



Family Group Decision Making: The Importance of Independent Coordination

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Preamble

In 2008, after broad consultation with the family group decision making (FGDM) community in the United States and abroad, American Humane issued a statement on the purpose, values and processes of FGDM in order to “[aid] the understanding of FGDM and [enable] the accurate classification of appropriate family-involvement practices as being FGDM for the purposes of funding application, research and evaluation, and training and education.”¹

The statement advocates for FGDM processes to be carefully crafted to ensure fidelity to FGDM values and to ensure those values drive practice. Five items were identified as critical to supporting exemplary practice in FGDM. The first of these was that independent (i.e., non-case carrying) coordinators be responsible for convening family group meetings with agency personnel.

This brief expands upon the importance of independent coordination of the FGDM process.

Historical Context

To understand the role of the coordinator, one needs an understanding of the origins in New Zealand of the family group conference — the process from which FGDM has drawn its inspiration. Much has been written about the social and cultural imperatives that led to the reform of the child welfare system in New Zealand. In essence, reform was inevitable when Maori tribes and the New Zealand government jointly identified the harmful impacts of agency and professional decision making on the nuclear family when extended family, cultural and community perspectives are not included.²

The need for a different approach is firmly rooted in a child and family rights agenda, culturally respectful processes and the pursuit of anti-oppressive practices. The family group conference was instituted in New Zealand to protect family households from unwarranted or excessive intrusion by agencies and

professionals with statutory powers. This is not to say that agencies or professionals were acting maliciously. Rather, what was recognized was the inherent power imbalance between those with statutory powers of intervention and those subject to them.

Addressing Imbalances in the Power Relationship

Whenever issues critical to a child’s safety or well-being are identified by agency professionals, these issues need to be discussed with the family. Decisions must be made about next steps, and plans formulated that provide future protection for the child. In orthodox child welfare systems, this dialogue is usually held with parents and can exclude the wider family, cultural and community contexts within which that household is nested. The dialogue occurs between professionals and typically a mother (and sometimes a father or other relative). In these situations, the professionals have considerable formal power derived from statutes and informal power that derives from being “the repositories of knowledge; being the designers of systems and the determiners of process; and being purveyors of agency interpretation of what constitutes risk or need.”³ The family members, on the other hand, are powerless. Such dialogue is inevitably unbalanced and one-sided, and families are likely to exhibit either hostility or helplessness in their inability to manage power relationships. Because of the way they have responded to intervention, parents can be labeled as not only abusive according to the reported concerns, but also as uncaring, uncooperative or unwilling to protect their children. Such judgments about parents can be broadened to incorporate whole family systems, thus effectively eliminating meaningful parental and wider family participation in decision-making and planning processes.

The family group conference was instituted in New Zealand to provide a different decision-making process. What is envisioned is a system that identifies

¹ American Humane. (2008). *Family group decision making in child welfare: Purpose, values and processes*. Englewood, CO: Author.

² Department of Social Welfare. (1988). *Puao te Ata tu (Daybreak)*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.

³ Doolan, M. (2007). Duty calls. *Protecting Children*, 22(1), 10-18.



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and motivates the extended family (including family friends) to support any child and his or her immediate family when agency professionals believe there are grounds for intervention, and that these wider family representatives — the family group — have the first opportunity to formulate a plan. It is clear the agency has an interest: it has initiated the referral. Family groups also have an interest: a household within their family network is being challenged by the agency, and this can lead to ongoing intervention in the life of the family or even alienation of a child or children. Given these vested interests, neither of these groups should coordinate the family group conference if there is to be open dialogue on a level playing field.

An independent coordinator, therefore, is best suited to manage the coming together of these disparate groups and to facilitate their conversation. Any hostility or helplessness generated by the agency investigation and assessment process can be mitigated significantly by a managed conversation that allows the two parties to work collaboratively toward effective child care and protection into the future. The desired result is a negotiated collaborative plan owned by the family group and the agency.

What effective family group conference practice requires is agency and professional consciousness about the impact of formal and informal power on children and their families. These are subtle power issues, and awareness of them is more likely to develop over time, particularly as workers receive the opportunity and support to experience a different way of working. What is interesting is that when professionals are encouraged to minimize their assumption of informal powers — by affirming the knowledge and expertise of family groups; by facilitating family group influence on the processes followed; by positioning family groups to lead decision making; and by supporting family group plans that emerge from the process — they find they are able to work with family plans, enjoy better relationships with families, witness improved outcomes and yet use their formal powers less often.⁴ Thomas Jefferson acknowledged this phenomenon when he said, “I hope our wisdom will grow with our power and teach us that the less we use our power the greater it will be.”

⁴ Doolan, M. (2007). Duty calls. *Protecting Children*, 22(1), 10-18.

In embracing FGDM and the principles and values on which it is based, agency leaders commit to anti-oppressive and culturally respectful practices that enable families to fulfill their responsibilities and lessen their exposure to imposed social control. By appointing coordinators and working collaboratively, agencies recognize the inherent oppressiveness of professional systems and place value on fairness and equity, while addressing power imbalances so that the best and most appropriate results may be achieved for children.