

FAMILY GROUP DECISION MAKING: MY STEPS IN THE JOURNEY

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INTRODUCTION

I am honored to have been asked to speak about family group decision making and my experiences as a conferencing coordinator in Pennsylvania, USA. It has been an exciting journey of learning and dreaming, one that I hope continues and is nourished through discussions with you at this conference.

Family group decision making (FGDM) is a process that provides families with an opportunity to bring together larger family networks—aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbors, friends—to make important decisions that might otherwise be made by professionals. This process of engaging and empowering families to make their own decisions and plans for their family members' well-being seems to lead to better outcomes, less conflict with professionals, more informal support and improved family functioning (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon & Burford, 2003).

As professionals, we tend to look to the end result: What do we want it to be for a client or family? Naturally we want what is best for them, and sometimes we believe we know what program would be best suited for a youngster or what type



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of treatment would be most helpful. The problem is that we jump right to the solution. We don't realize that the process of making the decision might be more important and more helpful to the client and family than the decision itself.

Recently, two grandmothers contacted me after two FGDM conferences. One called me six months after the conference to let me know how her grandson was doing and to tell me how much she appreciated having had the opportunity to meet and devise a plan for him. Her grandson seemed to have returned to drugs and alcohol and would not participate in a follow-up meeting. Despite this, she was thankful to know that every effort was being made to help him. The other grandmother had heard some difficult things from a close friend at the FGDM conference held for her two grandchildren. But even though the conference had been difficult for her, she still talked about the good that had come from it since. She also wanted to know what she could do to help other families have the opportunity to participate in a conference.

In the first situation, one grandmother felt wonderful immediately after the conference and still had positive feelings six months later, even though her grandson had started making poor choices again. The other grandmother felt drained and hurt immediately after the conference, but a week later she was able to see its positive aspects and wanted to help spread the process. So what is it that this process is giving families—a sense of empowerment, pride, hope? It seems that no matter how difficult a family's circumstances might be during or after a conference, they still value the opportunity to have a voice. Even if the outcome is not what they had hoped, they still appreciate being involved in the decision-making process.

MY STORY

I was pursuing my undergraduate degree in social work, having my eyes glaze over while memorizing the problem-solving model, when I stumbled across what has become my passion, in a restorative justice class with Howard Zehr. I found myself doing all the required readings in his book *Changing*

Lenses, fascinated by this common-sense approach to dealing with wrongdoing and conflict. One day we watched a video with Fred McElrea, from New Zealand, facilitating a family group conference. I longed for the opportunity to be a facilitator of such a process. I quickly dismissed the idea, as I was returning to my hometown, in eastern Pennsylvania, and nothing that innovative ever happened there. Little did I know that my first job would be at Community Service Foundation, working as an in-home counselor with troubled youth. You can imagine my excitement when I learned that this organization was not only involved in the restorative justice movement, but that they were training people all over the world. As a staff member, I was required to attend numerous trainings on how to work “with” clients, families, victims and even those I supervise.

In 2003 I was re-introduced to family group conferencing, or family group decision making, when I was asked to start a conferencing program within the agency. I was thrilled by the opportunity and the challenge. We would provide FGDM and restorative conferences to the community as a contracted provider to county agencies.

TRAINING

In September 2003, FGDM pioneer Gale Burford came to our area from the University of Vermont to share some of his insights on FGDM. Later that year, FGC leader Paul Nixon came from England to train our directors and other staff members who were directly involved in FGDM. A year later, Sharon Inglis, another FGC innovator from England, trained more of our staff. At this point, IIRP director of training Bob Costello and I developed a two-day FGDM training. The entire staff of the Community Service Foundation agency was trained in the FGDM process and encouraged to engage with our clients’ extended family and friends—people who would be able to lend support even after the clients completed our program. We also began offering the training to local government and private agencies at a nominal charge, to familiarize people with the idea. We wanted to see this practice spread.

EXPERIENCES

After the CSF staff was first trained in FGDM, we knew we needed experience before we offered to facilitate the process for other agencies. We began providing family group decision making conferences for clients in our programs, including our group homes, alternative schools and outpatient drug and alcohol services. One of the first conferences involved a 17-year-old girl, whom I'll call "Jill," who had "no family." Her mother was incarcerated; she had an older sister no one knew much about; her father was deceased. Since she was about to turn 18 and "age out" of the foster care system, it was time for her to choose whether or not to leave the care of county children and youth services.

I learned a great deal preparing for Jill's conference. To start, she claimed that the father listed for her in children and youth's records was not really her father. I spoke to Jill's mother, who confirmed Jill's assertion and permitted me to make contact with her real father's family, as he himself was deceased. When Jill and I were searching through the phone book and calling people with her father's last name, she said, "I feel like Antwone Fisher!"—a character in a movie about a young man in search of his family. Unfortunately, Jill's paternal family did not embrace her. They had never known of her existence and didn't want to know. (Her father had been married to another woman.) This part of the story didn't have a happy ending, as it does in the movie *Antwone Fisher*. Nevertheless, Jill had the opportunity to learn about her father's family.

After 65 hours of sleuthing and preparations, the conference was set. Jill made the invitations and prepared the food. She couldn't believe the conference was really happening. Her family was coming together to talk about how she would return to the community.

The day before the conference, Jill learned that her mother, who had recently been released to a halfway house, had been detained again and would not be able to come to the conference. Jill wanted to move forward with the conference anyway. About 13 family members attended; most were not members

of Jill's immediate family, but great aunts, great uncles and second cousins.

The family group came up with a list of things that Jill needed to do for herself and of ways that the family could support her. No family member was able to take her in. Together with Jill, they decided that she would stay in the care of the county agency when she turned 18 and enter an independent living program in the area. There, Jill, who had "no family" could continue to have contact with and support from her great aunts, great uncles and second cousins.

Jill's story might not have a fairy tale ending, but she had a difficult family situation, and many professionals might have dismissed the idea of an FGDM conference for her because she had "no family." If Jill's family had simply been invited to a meeting and not been strongly pursued during the pre-conference process, there is little doubt that no one would have come to the meeting. This family was accustomed to having children in foster care and was used to having decisions made *for* them. During the conference, it became apparent that they had no idea that Jill needed them in her life. They believed that her needs were being met by the child welfare agency.

When Jill's family members were interviewed several weeks after the conference, they all said that they valued the opportunity to tell Jill that they did care and would always be there for her. For a 17-year-old girl who thought no one cared about her, and who everyone thought "had no family," this was an incalculably valuable outcome.

STATE INVOLVEMENT

While pursuing my early conferencing work, in 2003, I attended meetings with the Center for Excellence of the University of Pittsburgh (now the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program) to help plan the American Humane conference in Harrisburg. I also began attending Pennsylvania statewide implementation team meetings, in which practitioners and administrators from around the state come together to learn more about the process and how others are making it work

in their region. At these meetings, the enthusiasm for FGDM is contagious. In spring 2006 I joined the state's FGDM leadership team, and I look forward to my continued involvement with that group.

Some local government agencies have implemented the practice by educating and training their staff and starting their own family group decision making units. Others have contracted with private providers. However agencies decide to implement the practice, professionals need to understand and "buy into" the values of FGDM in order for it to be successful. Believing that the families we work with can come up with solutions to their own problems is a major shift in thinking for many in the helping professions.

Pennsylvania started utilizing FGDM in 1999 with several county child welfare agency pilots. In 2006, almost half of the state's 67 counties are actively implementing the process. (For more information, see www.pacwcbt.pitt.edu/FGDM.htm.) Because the state is a commonwealth, each county is run differently, and each county agency has found a unique way to implement FGDM. Some agencies recognize that FGDM is not just a shift in thinking about how we treat families, but also a shift in how administration treats their staff. This shift is from doing things *to* or *for* people to doing things *with* them, essentially becoming more restorative.

There are some counties that have made FGDM available to multiple agencies. In these counties, any government agency can make an FGDM referral, including such departments as the Office on Aging, juvenile and adult probation, corrections, children and youth, and MH/MR (mental health and mental retardation).

As FGDM has been implemented throughout the world, several different practice models have emerged. The first was the New Zealand model of family group conferencing. In Pennsylvania and elsewhere, many counties have embraced the family unity meeting model, which originated in the state of Oregon, USA. In some FGDM models, practitioners raise the issue of "strengths and concerns" in conferences. The one

element I believe that all FGDM models must incorporate is “family alone time,” the period of time during an FGDM conference when the family group is left alone, without professionals present, to devise a plan. Family alone time is what renders family group decision making (or family group conferencing) truly restorative, in that it empowers the family group to work together to address its own concerns.

I have observed many disputes over which FGDM model is the “right” one. My experience with restorative practices has led me to the realization that (as long as family alone time is incorporated) what model is used is not so important. What is important is to provide a meaningful, empowering opportunity for people to share real thoughts and feelings with one another in a safe environment.

At this point I think there is a healthy tension between the need for flexibility within the practice and the need for regulation to sustain its integrity. The fear is that when such a grassroots practice is mainstreamed, it runs the risk of adhering so closely to “standards” that when it is delivered it becomes routine, and the family’s unique voice in how the meeting is run becomes secondary.

In England, part-time coordinators are utilized to organize and facilitate FGDM conferences. One of West Berkshire’s best FGDM practitioners is also a full-time customer service representative at a bank. She is used to doing whatever she needs to do to satisfy her customers, a skill that translates beautifully to FGDM. Have we already begun to professionalize the coordinator or facilitator role? If a family member who participated in a conference applied for a position as an FGDM coordinator, would we consider hiring her or him? Consider the example of Reverend Benjamin Shortridge, of Los Angeles, California, USA, who participated in an FGDM conference on behalf of his grandchildren, and was so taken with the process that he went on to found the organization L.A. FACES, to promote FGDM in the Los Angeles area.

There are many questions we will ask as we continue to learn about the practice of FGDM. I sometimes compare the

conference process to putting one foot in front of the other in the dark: You never know what the next step will be until you complete the one before it. But there is one thing I do know. As we work to implement a process that puts families first, what works best is to be real, engaging and empowering, and to always *ask the family*.

REFERENCE

Merkel-Holguin, L., Nixon, P. & Burford, G. (2003). Learning with families: A synopsis of FGDM research and evaluation in child welfare. *Protecting Children*, 18, 2-11.