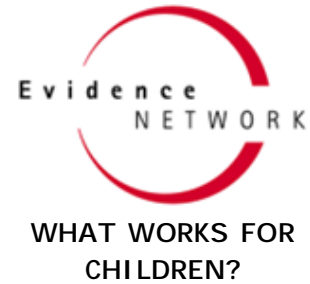


How effective are family group conferences at reducing re-offending?

The following is a list of studies on family group conferencing. The studies have been read and appraised for quality. Abstracts in italics are reproduced from databases and have not been critically appraised.



Search conducted by: Madeleine Stevens

Date of searches: January 2003

Databases searched:

Pubmed <http://www.pubmed.gov>

ERIC <http://askeric.org/Eric/>

ChildData <http://www.ncb.org.uk/library/services/childdata.htm> (subscription only)

Google www.google.co.uk

Cochrane (no relevant hits) <http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/cochrane.asp>.

Keywords used: family group conferenc*, family group

There is a lot of material on the web about Family Group Conferencing (FGC). However, evaluations tend to focus on process rather than outcomes.

Family group conferencing originated in New Zealand and is also being used in Australia, with a South Australian Family Conferencing Scheme being launched in 1994. Family Group Conferencing has been used in **childcare protection** cases and in **restorative justice** with juvenile offenders. Canada and the US also have FGC schemes. Most of the information included here concerns the use of FGC in youth justice, but some references are also relevant to child protection.

A descriptive account of the various UK pilot projects carried out in 1995 can be found in **Marsh, P. and Crow, G. Family Group Conferences in Child Welfare Services in England and Wales. In: Hudson, J.; Morris, A.; Maxwell, G. and Galaway, B. (Eds) Family Group Conferences: Perspectives on Policy and Practice. Australia: The Federation Press; 1996**

Family Group Conferencing in Hampshire

The full reports referenced here can be purchased from the Social Services Research and Information Unit at the University of Portsmouth, tel. 01705 845551 <http://www.port.ac.uk/departments/ssriu/>

All these studies are worth reading for anyone considering initiating Family Group Conferencing as they contain a lot of information and only main points are summarised here.

McKenzie, N. Family Group Conferences in Youth Justice. Social Services Research and Information Unit, Report No.48. University of Portsmouth; 2002.

This thorough and clearly presented report attempts to examine the effectiveness of Family Group Conferences (FGC) in Hampshire through a) questionnaires sent to participants in FGCs and b) a comparison of re-offending rates between young people participating in FGCs and a comparison group. This comparison would be a key outcome of interest for assessing the effectiveness of the intervention. Unfortunately it is difficult to read too much into the results because the comparison group did not appear to be equivalent to the FGC group.

The sample was not as large as originally anticipated due to a slower rate of referrals for FGC. This was put down to the changes in the Youth Justice System brought in over the period of the research (data collection ended on August 1st 2001). A total of 44 cases were referred for FGC (84% male average age 14.5) of which 30 were completed. The remaining 14 cases made up the comparison group.

The main reason for a FGC not taking place was that family members could not agree on taking part. This may mean that this group was already experiencing greater difficulties than the other group before the start of the FGC. The author notes that the comparison group had a higher proportion of violent crimes and more crimes overall than the FGC group.

On follow-up at the end of October 2001 (3 months or more after the FGC) 67% of the FGC group had not been reconvicted compared to 14% of the comparison group, a significant difference despite the small sample size. However when those with cases pending were included as having re-offended only 40% of the FGC group had not committed any new crimes, and the gap between the FGC and comparison group was reduced to 26%, which is not statistically significant. These results are not good indicators of what the real effect of FGC might be due to 1) the lack of equivalence between groups and 2) the small sample size.

The report also discusses questionnaire data from 17 young people before the FGC, 15 after the FGC, 11 victims, 26 family members, 15 YOT officers, 18 other professionals and 16 magistrates. Negative as well as positive quotes are given, suggesting that the author was not biased. However there were poor response rates (for example only 21% of family members responded, representing only 12 of the conferences) so we can not take the findings as being representative of all the FGCs. Nevertheless there are some interesting comments worth noting.

- Most young people said they would be more likely to go to their family if they were in trouble or needed help again.
- Young people showed more understanding after conferencing as to how their actions had affected others (family and victims).

- Most family members felt the FGC helped the young person to see that their family cared about them.
- A YOT officer comments: “An excellent concept but enormously time consuming and resource consuming.”
- Most magistrates had used the plan when sentencing the young person. Of 16 magistrates seven said they had used it ‘a lot’, eight ‘a little’ and one said ‘not really’.

The report’s recommendations include:

- YOT management should increase awareness of the FGC model so that FGC eligibility criteria are consistently taken into consideration.
- Consideration should be given to funding a co-ordinator to be in court regularly to help maintain referrals and ensure equal access to FGCs, and to take the pressure of referral generation away from the court YOT officer.
- More emphasis is needed on evaluation of FGC.
- There should be an acknowledgement that not all victims will want to participate.
- YOT officers should be present at all FGCs to strengthen participants’ confidence in the Youth Justice System.
- More comprehensive training about the FGC process needs to be delivered to the magistrates.
- Consideration to the use of FGCs at various stages in the youth justice system.

Lupton, C. and Stevens, M. Family Outcomes: following through on Family Group Conferences. Social Services Research and Information Unit Report No. 33. University of Portsmouth; 1997.

This report examines various aspects of Family Group Conferences in Hampshire comparing: FGCs in the various pilot areas, pilot areas with ‘mainstream’ FGCs, and FGCs from year 1 and year 2 of the pilot. There is also an examination of longer-term outcomes for a sample of families in the first year of the pilot reported below.

- Some families felt they did not have sufficient information when making their plan, and it is suggested that a standard ‘checklist’ of key services available from relevant agencies might be helpful in addressing this.
- The routine collection of plan items requested but not met and the reasons why they were not met may be useful in developing the service.
- A review FGC date should be built into the plan.
- The role of the co-ordinator should continue after the conference assuming responsibility for confirming availability of plan components and arranging a three month review meeting.
- More research is needed on the outcomes of FGCs, particularly in comparison with those of traditional meetings.

Lupton, C., Barnard, S. and Swall-Yarrington, M. Family Planning?: an evaluation of the Family Group Conference model. Social Services Research and Information Unit Report No. 31. University of Portsmouth; 1995.

This reports on the first year of a pilot of FGC in the Winchester area of Hampshire funded by the Family Rights Group. 22 FGCs were conducted and 14 of these, involving 11 families, were researched in depth. Excluding those reconvened, out of 19 cases 6 were accommodation cases, 6 child protection cases, 5 where the child was considered 'in need', 1 youth justice case and 1 both accommodation and 'in need'.

There is a lot of information on the setting up of the FGCs which may be useful to those considering doing this.

- The average time taken to convene a FGC was 24 working days (range 6 to 54 working days).
- The average number of hours taken by the coordinator to organise and attend a FGC was 23 (range 8 to 51 hours)
- The average duration of a FGC was two hours 20 minutes.
- The average amount of time taken for the family to deliberate in private was just under an hour.
- Although nearly all family groups (11, 85%) expressed satisfaction with the plan they made at first, the proportion expressing satisfaction had dropped to 69% by the time of the follow-up interview.
- Just under half (6) the family plans were carried out 'wholly' or 'mostly' and the same number were carried out 'partly'. One was not implemented at all. 7 out of the 13 were considered ultimately unsuccessful while 6 were seen as successful. However since some plans were by the same family 6 families produced a successful plan while 5 did not.
- The main reason for lack of success of plans was the failure of key family members to agree or abide by their part of the plan.

There are several pages of recommendations.

Jackson, S. Family justice? An evaluation of the Hampshire youth justice family group conference project. Southampton University; 1998

Abstract: Contents: Background to the development of family group conferences - Implementation process - FGC and comparison group basic data - Professional views - Coordinators' views - Family interviews - Young people interviews - Victim interviews - At the conference - Illustrative case studies - Conclusions and recommendations.

Family Group Conferencing in Gloucester

The cost of Family Group Conferencing in Gloucester is recorded in the Home Office publication **Miers, D. et al, 'An Exploratory Evaluation of Restorative Justice Schemes', Crime Reduction Research Series Paper 9.**

The Gloucester Diversion Unit employs 3 Family Group Conference coordinators (had originally expected to need 12, but this was not warranted by their workload). 12 conferences with families of young people who had committed serious offences (domestic burglaries) had taken place. Success was limited with the majority of the young people re-offending again shortly after the conference. However coordinators felt there had been some positive elements and that success should not be measured by re-offending rates alone.

Other useful references on family group conferencing in the UK

Not an evaluation:

Ryburn, M., Atherton, C. Family Group Conferences: Partnership in Practice. Adoption & Fostering 1996;v20 n1 Spr 1996:16-23.

Abstract: Describes New Zealand's Family Group Conference as a model for quality relationship between families and social work professionals. Examines adaptation of the model in the United Kingdom, noting how the model reasserts kinship as a valuable resource in all matters of care and protection, and establishes a clearer role for professionals as skilled facilitators rather than expert decision makers.

This is not an evaluation and concerns FGCs in cases of childcare and protection rather than restorative justice. However there is a useful discussion around practice issues for conducting a FGC.

The 4 stages of a FGC are:

1. The co-ordinator, in consultation with the child and immediate carers, identifies the family network
2. At the meeting the key professionals share information about concerns, statutory duties and relevant available resources; the family acknowledges the need for a plan
3. The co-ordinator and professionals withdraw and leave the family to agree: a plan, contingency plans, how to review the plan
4. Plan is agreed and resources negotiated with the co-ordinator and key professionals.

Some of the key suggestions picked up from UK practice are:

- 1) Retain the flexibility of Family Group Conferences i.e. adapt the model for each family
- 2) Consider Family Group Conferences for all childcare work: it is suggested that there is no particular area of childcare practice that should be targeted or avoided for FGC.
- 3) Remain true to the essential elements: success relies on adherence to key elements of the model

- 4) Get Going Gently: training on a practical level is insufficient, organisers need to be committed to the principles and enthusiastic and to trust in the ability of families to make safe plans for their children.
- 5) Use research wisely
- 6) Preserve the goal of partnership

Lupton, C. User empowerment or family self-reliance? The family group conference model. *British Journal of Social Work*, 1998;28:107-28.

Abstract: Explores the issue of empowerment in the context of the Family Group Conference (FGC) initiative. The FGC model explicitly aims to shift the balance of power between families and professionals within the childcare decision-making process. Observes that political interest in the model, however, may also be generated by its perceived potential for reducing the dependency of families on state provided services.

Another abstract on the same paper from a different source:

The family group conference is an innovation introduced into New Zealand law as a means of resolving child protection and youth justice cases. The law requires the conference to include the offender, the victim, the extended family, and other relevant parties. This article reviews New Zealand research and commentary, and publications reporting on experiences with the methods in other countries. The discussion emphasizes problems in adapting a method based on one culture to a different culture and social organization. The article also considers the law from the viewpoint of therapeutic jurisprudence. Although the research is sparse, the FGC has strong promise for resolving problems, enhancing the sense of community and participation, and empowering families. Copyright 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd

Ryburn, M. A New Model for Family Decision Making in Childcare and Protection. *Early Child Development & Care* 1993;86:1-10.

Abstract: Examines New Zealand legislation that allows families greater decision-making power when the safety and welfare of their children are seen to be at risk. Discusses the Family Group Conference intervention model and its efficacy, concerns and criticisms that this model has evoked, and the model's potential applicability to childcare and protection in England and Wales.

Statham, J. Outcomes and Effectiveness of Family Support Services: A Research Review. *Practice Issues. Institute of Education*; 2000.

Abstract: This report reviews the evidence for the effectiveness of different kinds of family support services, focusing on services in the United Kingdom, particularly for families who are disadvantaged or experiencing particular difficulties in their lives. The report also describes different evaluation methods and presents information on various measures and scales used to evaluate family support services. Part 1 of the report presents the conceptual framework, defining family support services and examining issues involved in evaluating such services. Part 2 presents evidence for effectiveness of the following types of

services: (1) day care and early education; (2) parenting education; (3) family centers; (4) pre- and postnatal home visiting; (5) befriending and support; (6) children's mental health intervention; (7) services for disabled children and their families; (8) short-term foster care; (9) social work support; and (10) family group conferences. Part 3 presents instruments used to measure child and family outcomes related to child development and behavior, parenting, social support and resources, adult mental health and emotional well-being, and satisfaction with services. The report concludes by noting that there is good evidence for the effectiveness of high quality early education and day care services and for some parenting programs. There is much anecdotal evidence for the effectiveness of family centers. There is some evidence for the effectiveness of population-based mental health services to reduce child behavior problems and of the impact of services to support parents of children with disabilities. The report also acknowledges a need for well-designed studies of the effectiveness of U.K. family support services and for the development of appropriate outcomes measures. Contains 116 references. (KB)

A 1-page online report of this study is available at:

<http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/town/road/xib80/spotlight/Spotlight%2071.pdf>

Family group conferencing outside the UK

Fercello, C. and Umbreit, M. Client evaluation of Family Group Conferencing in 12 sites in 1st judicial district of Minnesota. Centre for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking; 1998

<http://ssw.che.umn.edu/rjp/Resources/Documents/ferumb98.PDF>

This reports on feedback from 455 interviews with participants in voluntary family group conferences with juvenile offenders, victims and families. A high level of client satisfaction is recorded.

The same Centre at the University of Minnesota offers a Programme Evaluation Kit for Family Group Conferencing (in Restorative Justice):

<http://ssw.che.umn.edu/rjp/Resources/Documents/FGC%20kit.PDF>

Family Group Decision Making Project

<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jpennell/fgdm/fgdmlink.htm>

This organisation's web site contains many references to resources relevant to Family Group Conferencing

Not an evaluation:

http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/2001_2_1/contents.html

Bazemore G., Umbreit M. A Comparison of Four Restorative Conferencing Models. Juvenile Justice Bulletin. Juvenile Justice Bulletin 2001.

Abstract: *This bulletin focuses on four restorative conferencing models within the juvenile justice system: victim-offender mediation; community reparative boards; family group conferencing; and circle sentencing. The bulletin first describes each of the four restorative justice models, presenting information on background, concept, procedures and goals, considerations in implementation, lessons learned from research, and sources of additional information. It then compares and contrasts the models on the following dimensions: origins and current applications; administrative and procedural aspects (eligibility, point of referral, staffing, setting, process and protocols, and management of dialog); and community involvement and other dimensions (participants, victim role, gatekeepers, relationship to the formal justice system, preparation, enforcement, monitoring, and primary outcomes sought). Next, the bulletin discusses various issues and concerns to be addressed in the development and implementation of restorative conferencing approaches. It also offers guidelines for clearly grounding interventions in restorative justice principles and includes a test for determining whether an intervention strengthens the community response to youth crime and creates new roles for citizens and community groups. (Contains 60 references.) (SM)*

Not an evaluation:

Taylor B.R., Kummery G. Family Group Conferencing. Educational Leadership 1998;54:44-6.

Abstract: *A suburban Pennsylvania school district is increasingly using family group conferences to address incidents of misconduct and violence. Through a reintegrative shaming process, family group conferences allow offenders to face their victims, move past their inappropriate behaviour, discard the offender label, make amends, and return to the community as changed persons. (MLH)*

No evaluation but includes a checklist for establishing family group conferences:
Policies and Practices. Shortening Children's Stays in Temporary Care, Part One. Family to Family: Tools for Rebuilding Foster Care. 1997.

Abstract: *The Family to Family initiative has encouraged states to re-conceptualise, redesign, and reconstruct their foster care systems. By 1996, the initiative was being implemented in five states and six counties in two additional states. Drawing on the experiences of Family to Family participants, a framework for child welfare leaders working to reduce the number of children in foster care over 18 months has been developed. This paper opens with a description of recent changes in foster care and a review of the challenges the child welfare system has faced. It then describes how the Family to Family initiative has attempted to reform the system and reduce lengths of stay. The characteristics of children in care and the problems their families face are discussed, as are the barriers that have contributed to children's lengthy stays. The results of Family to Family approaches are reported in the areas of public policy, program management and structure, and program operations. In addition to protecting and supporting children within their family and cultural networks, services for ethnic minority children and families need to be improved in other ways. This will*

require changes throughout the entire child welfare system. Four appendixes contain results from 1996 focus groups, a list of Family to Family programs, a risk assessment matrix, and a checklist for establishing family group conferences. (Contains 71 references.)

6) Thielman, B. Implementing the Values and Strategies of Family to Family. Family to Family: Tools for Rebuilding Foster Care. 2001.

Abstract: This guide helps child welfare agencies and their partners craft more family-focused and neighbourhood-based service systems. It suggests a framework that agencies can use to assess their current policies and practices and develop plans to integrate Family to Family values, principles, and strategies into existing initiatives and activities. Family to Family is a strategic approach to systems change that enlists four strategies for restructuring and strengthening the child welfare system: foster family recruitment and support planning, timely decision making around placement, building community partnerships, and using data to track and improve agency performance. Drawing on the efforts of several early Family to Family sites and the original Family to Family tools, this guide describes site activities and approaches to help agencies begin to change practice and realign their system. Seven appendixes present Family to Family compatibility with the Adoption and Safe Families Act and Child and Family Services reviews; Family to Family strategic planning questions; steps for creating and mapping longitudinal data files; experiences of children entering child welfare custody 1996-2000; Family to Family site coordinator job description; best practices for out-of-home placement (preparing the child); and family group conferencing and team decision making. (SM)