

A large, light grey stylized tree graphic on the left side of the slide. The tree has two main branches that curve upwards and outwards, ending in a dense canopy of leaves. At the base of the tree, there are two stylized human figures, one on each side, with their arms raised as if holding up the tree. A red heart is positioned between the two figures, and a red circle is below the heart. The overall theme is family and community.

Evaluation of the Family Group Conferencing Program: Findings & Recommendations

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We acknowledge the tradition of custodianship and law of the Country on which the University of Sydney campuses stand. We pay our respects to those who have cared and continue to care for Country.

Tree of Knowledge - pokerwork on kangaroo skin, Lynette Riley, 2010

<http://Sydney.edu.au/kinship-module>



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Evaluation overview

- **Implementation:** assess fidelity of program implementation
- **Outcomes:** examine the extent to which FGC has contributed to *reducing risks and avoiding entry into care* for children and young people
- **Economic analysis:** measure and *compare the cost and benefits* of FGC

Evaluation governance and ethics

FGC Evaluation Steering Committee, composed of:

- FGC Program Team: knowledge of the program implementation and protocols
- DCJ Districts: to provide insights into the consideration and timing for consultations with caseworkers and casework managers
- FACS Information, Analysis and Research portfolio (FACSIAR): to assist with the evaluation methodology and access to administrative data
- DCJ Aboriginal Outcomes program: to inform the evaluation with local knowledge about the Aboriginal communities in each District and cultural protocols for consultations.

Ethics approval provided by The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and The University of Sydney



Implementation evaluation

How did we evaluate the implementation of FGC?

Data collection	Sample
Family interviews	Involving 40 family members (approximately 100 children). 31 Aboriginal participants 9 non-Aboriginal participants.
Workforce surveys	Surveys completed by 85 caseworkers 49 casework managers 35 independent facilitators.
Workforce focus groups	23 facilitators (7 Aboriginal/16 non-Aboriginal) 8 District Coordinators 29 caseworkers/casework managers (15 Aboriginal/14 non-Aboriginal)
Observations of FGCs	9 FGCs observed across 3 sites, with post-FGC facilitator interviews
Referral Information Forms & Family Plans	Sample from 3 sites, with a range of presenting issues and family cultural backgrounds

Factors associated with a positive FGC experience

Preparation for the FGC

- Clear communication around issues and expectations
- Early engagement of family, Kin and community
- Having a skilled facilitator who briefs family



During the FGC

- Facilitator skilled in handling family dynamics and offering cultural support
- Clarity around non-negotiables and support in Private Family Time if needed
- DCJ caseworker or manager in attendance



Family Plan implementation

- Active caseworker support for implementation
- Accountability for what was agreed
- DCJ conducts the 3-month review

Messages for practice: Aboriginal communities, children and families



Engage early with Kinship network and community

- DCJ should value the strength of Aboriginal Kinship networks and community from early engagement to OOHC
- Ensure the right people offer support to the child and are present for the FGC



Promote cultural safety

- Participants valued Aboriginal facilitators who demonstrated cultural safety and respect
- Genuine and more effective engagement from DCJ with NGOs

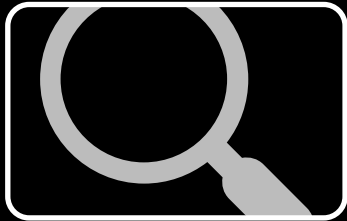


Ensure implementation of the ATSICPP

- Elements of participation, partnership, placement and connection can be implemented through reaching out to the Kinship network and focusing on cultural connection through the preparation, meeting and follow-up phases

Messages for practice:

Family decision making and empowerment



Importance of Family Finding and preparation

- It is critical for caseworkers to identify important people in the child's life
- Families need to be informed about the scope of decision-making



Skilled facilitators can manage family dynamics

- Skilled facilitators can support the family to keep conflict from escalating
- Conflict management skills and competencies vary between caseworkers and facilitators



Take care with involving children

- Preparation involves frank assessment of whether children should directly participate
- Alternatives include pre-recorded message and having a photo present

Messages for practice:

Relationships & communication between families and DCJ



Importance of honesty & transparency

- Families are expected to be honest about their circumstances and look for the same honesty and transparency from DCJ
- Families expressed concern about the FGC agenda and whether decisions had already been made by DCJ



Clear communication

- Receiving the right information around expectations helps family members prepare for the FGC
- Changes to the family plan should be communicated to all family members

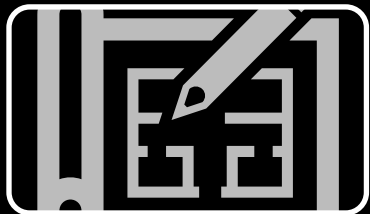


Caseworker and casework manager attendance

- Families stressed the importance of the caseworker or casework manager attending the FGC so decisions can be made by those who know the case.

Messages for practice:

Access to supports and achieving the Family Plan



Support to implement the Family Plan

- Support for implementation is affected by - high caseloads; staff turnover; waitlists; and inconsistent engagement with NGOs



Frequent follow-up

- Families stressed the importance of the case worker following up and making referrals to services
- Without follow-up, families may not know about support services available



Consistent 3-month review

- Confusion was reported about who was responsible for scheduling the review – the caseworker or facilitator
- Reviews don't happen because of competing casework demands, and DCJ deciding that a review is not necessary

An illustration of a woman and a man dancing joyfully. The woman, on the left, has dark hair in a ponytail and is wearing a green sleeveless dress. She has her arms raised and is smiling. The man, on the right, has dark hair and is wearing a blue t-shirt and yellow shorts. He is also smiling and has his arms outstretched. The background is a large, vibrant red shape that resembles a stylized heart or a splash of paint. The overall style is flat and modern.

Outcomes evaluation


How did we evaluate outcomes of FGC?

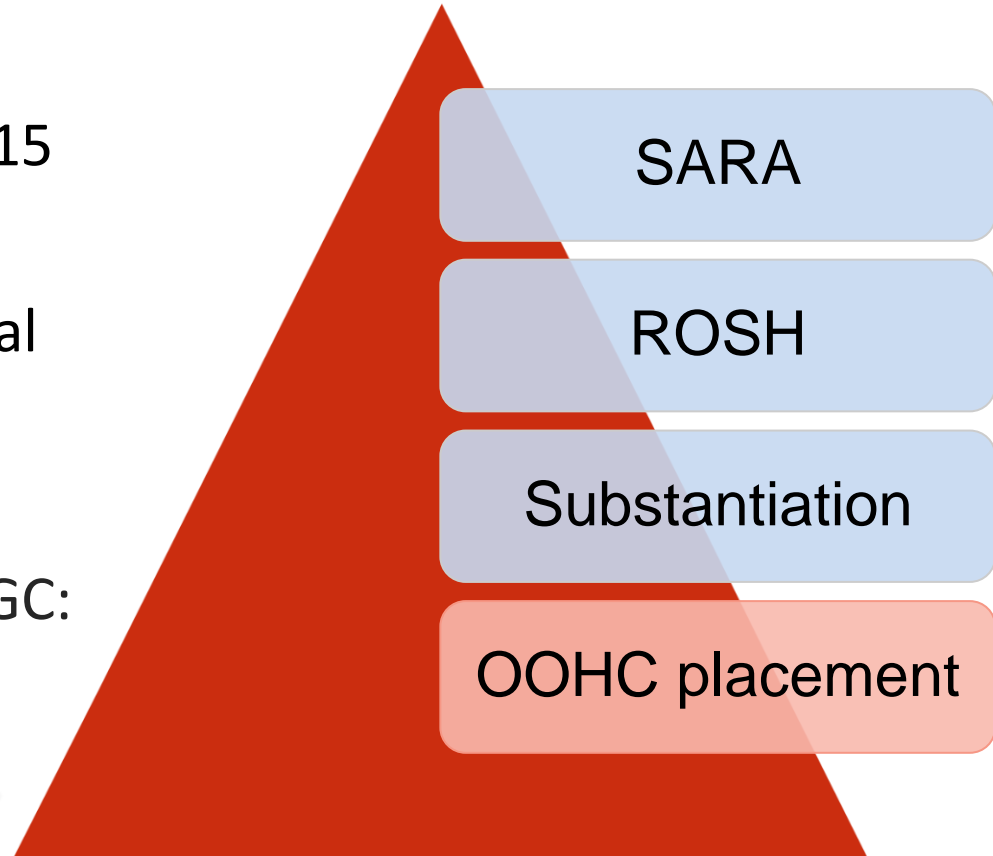
- Statistical model: We used a **generalized difference-in-difference model** which compares outcomes for children in the FGC program (*treatment group*) before and after the FGC session occurred with outcomes of children at the same time periods (*control group*) for whom no FGC was convened.
- Can control for long-term trends and individual-specific effects
- Main identification assumption for causal effect:
 - ✓ Children in treatment and control groups were on similar trends before FGC treatment occurred
 - ✓ No systematic logic in rollout timing of FGC

Evaluation framework




How did we evaluate outcomes of FGC, continuation?

- Data: De-identified DCJ administrative data from 2015 to June 2021
- Population: 60,487 Aboriginal and 48,387 non-Aboriginal children
- Follow-up period after FGC: ≥ 6 months
- Outcomes: 



Estimation Results

Statistically significant reductions in:

- 
- Helpline reports: Emotional abuse & Neglect
 - SARA
 - ROSH
 - Harm Substantiations

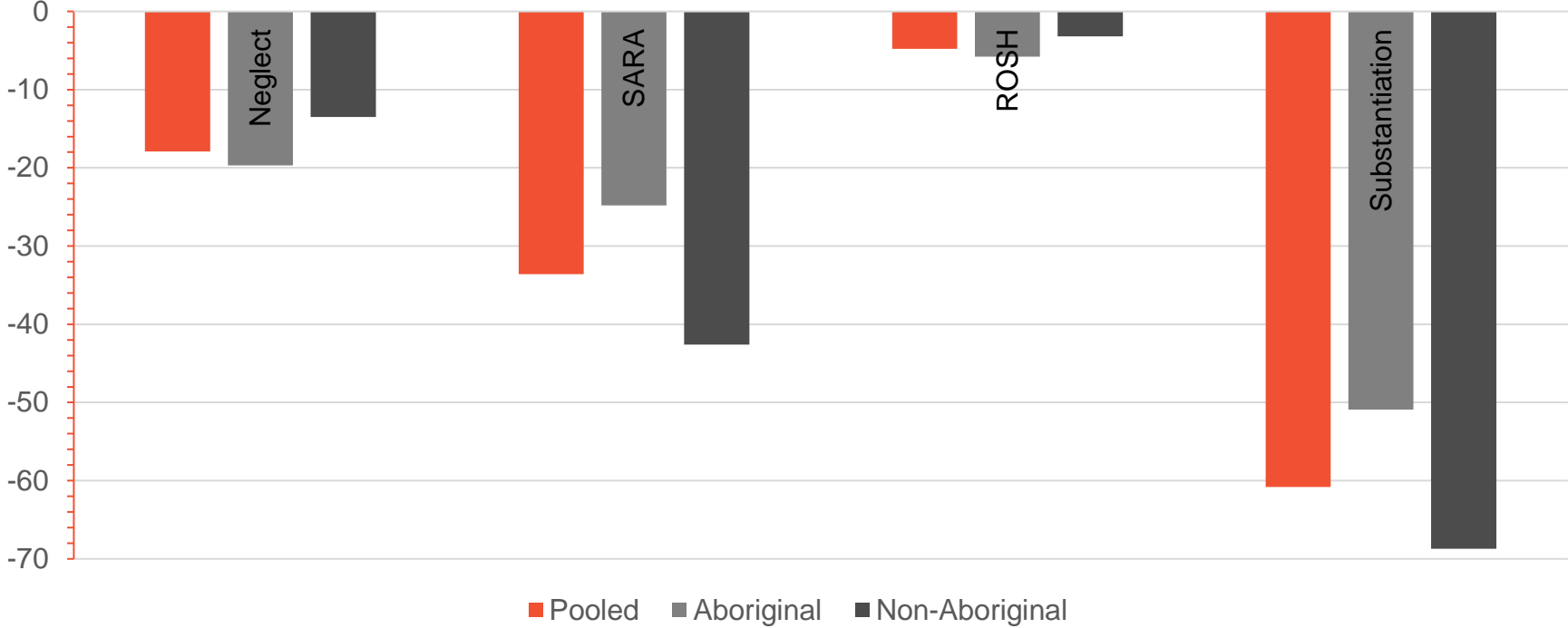
For ROSH, the effect was only present for Aboriginal children

For Helpline Sexual Abuse and SARA effect was only present for non-Aboriginal children

The strongest effect of FGC was on substantiations:

- **1/2 treated Aboriginal children avoided a subsequent substantiation**
- **2/3 treated non-Aboriginal children avoided a subsequent substantiation**

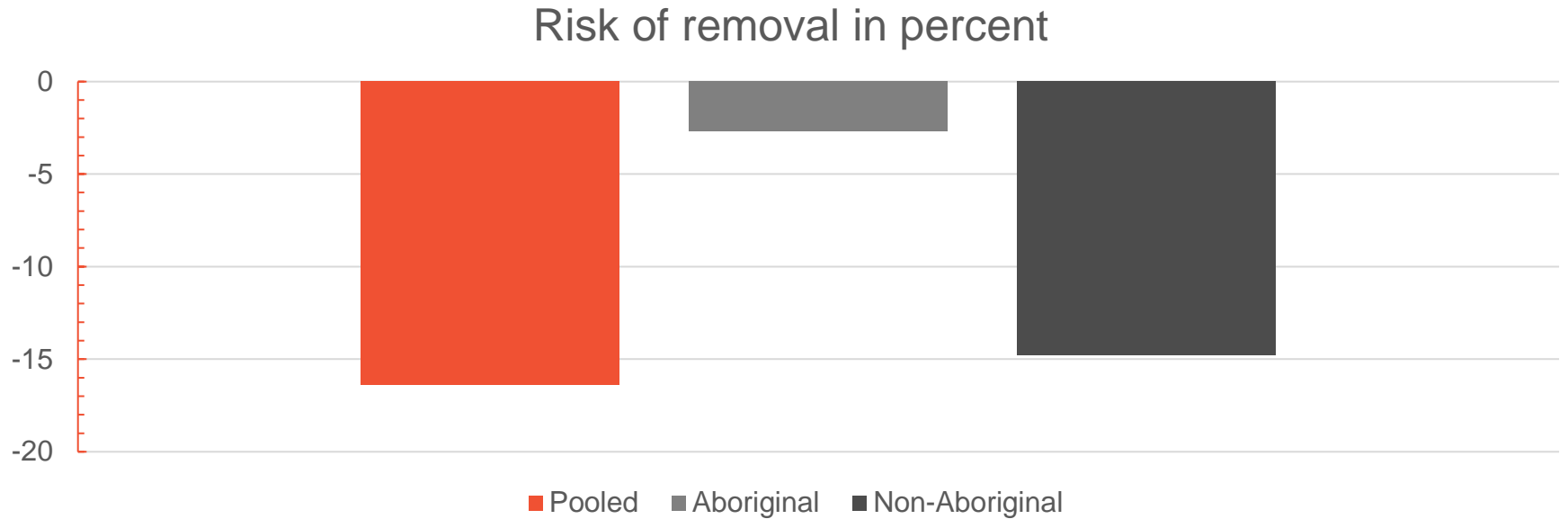
Estimation Results in Magnitude (Percent relative to sample mean)



Outcomes evaluation: Removal from home

- Method: Comparison of those referred and who ended up in the FGC program (n=3,728) with children who were also referred but did not receive a FGC (n=1,251).
- The analyses cannot control for longer-term trends and individual fixed effects in this estimation model, given the small number of removals.
- Results are interpreted as statistical associations, not as causal
- **Main result:**
 - ✓ ~ **1/2 children** who received the FGC avoided a removal in the short term
 - ✓ Treatment effect is statistically significant for **non-Aboriginal children**

Estimation results





Economic evaluation

How did we evaluate the economic cost benefit of FGC?

- We ask: does the FGC increase or decrease social value?
- We calculate the Benefit-Cost-Ratio (BCR):
 - ✓ If $BCR \geq 1$: The FGC increases social value
 - ✓ If $BCR < 1$: The FGC decreases social value
- Methods:
 - ✓ Costs: Calculate unit costs for operating the FGC program & compare with the cost of providing traditional care.
 - ✓ Social benefits: Derive monetary value from existing economic analyses conducted by DCJ

FGC cost

- The average cost of a FGC (excluding casework costs) is **\$3,231** ($SD = \$1,752$, median = \$2,769), and ranges widely from \$764 to \$14,141.
- Most of the expense for a FGC stems from the cost of the facilitator which averages at **\$2,791** ($SD = \$1,795$, median = \$2,272), but there is also a wide range for facilitator fees, from \$273 to \$12,972. This variation can be partially explained by families that have more than one FGC recorded.
- Other costs for the FGC relate to venue, catering, childcare, interpreters, and office supplies, which range on average from \$7 to \$1,682.

Economic analysis key findings

The costs of a FGC are estimated to be **\$7,914**. This includes FGC costs of \$3,231 per family, with the majority of those costs being the facilitator fees (around \$2,700), and the cost of DCJ staff time of \$4,683.

Social benefits for avoided ROSH substantiation was estimated to be **\$91,032**. Sum of avoided costs to the Government (\$33,726) and the broader economic benefits to the client (\$57,306).

For every dollar spent on the FGC program, society will recoup \$7.2 on average, \$5.5 for families with Aboriginal children and \$8.0 for families with non-Aboriginal children

Recommendations



Aboriginal communities, children and families



Engage early with Aboriginal Kinship networks and communities to draw out their strengths and contributions



Promote cultural safety through support from Aboriginal facilitators and cultural support people



Enhance integration of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in FGC implementation



FGC preparation and engagement



Encourage caseworkers to invest time in Family Finding to have the right people present



Include adequate information in referrals so that facilitators and families understand parameters of decision making



Take care with inclusion of children in meetings, with consideration of alternatives like pre-recorded message



Communications between DCJ and families



Ensure families and their networks have comprehensive information about the FGC and the non-negotiables



Ask caseworkers and managers to commit to attendance and follow-up on the Family Plan



Follow-up by caseworker with family to offer support as they implement the Family Plan is critical



FGC processes and procedures



Extend the 4-week period for FGC if needed for cultural and other considerations to engage family members



Monitor facilitator performance using the evaluation forms completed by FGC participants, and offer ongoing professional development to facilitators



Consistently conduct and review the family plans, to ensure assistance with connecting the family to services and resources



FGC processes and procedures



Clarify that the facilitator can assist during private family time “when and as requested”



Record in FGC data collection the reasons for refusal or cancellation of FGC, and also record context for the FGC



Link families to expenditure in expense recordings, to improve estimates on the costs of FGC per family



Thank You



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Website:

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families.html>

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Email to register for our mailing list.

