decisions relating to the safety and wellbeing their children
- actively participating in the FGC process
- being clear with families about what needs to be addressed through the FGC (bottom lines)
- support families to focus on the future and the needs of their child or children
- being responsive to the FGC facilitator, child and family's needs during the FGC process.

For further information see:

- [Steps you can take to protect your wellbeing, stay safe and stop the spread of COVID-19](#)
- [Foundations of Family Group Conferencing](#)
- [Family Group Conference Process](#)
- [The Role of PSP Casework Staff in Family Group Conferencing](#)
- [Talking to Children and Families about Family Group Conferencing](#)