

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY
—
Research Centre
for Children and
Families

Family Group Conferencing Evaluation Practice Note

Introduction

NSW government introduced Family group conferencing (FGC) in 2011, with a phased state-wide implementation. Following an evaluation of the pilot program in 2011, a comprehensive evaluation commenced in 2020, to examine the extent to which the program has achieved its stated goals and outcomes.

FGC is a family-focused, strengths-based form of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). It seeks to engage families in decisions about their children and young people, thereby improving outcomes for their children. FGC is usually used early in the child protection process, with the aim to maintain children in the care of family, where possible, by including extended family in the decision-making process. Therefore, the introduction of FGC provided an important opportunity to resolve child protection matters and build supports for families outside of the court.

Most families viewed FGC as a chance for their extended family to come together and be heard. FGC offered them the respect and acknowledgement of their intimate knowledge of their own family and the solutions that would work for them. It allowed families to demonstrate their genuine care and love for the child at the centre of the FGC.

Evaluation findings

Family finding and engagement

Casework that included proactive family finding, respectful communication with family members, and keeping the child(ren) as the core focus of the FGC were consistently found to be critical factors associated with positive FGC outcomes. Investing adequate time for the identification of key members of the family and the extended network was crucial to the success of the FGC process.

It may take longer for family finding and engagement with Aboriginal families. This includes the need to recognise important events within Aboriginal communities that might affect timeframes for holding FGCs and family participation in FGCs such as Sorry Business and NAIDOC celebrations.

Families appreciated clear communication around the purpose of the FGC including the scope of family decision making. This is particularly relevant if the child is already in out-of-home care and the family's decisions may hold limited influence. Clear, transparent communication assisted in managing family's expectations. The purpose of the FGC and scope of decision making should also be made clear to facilitators, as they play a critical role in preparing the family for the FGC.

Key findings

- Good family finding practice by caseworkers, including identifying the right family members to attend, was key to good FGC outcomes.
- Facilitators require adequate information about the purpose of the FGC to prepare families so they can effectively participate in decision-making.
- Families gain the most benefit if they are well prepared and understand the 'non-negotiable' issues and scope for decisions.
- Family finding with Aboriginal families may take time due to cultural protocols and cultural obligations.
- Aboriginal facilitators are important for establishing cultural safety and respect for Aboriginal families.
- FGC should be aligned with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle to engage the strength of Aboriginal Kinship networks.
- Skilled facilitators are key to managing family dynamics to avoid conflicts escalating and keeping the focus on the child and family plan.
- There are a range of ways for children to voice their views if it is not in their best interest to attend an FGC.
- Some families needed support from facilitators during Family Time.
- Families often need support from DCJ to connect to services and implement their Family Plan.

“There are times that there is conflict between family and agency, and that part of my role is to strengthen those relationships and to try and create some collaboration there to achieve the outcomes that they would like to achieve from agency and from the family perspective as well.”

[Non-Aboriginal facilitator]

“I think the skill of the facilitator really impacts on the quality and the outcomes. We’ve had ones where I’ve pretty much ended up running the FGC, which is not ideal.” [Non-Aboriginal caseworker / manager casework]

“That was the big thing that I think helped us all is the pre meeting, meeting with everyone individually, I think it was, he did. Yes, to put everyone’s mind at ease and, yeah, to step in that way it made the meeting much go much smoother.” (Family interview 11)



“What I will do is go out and interview the children and do like the ‘Three Houses’ [activity] and ask them about their hopes and dreams and really talk to them on their own so that they can give me their viewpoints.” [Non-Aboriginal facilitator]

“One thing that sticks in my mind was a nine-year-old boy and he didn’t want to come but he recorded on my phone a message to the family, and it was just overwhelming ... to have that played back to the family I found was really an incredible moment because the voice of the child was there even though he didn’t want to be there physically.” [Non-Aboriginal facilitator]

FGC referrals and preparation

Amending the Referral Form to include a section specifying the purpose of the FGC would assist caseworkers to provide relevant information to the facilitator, including the services involved with the family. Articulating the child protection issues prompting the FGC, and the scope for family decision making, provides the background information to assist the facilitator and prepare the family, ensuring they understand what will entailed.

Thorough preparation makes or breaks the FGC experience. Clear and effective communication between the facilitator and DCJ caseworker / manager casework is essential for ensuring the facilitator can pass on accurate information to the family during the preparation phase. Good preparation included ensuring that the relevant people attended and the communication with them promoted a shared understanding of the purpose of the meeting. A skilled facilitator has conversations with FGC participants in advance and considers how to handle family dynamics, including how to incorporate the views of the children involved with the FGC.

Independent facilitators

The independence of facilitators from DCJ was highly valued by caseworkers and families and was considered to make the difference for family engagement and trust in the process.

The quality and depth of the preparation for an FGC is a key aspect for success. The skill and expertise of the facilitator was consistently reported, by caseworkers and families, as having the most impact on the FGC outcomes. This involved the facilitator’s ability to mediate complex relationships and conversations, as well as create a safe space for constructive discussions. Clear parameters for decision-making contributed to family’s engagement in the process and commitment to the Family Plan.

Another key aspect of the independent facilitator’s role is to sensitively mediate difficult relationships within families and between family members and agencies. A skilled facilitator is one who takes charge of the process from the outset and made sure that all family members have the same information and understood why there were being invited to attend the FGC. A key skill of the facilitator was in knowing when to bring people back into the conversation and keep it on track or intervene to prevent conflict.

Involving children and young people

The engagement of children and young people as participants of an FGC is a complex issue, which requires consideration of their developmental level, as well as potential distress or safety concerns. Other concerns included the difficulty for professionals to openly discuss sensitive issues in front of the child and their exposure to upsetting or confronting discussions. Some of the benefits of the direct participation of children and young people include that they get to have a say about what is important to them and what they want.

A range of examples of creative ways to include the voices and views of children and young people were offered. Some facilitators met with the children and young people prior to the FGC to discuss their hopes and dreams and develop a ‘views and wishes statement’. Others recorded messages from young people to play during the FGC. Family members discussed the value of bringing photos of the children, to remind them that their needs should be at the centre of the FGC.

The decision about how to engage children and young people often relates to family dynamics and whether there is likely to be conflict that may be distressing to children and young people. It is recommended that when children or young people are in attendance, there should be more detailed information for stakeholders regarding measures to ensure the child or young person is comfortable throughout the conference.

Families feeling heard and valued

Families expressed feeling validated and supported to clear the air and reconnect with family when an FGC went well. This included when families perceived they had a significant role in decision-making and consequently felt empowered by the FGC process.

Communication between children's parents and their respective sides of the family can be particularly tough to navigate if there has been a history of domestic violence, which may create a biased view of what has occurred. FGC could provide a safe space for constructive conversations, even when there were fraught family dynamics.

A shared understanding of the purpose of the FGC, and what DCJ considers to be the issues, which is clearly communicated to families prior to the FGC, was considered critical. Families benefited from clear parameters about the scope for decision making.

Culturally safe practice

Aboriginal facilitators expressed the need to take the time required for involving Aboriginal families in an FGC. This was particularly pertinent for finding family able to support children's ongoing cultural connections. The need to convene FGCs within prescribed timeframes, often to progress a legal process, was deemed a barrier to culturally safe practice with Aboriginal families.

For many Aboriginal families, the Stolen Generations and/or a personal history of child removal deeply overshadow the FGC experience and DCJ involvement. Given this fraught history and context, culturally safe practice with families is essential, as they can feel unsafe and vulnerable taking part in this process that asks them to publicly discuss family challenges and dynamics.

Families indicated that support from Aboriginal facilitators made the FGC culturally safe for them. They felt valued the unique skills and lived experience of Aboriginal facilitators, with an emphasis on *dadirri* or 'deep listening'. When an Aboriginal facilitator is not available or the family does not wish to have their FGC facilitated by an Aboriginal person, DCJ policy is to offer an internal Aboriginal cultural support consultant. However, there was some debate about whether they can be neutral, given they are not independent of DCJ like facilitators.

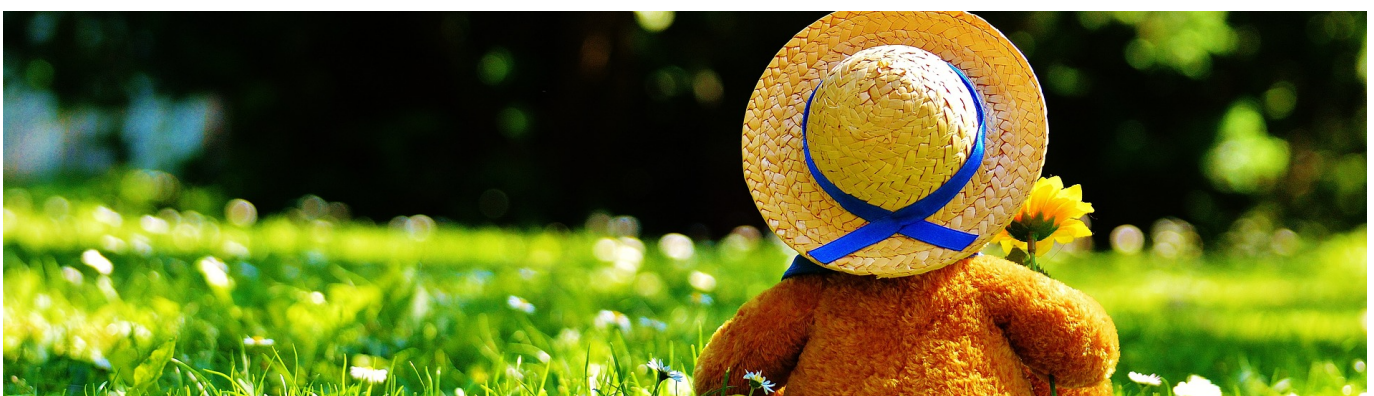
Offering Aboriginal families support from Aboriginal community-controlled organisations was not common in FGC meeting and the greater involvement of these organisations may be considered as way of providing additional family support.

Aboriginal participants identified the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (the Principle) during FGCs as part of culturally safe practice. The Principal elements of Participation, Partnership, Placement and Connection emphasise the importance of ongoing cultural connections for Aboriginal children.

"Everybody had a say, and everybody address their own concerns and issues and yeah, and I think the most important thing is that our views weren't ignored."
(Family interview 32)

"Part of the language that we use up here is having that cultural lens ... it's always about ongoing training for culture because for non-Aboriginal people, they're not living it every day, so they're bound to forget. That's part of it, unfortunately. As much as it is our culture of the Country we live in, it's not what they live every day ... so ongoing cultural sort of training around what they need to be mindful of, what they need to ensure is happening in each of the family group conferences that they are participating in, I think that will help a lot." [Aboriginal caseworker]

"What made it so good. You know what works so well is having the Aboriginal facilitator that understood ... it is a game changer altogether. It's the only game changer that's gonna get the outcomes that are needed." (Family interview 22)



Family dynamics, communication skills and the extent of parenting issues they were dealing with made a difference to how well family members could take advantage of the FGC as an opportunity to come up with an actionable plan.

Some participants expressed satisfaction with the plan that they were able to achieve during Private Family Time: *“I think [the plan] was the best one we could come up with all of us together at the same time”* (Family interview 11).

The benefits of FGC for children and families rest on what happens after the conference. This highlights the importance of the timely and active review of the implementation of Family Plans, including caseworker support to assist families to access the support and resources they need. The benefit of such efforts can have a lifelong impact on the life of the children at the heart of the FGC program.

Family Time and Plans

Families often needed help to make a plan that was realistic and met the department’s non-negotiable requirements. Some facilitators offered support during Family Time to answer any questions families had and assist with keeping conversations constructive or on track. Aboriginal families valued facilitators who worked flexibly with families to meet their individual needs. They expressed that this was important for achieving the goals and outcomes of FGCs, including the development of a meaningful and achievable family plan.

Ensuring DCJ’s non-negotiables were addressed in the Family Plan was seen as the responsibility of the DCJ caseworker and manager casework who were present at the FGC. A good Family Plan had detailed and specific actions and included mini milestones to check things were on track after the FGC, and a documented date for review.

Families valued having a voice in the FGC process, however, the real measure of whether a family is satisfied with the family plan and the FGC is whether the plan gets implemented and the amount of casework support offered by DCJ. The key dynamics, emerging across the findings from family members as well as workforce participants, is *follow-up* in two forms:

- **support** to implement the family plan
- **accountability** that the decisions made in the FGC will be honoured.

Families often rely on casework support to access the services that are indicated by the family plan, this can include assistance with referrals to health services, liaison work with housing or social security services and carer assessments.



“Three months can be a long time without contact between the family and the caseworker. I believe the caseworker and...casework team should be checking in with the family and saying, ‘how is the plan going? What’s working? Along that journey for the three months and saying, ‘we’ve got our meeting coming up in a month’s time. And it’s good to see it going well.’ [or] ‘I can see this isn’t working too well but we’ll come together and look at what’s – do we continue with the plan? Do we amend a little bit? Do we need to have another FGC” [Non-Aboriginal facilitator]

Family Plan review

The FGC model includes a review of the implementation of the Family Plan 3 months after an FGC was held. There are mixed views on whether the caseworker or the facilitator should conduct the review. The review of Family Plans found that around one third did not record a review date.

Who will monitor the Family Plan, and the date to undertake a review should be documented at the FGC and communicated to the facilitator and family to strengthen the commitment to the Plan. This includes caseworker’s role to organise and lead that process or if the facilitator should be involved, if it was considered they were best placed to re-engage families and hold caseworkers accountable to the review process. The decisions about whether the facilitator should be re-engaged at three months should be made at the time of the FGC so this can be scheduled.

To address confusion and inconsistency, a guidance procedure could be introduced for conducting reviews.

For more information

Research Centre for Children and Families

[e rccf.research@sydney.edu.au](mailto:rccf.research@sydney.edu.au)

[w https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families.html](https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families.html)



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