

Sharing Risk and Shifting Power in Family Group Conferencing

Family Group Conferencing is a process used to support families to come together to develop solutions and plan to move forward. It is a family-led approach that starts from the basis that families are the experts in their own lives. In a successful Family Group Conference, the facilitator assists all parties to work together on equal footing to develop plans in the best interest of a child.

However, the nature of the child protection system means that power imbalances exist between children, families and the agencies that support them. These can negatively affect the FGC if left unaddressed. As Permanency Support Program (PSP) service provider casework staff, it is your responsibility to address these power imbalances by actively shifting power to families and sharing the risk with them.

For more information see [Foundations of Family Group Conferencing](#).

Shifting Power

PSP service providers and the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) inherently hold significant power in relation to the families we work with, due to the statutory context in which we work.

Help reduce power imbalances by:

- respectfully seeking consent from children and families for the FGC and hearing their concerns
- discussing details of the FGC such as the participants and location and, where possible, giving them control over these choices
- showing respect for families' autonomy and honouring their dignity
- validating children and family's strengths and being future focussed
- allowing the family to have ownership of the agreed outcomes and walking alongside them to support implementation.
- being clear and transparent about concerns.

This may be challenging when the family has had negative experiences within the child protection system, however it is crucial for the FGC to be effective. The FGC facilitator also plays a major role in addressing power differences in FGCs. Their role is impartial, and they are responsible for facilitating and ensuring all voices are heard.

Using language that is open, respectful, honest and transparent is another way to address power imbalances in a FGC. Words can make people feel confused, scared, at fault or shamed. Words can carry power, authority, distance and emotion.

There are many words DCJ and agencies use that distance us from the families we work with such as 'placement,' 'removal,' 'contact,' 'intervention.' The way we describe a family's experience and what needs to be addressed will have an effect in creating change with families to keep children safe (Casework Practice Site: The Language We Use, 2018).

The language and tone you use in the FGC are equally important. Children, parents, other family members or carers may not understand jargon commonly used in the sector, and they may be unfamiliar with legislation and child protection processes. They might feel helpless or insecure about attending the FGC due to the power imbalance.

Language needs to be easy for everyone to understand. This is especially important for people with a disability, people who have limited literacy skills or for Aboriginal people or people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds. Having a cultural support person in the FGC, such as a support worker, interpreter or trusted community member can assist to shift power imbalance for children, parents and carers.

Sharing Risk

In past child protection practices, DCJ and out-of-home care agencies made decisions on behalf of children, young people and their families. Agencies have typically addressed the risk for children by removing them from their families. In more recent years, this focus has shifted. With the introduction of PSP came a recognition that parents and children need to be heard and for casework staff to walk alongside a family.

Before you request an FGC, consider:

- the reason why the FGC is being held
- what the family need to achieve for the safety and wellbeing of the child (the children's needs/bottom lines).

Being able to articulate the aim of the FGC makes it more likely to be successful and being open and transparent with families allows you to begin to shift power and share risk. It enables families to ask questions and prepare for the FGC and gives them ownership of their journey. It shows them you are actively helping them with their challenges, and it maintains the trusting relationships you have built with them or you are beginning to be build.

When seeking a solution, consider how you can frame your language in a future-focused and strengths-based way without using jargon.

1. The mother is a drug user – this labels the mother as a drug user and gives no insight into her drug use or the impact it is having on her or the children’s lives. The safety need is not clear.
Alternative: How can we make sure Zoe (child) is safe from Laura’s (mother) drug use.
2. The father is mentally unstable – This is not specific, labels the father and gives no insight into the safety needs of the child.
Alternative: How can we keep the children safe when Warren is unwell?
3. The parents are failing to keep Annie safe – This is not specific and does not give insight into the safety needs of Annie, it fails to recognise any strengths.
Alternative: What does Annie need to be safe?
4. The children are exposed to DV between the parents – children are not exposed to domestic violence, they experience it. This does not identify who is perpetrating the violence and the impact of this for the children and family. The safety needs are not clear.
Alternative: How can we ensure Tomi and Isla do not experience Donald’s (father) use of violence towards Tracey (mother) and that Tomi and Isla are safe?

In framing issues in an understandable and solutions-oriented way, you can contribute to the Family Group Conferencing being a family-led process rather than confrontational. Families can better engage with solutions and share risk with you, rather than having decisions made for them.

When providing information about the family (both written and verbal) ensure it is strengths-based and future-focused. Use language and tone that is always respectful of all participants. Language can be a major barrier for engagement with individuals, families and

communities. The use of legal jargon, acronyms and industry terminology can limit involvement and engagement.

Also consider the possible role of extended family, kin, carers and community in sharing risk. This enables everyone in the child's life to share responsibility for them and their needs.

See [Foundations of Family Group Conferencing](#) and [Family Group Conference Process](#) for more information.

References:

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