

Confessions of a Family Group Conference Coordinator

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Family group conferences provide a forum for families to come together to make decisions about the welfare of their children. This is only made possible, though, if all those involved in the FGC process fulfill their roles toward commitment, encouragement, empowerment and believing in the FGC model. Those involved are social services agencies and service providers, families and adults important to the child(ren), and family group conference coordinators. As well as sharing the presenter's knowledge and experiences of being a family group conference coordinator, the session will look in depth at how important the role of the coordinator is, as they are crucial in the FGC process.

- We'll be looking briefly at '**What is a Family Group Conference?**' & what '**The FGC Model & Process**' is
- '**The Role & Responsibilities of the Players**'
- '**Co-ordinator's Job Description**' & '**Person Specification**' that's required and necessary to be able to do the job effectively
- I'm hoping to generate enough interest and enthusiasm in what could be potential FGC co-ordinators amongst you!
- **Overview of the referrals I've been involved in**
- **The challenges & issues raised**
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- Just before we go into 'What is a Family Group Conference', it might help to mention the types of cases referred from the Children & Families SS Division:
- Where the **rehabilitation** of a looked after child is being considered, FGC to ascertain level & type of family support available if the child were to return home, or alternatively to identify a placement with another family member
- Where a child (usually teenagers) has had a number of short-term emergency admissions to local authority **accommodation**, FGC to focus on the prevention of further breakdowns in the home situation & also make contingency plans for the child to remain within the extended family during a future crisis, rather than being looked after by the local authority
- Where there are **child protection** concerns, FGC to give the family the opportunity to come up with a family support plan to address risk & demonstrate family's capacity to work with professionals to implement the protection plan
- Where **parents/carers** are finding it difficult to meet their child's needs due to **health or emotional problems**, FGC to focus on support from family members, and/or identify alternative carers if necessary
- Where child is subject of **care proceedings**, FGC to help SS assess whether rehabilitation or placement with extended family are viable options for a child before (and after!) making any recommendations around permanent placement outside the family network
- Where SS wish to apply to discharge a care order, FGC to ascertain that family

support will be available

- Where parents/carers of children with special needs are struggling to cope, FGC to see what family support is available
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- So Family Group Conferences: In my own words, is ‘**A forum for families to come together to take responsibility and make decisions about the future welfare of their child(ren)**’
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- The small print says FGCs **empowers families**; it’s their meeting; the power dynamics is shifted; families make the decisions, rather than SS
- Enables **extended family members and other adults** important to the child(ren) **to be involved**
- Meeting is **centred on the needs of the child(ren)**
- **Information is provided from Social Services about support/resources available; families can also request assistance/resources** if it means taking better care of or being able to take on the care of a child
- **Highlights strengths** and teases out resources available within family & friends
- **Enables working in partnership** and improves relationships
- Aims to **have children returned/remained in family environment/network**
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- Theoretically speaking, Family Group Conferences are a great idea
- But it can only be successful and produce the desired benefits if all those involved in the FGC process fulfill their roles and responsibilities
- And this can only be achieved by believing in the FGC model as this generates a level of accountability, commitment, encouragement & empowerment
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- So, how does it work? Theroetically....
- The FGC Model starts with a **referral** – agree need for a plan for a child/young person; independent co-ordinator appointed, reflecting the race/culture/language/religion, which is acceptable to the family
- **Preparation** - co-ordinator, in consultation with child & immediate carers, identifies ‘family’ network, issues invitations, agrees venue, date, timing & prepares participants
- We then move on to the meeting itself, which is held in 3 stages: **Information-Giving** – at the start of the meeting, the co-ordinator chairs the professional information sharing about roles & responsibilities, concerns & local resources. Family can seek clarification
- **Private Family Time** – private planning time for the family. Professionals & co-ordinator withdraw; family needs to agree a plan, contingency plans, review arrangements & requests for resources
- **And Agreeing, Monitoring and Reviewing the Plan** – co-ordinator & professionals rejoin the family & the plan is clarified. Resources are negotiated if possible within the meeting & the plan agreed unless the plan places the child at risk of significant harm. Monitoring & reviewing arrangements are discussed & clarified

- Much emphasis is given on the meeting itself, which is important but the preparatory work involved beforehand contributes towards making the meeting a positive outcome/experience for everyone involved
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- For the FGC model to take shape, there has to be people involved. And these are:
Development Officers/Project Managers; Social Work Team Managers; Social Workers; Support Agencies; Independent FGC Co-ordinators & Children and Families
- And where there's people in the equation, there has to be roles & responsibilities attached to them as well
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- **The Role of the FGC Development Officer:**
- To **promote the Service** – if no one knows about FGCs, there can be no referrals or recommendations. Not just promoting the service to those who can only refer but to other agencies involved with children & families. In England, the majorities are social workers who can make referrals & it's not compulsory. This indicates that social workers have some degree of power or decision on whether to make referrals or not. Families need to know about FGCs so that they can self-refer
- Recently, I met children & families who'd been involved in FGCs. A teenager was talking about her own experiences. Whilst going through a trouble teenaged life, she ended up in hospital after a failed suicide attempt. It was her doctor who suggested having an FGC. The teenager mentioned it to her social worker, who then made a referral! Since having an FGC, her life and her relationship with the family has positively improved. So much so, that she wants to be an FGC advocate!
- Judges, barristers & solicitors are also playing a significant role in making recommendations or insisting that social workers have an FGC before any decision is made in court
- FGCs need to be regularly promoted due to the number of social workers who leave and new ones join. And that also includes **providing training** for them to explain about the model & process
- Development officers are the point of contact to **discuss potential referrals & ensure that they are appropriate for an FGC. Explain FGC Model/Process/Roles & Responsibilities/families preference of co-ordinator**
- **Allocate referrals to co-ordinators** according to ethnicity, gender, language, culture & religion or preference; availability; matching skills/styles; & complexity of cases
- **Provide regular supervision to co-ordinators**, especially when working on a referral & **provide on-going training** to develop & update their practice i.e. refresher courses or workshops aimed at dealing with particular issues e.g. domestic violence issues, dealing with aggression, keeping control of the meeting etc. Regular co-ordinators' group meeting – share experiences,

isolating profession

- **Collate post-evaluation information** – to develop and improve the service both for service providers and service users
- **Administrative duties**, such as filling important documents for reference & submitting invoice claims!
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- **The role of the Social Work Team Managers:**
- Recommend FGCs to social workers, where appropriate
- Agree & support referral
- Assist referrer to make a clear agenda
- Ensure referrer is clear about resource
- Be available at the other end of a telephone! This helps considerably when the social worker at the FGC can't say yes, for example, to a request that a family has made about resources in their plan
- Agree the family plan, if it doesn't place the child at risk
- Ensure implementation & monitoring as appropriate
- Ensure accountability
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- **The role of the Social Worker:**
- Carry out usual statutory duties
- Consult/seek agreement with at least one family member re: FGC
- Make an FGC referral – the sooner the better, early intervention
- Meet with the co-ordinator; work with the co-ordinator, not against them – issues of power struggles emerge especially if a SW has reluctantly been asked to make a referral: the 'what could a co-ordinator do that I haven't done already?' issue; 'what can the family possibly come up with in their plan?' issue; be available/ contactable to the co-ordinator
- Prepare report of concerns/questions/resources etc
- Attend the FGC & present report
- Consider the plan & monitor/review arrangements
- Support the family to carry out the plan
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- **The role of the Support Agencies:**
- Carry out any necessary assessment
- Provide information about their clients for the FGC
- Provide information about their services
- Attend the FGC, if possible; to give families the opportunity to ask questions, seek clarification & gather further information from them
- Implement their part of the family's plan
- Be part of agreeing & monitoring arrangements
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- **The role of the Family:**
- Attend the Family Group Conference
- Focus on the needs of the child(ren)
- Develop a plan
- Write up the plan

- Monitor the plan
- Carry out the plan
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- Apart from the role & responsibilities of the co-ordinator, which we haven't looked at yet, this is (ideally) what everyone else's should be to ensure that Family Group Conferences are successful, positive and empowering. Of course, FGC co-ordinators are not guardian angels (cough, cough!) but there are the little things that they do (or should do) that makes them so important in the process
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- This is my own job description/procedures!
- So, **after thorough consultation/agreement with development officer & in receipt of the referral form, contact SW ASAP to arrange a meeting**
- **Go through referral form with SW for any omissions, clarification or additional information needed*.**
- **Explain the FGC process**, especially what the co-ordinator's & the SW's role & responsibility is; to eliminate power struggles
- **Explain format for FGC report**.**
- **Check SW's timescale/availability for FGC:** they might be away on holiday/training; this might incur delays. Are they prepared to work out of office hours/weekends, if no, reach a compromise!
- **Exchange contact details;** sounds obvious but additional contact information e.g. fax, email, mobile etc are handy!
- **Update SW regularly** regarding general progress, not the details of individual contacts (confidentiality); likelihood of major delays or if it looks unlikely that a meeting will occur
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- **Referral form checklist:**
- **Family genogram:** the more additional information the SW has, the better, sometimes not all information is included on the referral form. Get a feel about the family, bring it to life
- **Family dynamics:** the status of their relationships with one another; good to know & prepare before meeting with the family members
- The **child(ren)** involved; their views, wishes & feelings
- **Characteristics/personalities:** good indication of how to approach/communicate
- **Potential conflict:** who to look out for in particular
- **History of assault:** personal safety or for others
- **Language;** interpreters needed during visits to family
- **Communication issues:**
- **Disability/special needs:**
- **Ethnicity:** again, not all family members may ethnically be the same i.e. mixed relationships
- **Support Agencies:** ensure that the number of professionals does not exceed the number of family members
- **Resources:** what resources are available from SS or what would they consider

- i.e. financial, emotional & practical
- **Contact details** of family members/support agencies: again, sounds obvious, but sometimes telephone numbers/addresses are missing, not always correct/complete addresses. And it causes unnecessary delays
- **Reason for the FGC!**: I've had occasions where the SW has asked me what the reason for the FGC is! If the SW doesn't know, there's no clarity, focus or agenda/outcomes of conferences less successful. Which makes it difficult for the co-ordinator to explain to the family the purpose of the FGC and why they should attend, especially when they are already reluctant to be involved! This normally occurs when the SW has been told to make a referral & just going through formalities. SW has own agenda i.e. use of FGC as an assessment of family/ confirmation/guardian ad litem/steering the family towards what they want the outcome to be
- **Legal status of the Child/Parental Responsibility**
- **Who has the FGC been discussed with/who has agreed:**
- **Timescales:** how soon does the FGC need to be convened realistically?
- **Guidelines for SW's FGC Report:** a4 jargon-free, clear & understandable, available in family's first language. There should be no surprises/no new news in the report!

Brief background i.e. reason for FGC rather than detailed history of how current situation has arisen

Main concerns: Centred on the needs of the child rather than the adults (not disempowering) e.g. Mother not taking responsibility for ensuring that Darren goes to school but rather 'Darren not attending school every day?'

Family strengths/Positive information about the child and/or family

Questions for the Family to Address in their PFT: clarity & focus. Again, centred on the needs of the child e.g. How will the family ensure that Darren goes to school every day?'

Resources availability & limitations/timescales for accessing & procedures for accessing resources e.g. assessments

NB: SWs are sometimes reluctant to include available resources; they await what families ask for instead but if families don't know what's available to them or what they are entitled to, then how do they know what to ask for! Should co-ordinators be able to challenge SWs or research; again power struggle issues

Bottomline: what will happen if the concerns are not addressed in the plan or the family is unable to make a plan i.e. care proceedings

What would not be acceptable in the plan? E.g. placement with a family member who is a schedule one offender

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- The SW report for the FGC provides an agenda, information and focus
- Sent to co-ordinator BEFORE the meeting to be distributed
- Families are PREPARED; able to think & talk about it
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- Contact parents/main carers to arrange appointment ASAP. I like to make telephone contact to save time and not everyone can read, then follow-up with confirmation letter
- Explain role/independence/no decision-making powers; reasons for FGC; the process/model; leaflets & video;
- Confidentiality
- complaints procedures;
- Map out together other family members/friends/support agencies to invite but who really has control over who should be invited? Do co-ordinators need consent from parents/main carers to contact other family members, regardless of whether we have been able to make contact with them or not?
- Face-to-face contact as many as possible
- If appropriate, visit children to explain FGC; seek their views, wishes & feelings; empower them to become involved
- advocate's role; identify advocate: was co-ordinator's role but now using independent advocates to work solely with a child, young person or vulnerable adult
- Encourage + Support + Prepare = Empower
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- During these visits, important to pick up & deal with any hidden agendas, conflict issues within family members & between SS;
- seek out potential mediators within the family
- negativity, anxieties & fears; lack of interest/involvement;
- who's dominant/passive etc – identify support person/advocate for vulnerable adult;

**** FOCUS IS ON THE NEEDS OF THE CHILD/
REMINDE THEM OF BOTTOMLINE ****

- Listen what families' needs are/resources. Families' agenda might be different to the SWs; possible plan proposals; any social work questions etc
- Feedback to SW for more information/seek approval regarding resources PRIOR to meeting
- Update Development Officer re: progress/queries/feedback
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- Contact other support agencies; encourage FGC attendance; submit reports in their absence
- Suitable FGC dates/times/venues convenient for the family to attend
- Those unable to/excluded, seek alternative ways – letter, telephone, video,

advocate etc

- Seek practical FGC arrangements according to families' needs – travel, advocates, interpreters, where the FGC is held in the family's 1st language, translated back to SS in English, plan is also in 1st language, empowering for families
- creche facilities/worker, food/drink etc
- Regular contact to/from advocates, if being used
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- Chase up SW's report!! Insisting week before FGC
- Check through/edit if necessary SW's report before distributing to invitees – no new news & avoid disempowering information that will just inflame situation
- Send out invitations with attendance list, ground rules & FGC Model information as reminders. Set time half an hour before start of meeting to allow for lateness, relaxation & time for family to chat amongst themselves, especially if they haven't met one another
- Contact all participants beforehand to check receipt of invitations/attendance/anxieties/queries
- Reconfirm venues/creche workers/interpreters etc
- THE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE.....!
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- Set up meeting rooms (informal), extra room available for breather/cool down; seating arrangements (in a circle) etc
- Give family time alone before meeting starts, without 'professionals'
- Introduction/Housekeeping/Ground Rules (**respect, no blaming, no past unless it helps with the present, listen & not interrupt, give everyone the chance to participate, count to 10, leave the room, take a breather etc (e.g. gowdie)**)/Stages of FGC/Use of Flipcharts: reminders/child focused
- Chair Information-Giving Stage – not SWs! Be in control, stick to the ground rules!
- Ensure families ask questions/seek clarification/further information
- Read out any other reports/letters in the absence of/hear from advocate/child's views, wishes & feelings
- Ensure families have information they need in order to formulate a plan before moving onto Private Family Time
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- At this stage, co-ordinator & SW withdraw from the family & support agencies who attended can leave. Be available (also SWs) should families have questions or are stuck
- Check families remain focussed during Private Family Time
- When ready, go through plan with family before SWs are brought back into the meeting for last stage of FGC – Agreeing, Monitoring & Reviewing
- Ensure all questions have been addressed & AOB in which families would like to include
- Who/Why/What/When/Where/How – Be SMART****
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- Clear & accurate record of every single decision made: Specific – Measurable – Achievable – Realistic – Timed
- Non-SMART: ‘BC has agreed he would like to see child more often’
- SMART: ‘BC wants to resume his contact every Friday from 1-3pm starting in two weeks’ time’
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- Belongs to the family, using words & expressions chosen by the family
- Can be read & understood people who were not present at the FGC
- Arrangements about how the plan will be monitored & reviewed by the family
Could include back-up/alternative plan should original plan not work
- Existing arrangements, not just future plans e.g. JC is currently living with his sister on a temporary basis until the family make a decision about where he will live in the long term. He takes his laundry around to this mother’s on Tuesdays & she does his washing’
- Statements/requests even if SS not in agreement with families’ plan but courts might be e.g. ‘the family are strongly against the idea of Debbie being adopted outside the family’
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- When families are ready, invite SW back
- Include SWs’ feedback in the plan, especially if they have not agreed or need to seek agreement
- Use SMART approach: Who/Why/What/When/Where/How
- Family Group Conference Review? Is families’ choice. Good way to ensure that both parties stick to their commitment, their side of the bargain. Preferably with a fixed date. Again, include in the family plan
- Plans to be signed (ownership) & photocopied if possible, given to families to take with them
- Evaluation forms to be completed
- Provide & distribute typed-up copy of families’ plan ASAP, to also include attendance, those invited but did not attend, apologies, letters & children’s views, wishes & feelings. Important to state who’s who in relation to the child e.g. maternal aunt, paternal grandmother
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- This is the current person specification for FGC co-ordinators
- Good general standard of education, although it has been raised on whether co-ordinators should have a SW qualification/background!
- An awareness of children’s legislation
- Knowledge of the workings of Social Services Departments
- Experience of facilitating meetings
- Knowledge of & commitment to the FGC model
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- Good level of written & verbal communication skills, includes being a good listener, patient, empathetic, flexible, enthusiastic, believe, persistent, think on your feet for the unexpected & a sense of humour!
- Ability to liaise & mediate between individuals
- Ability to negotiate & manage conflict between family members & SS!!

Ability to work in partnership with families & agencies

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- Ability to manage own workload in order to achieve targets within given timescales. Co-ordinators also work on more than one referral at a time
- Good range of organisational skills
- Good record of health
- Access to transport
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- Experience of working in a multi-cultural environment & an understanding of equality issues
- Commitment to equal opportunities & the ability to demonstrate anti-discriminatory practice

Quick overview of the referrals I've been involved in:

- Out of 40 referrals received, 22 went to an FGC, 18 did not
- Of those 22 FGCs, 13 reviews requested. Out of those 13 requests, 6 have been held; 5 did not go ahead; 2 yet to be held. Another 2 were left open

• family plans made at fgcs (nb this doesn't necessarily confirm the final outcome e.g. dependant on court decision/outcome of assessments)

- stay with parent (2):
- stay with family (5):
- return to parent (2):
- plan to return to parent (5):
- plan to return to family (1):
- plan to stay with parent (2):
- plan to stay with family (1):
- stay Child Looked After (1):
- to be Child Looked After (1):
- no plan (2):

• Why FGCs not held, also indicating the contact involved:

- Parent were not interested/resistance (8):

Due to higher level of parents not wanting an FGC, could co-ordinators still contact other family members, without their permission?

- Other family members not interested/resistance (2):
- Child(ren) not interested/resistance (2):
- Issues Resolved (4):
- SW changed their mind about referral (1):
- Parent cancelled on the day (1):

• **The 5 reviews that were not held:**

- family member was not interested (3)
- Because plan was not implemented by SS; family felt disempowered, hence considered review a waste of time (2)

- Ethnicity of referrals:
- Mostly White UK/Black Caribbean/Mixed
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- Gender/age of children
- 63 children / 37 girls / 26 boys
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- Challenges & Issues Raised:
- How to ensure that SWs refer as early as possible e.g. before child is accommodated? SWs using FGCs as a last resort rather than preventative measure; especially if it's already in the court arena and decision-making is limited; already been decided; families already involved with so many agencies and legal. Families feel grounded, co-ordinator shows up, yet another person
- Do we need consent from parent to contact extended family members, whether or not we've been able to make contact with the parent themselves? And they're saying no!
- Can FGC still go ahead without parent/child's involvement?
- Should children attend Family Group Conferences? Issues of impact
- SWs report: issues of confidentiality
- Resources: can we challenge SS to come up with the goods / should co-ordinators be advocates to what the families are entitled to?
- Responsibility of follow-up/outcome of commitments made by SS?
- All the above is disempowering to families rather than empowering!
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- Just to end on why I do the job that I do:
- The belief that parents can look after their children, with added help & support
- The belief that extended families must be looked into or given the opportunity to come forward & be assessed as possible alternative carers
- The belief that kinship carers should have the same status as foster carers
- The belief that children should remain with families, unless they are 'at risk of significant harm'
- And the belief that families are capable of making decisions