

# Foundations of Family Group Conferencing

## What is Family Group Conferencing?

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is a family-focused, strengths-based form of alternative dispute resolution (ADR). FGCs works to strengthen partnerships between family members and encourage greater family decision making and responsibility. An FGC informs case planning and provides an opportunity for families to develop their own plan to keep their child or young person (child) safe.

The aims of Family Group Conferencing are to:

- place the child and their family at the centre of planning and decision making
- empower parents and families in decision making about the safety and wellbeing of their child
- improve outcomes for the child by providing them with a stronger voice
- keep families together safely
- build respectful relationships through open communication.

Through the FGC process, a family plan is developed and owned by the family to support them to successfully implement actions or tasks which will address safety and risk. The plan is written during private family time by a family member or family support person using the family's words and decisions. The family plan is reviewed within three months following the FGC. Caseworkers should align the family plan with casework and planning processes.

Research on FGC outcomes have found positive effects, such as:

- high levels of participant satisfaction
- bringing family members closer together and strengthening positive family ties
- keeping children safe through the delivery of a plan which protects and safeguards children and parents/carers
- improved collaboration between families and social work services
- achieving more timely permanency and exiting out-of-home care more rapidly

(Pennell & Burford, 2000; Merkel-Holguin, 2003; Holland, Scourfield, O'Neill, & Pithouse, 2005; Marsh, 2013; Metze, Kwekkeboom, & Abma, 2015: see also Mitchell, 2018).

FGC provides families with the opportunity to be a part of decision making for their children's safety and wellbeing.

FGC is based on the premise that families are the experts in their own lives and can develop solutions to challenges in a way which will work for them.

## How does Family Group Conferencing work?

FGC is a different way of working compared to a case plan meeting. During the conference, the independent facilitator and other professionals leave the room to enable 'private family time' so the family can develop their own plan. Once they are happy with the plan, they then present it back to all FGC participants for feedback, negotiation and agreement. It is less formal than child protection or out-of-home care planning meetings, by providing families with the space to have their say and make decisions. Contemporary research and evidence tell us that when families are involved in formulating their own goals for change, they are more likely to commit to and take ownership of them.

Family group conferences can be up to five hours in duration, depending on the needs of the family. The FGC facilitator will guide the process and ensure that families are given adequate preparation, space and information to make decisions. The referral developed by the PSP service provider guides the purpose of the FGC and outcomes vary based on the child and family's needs.

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FGC is covered by the confidentiality provisions of the Act.

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FGC is a form of ADR and covered by the confidentiality provisions in the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act*. This means that the family own their family plan and Permanency Support Program (PSP) service providers are unable to use the family plan or any information shared in the FGC without the family's permission. This includes submitting the family plan to court.

Further information can be found here: [Family Group Conference Process](#).

## FGC and PSP Service Providers

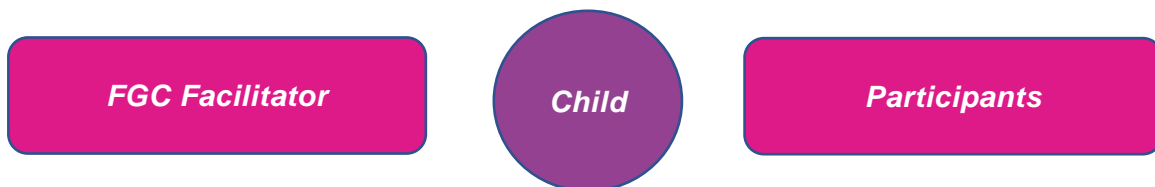
PSP Service Providers can access FGC in the following ways:

- DCJ caseworkers may use FGC, if the family consents, during the initial assessment phase to gauge the potential for family preservation. Outcomes are shared with PSP service providers to support the on-going implementation and coordination of the plan.
- PSP service providers can initiate a FGC if it is likely to be useful for the family. Consent from the family is required prior to arranging a FGC. For children and young people receiving a family preservation package, the DCJ caseworker is required to attend.
- FGC can be used by PSP service providers as a decision-making tool at any stage of the continuum of care, from entering care through to leaving care.

It is important to describe the benefits of FGC to the child and their family in a way that they will understand. If you require support to do this, it is best to contact an accredited FGC facilitator to help you.

PSP service providers can access the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) panel of approved facilitators by speaking to their DCJ permanency coordinator or their Child and Family District Unit (CFDU) worker.

## Roles in FGC



There are several roles within the FGC process. It is key that you understand these roles as they are different to your usual casework role.

- The FGC Facilitator is an independent person who will facilitate the whole FGC process.
- PSP caseworkers or managers are participants in the FGC process. Before the FGC, you identify participants, obtain consent, develop bottom lines and make the referral. During the FGC, your role is to support the family to develop and implement their family plan. This means partnering with families to help them find solutions to their challenges. You and your manager can then agree to the plan if it addresses the bottom lines and approve it along with any funding requirements. Your general casework continues alongside the FGC process.

Ensure you meet early with the FGC facilitator to discuss the referral and prepare for your role in the conference. It is important that you identify family strengths and be future focused to support the family to be able to find solutions and plan to meet the child's needs.

For further information on roles in FGC, see [The Role of PSP Casework Staff in Family Group Conferencing](#).

## The Difference Between FGC and Family Connections and Networks (Family Finding)

There are key differences between FGC and Family Connections and Networks (also known as Family Finding). It is important to understand that FGC is a process of supporting children and families to develop solutions to challenges; whereas Family Connections and Networks (family finding) is the process of identifying family members for a child to support lifelong connections.

The key difference is that Family Connections and Networks must occur throughout a child's life and the relationships are ongoingly identified, developed and nurtured.

The Family Connections and Networks process is important for FGC as it can identify family members to be a part of the FGC process.

For more information see: [Family Connections and Networks – Overview](#) and [Family Connections and Networks - Practice Tips](#).

## References

Pennell & Burford, 2000; Merkel - Holguin, 2003; Holland, Scourfield, O'Neill, & Pithouse, 2005; Marsh, 2013; Metze, Kwekkeboom, & Abma, 2015: see also Mitchell, 2018

Reimagining child welfare outcomes: Learning from Family Group Conferencing  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cfs.12676#:~:text=Research%20studies%20on%20FGC%20outcomes%20have%20been%20the,Kwekkeboom%2C%20%26%20Abma%2C%202015%3A%20see%20also%20Mitchell%2C%202018%29>