Transforming Practice: Developing family Group Conferences in Europe:

Jane Wiffin
To start....

- Great privilege to be here
- Here representing the work and commitment of so many people
- Its also a privilege that you want to hear our stories
- The start of the story is children and young people
- who have a right to be part of decisions about their lives
- have a right to see their families working things out for them in difficult circumstances
- to see professionals who are committed to proving knowledge and expertise to enable this to happen
What I want to cover

• In part a shameless homage to New Zealand – you have been an inspiration to us;
• What we did with that inspiration;
• How we use FGCs;
• Questions for us – I hope we will be inspired again to move FGCs forward into the future for the best interests of children
FGCs in Europe

- Holland
- Sweden
- Norway
- Germany
- Scotland
- Denmark
- Russia
- Eire
- Northern Ireland
- Wales
- Finland
- England
Across Europe

- Very diverse communities and different language and political systems
- All inspired by New Zealand and FGCs
- Many of the same struggles
- Except Eire no legislative mandate so all introduced as a good practice construct
- Inspired and supported as network – principles into practice sharing knowledge and expertise
- Many colleagues here and you will hear from them about policy, practice and research in their areas
Concentrate on the experience in the UK

- **Four communities**
  - England
  - Wales
  - Scotland
  - Northern Ireland
- **Within these communities**
  differences in distribution of income, jobs, health equalities, multi-cultural communities, class;
- **Differences in legislation and governing bodies**
Member of the population
Facts about the UK

- 60 million people
- 10 million living in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland
- 92% White
- 7.9% belong to other ethnic groups
  - Indian population largest
  - Then Pakistani, mixed ethnic background, Black Caribbean, Black African and Bangladeshi, Chinese
- 45% of non-white group live in London, high concentration of Black and ethnic groups in urban areas
The context

• The proportion of children living in poverty in the UK has doubled in the past generation.
• The UK has proportionally more poor children than most rich countries.
• In 2005, 3.4 million children were living in poverty (about a third of the child population).

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

• Poverty impacts on Black and minority groups disproportionately
The context

- As many as 9 out of 10 users of social work services are welfare benefits claimants.
- Strong association between family poverty and the numbers of children in care often with strangers (Becker 1997).
- Strong association between poverty and feeling of lack of control over decision making in own life (Hazel and Ghate 2003).
Child welfare services in the UK

- Legacy of rescue and removal from poor law and onwards;
- In the lead up to our own change in legislation there was concern about:
  - Over reliance on emergency removal;
  - Poorly planned placements for children;
  - Lack of contact with families for children in care;
  - Child abuse scandals which suggested social workers under respond or over respond.

- Intended to remedy these concerns
- Child’s needs paramount central to legislation;
- Provision of support to families to enable children and young people to remain with family of origin;
- Recognition of importance of race and religion in planning for children;
- Contact with parents/families when children away from home;
- Family and friends first choice when children cannot live with birth parents;
- Concept of partnership between family and state.
Inspired by New Zealand

- Inspired by the fact that you got the Children Young people and their Families Act;
- Concept and approach to partnership prescribed through the use of Family Group Conferences;
- In the UK partnership is left to practitioner/ prescribed through procedures/family out of loop – so number of responses from social work professionals.
Child rescue approach

“FGCs are the maddest idea I ever heard”
Training Participant

“you mean you are going to allow dysfunctional families to make their own decisions?
Manager of social work service
Keep it in the family no need for public resources

"the grandparents are going to have the child. I suppose they will want paying to look after their own - shall I bring my wallet?"

Team manager in a meeting with parents after an FGC
Professional as expert

“We have the knowledge – we are objective” SW

“We already work in partnership we do all that already (DATA Marsh 1996)
Family as expert

“I was amazed - really did not think they could do it – but they did and it was a good plan – a long plan – they are the experts” SW

“We know our family better than any professionals and yes it should be us there working together for our children” Family member
Inspiration from New Zealand

- FGCS were way of addressing this variability of response
- Belief in family decision making and family expertise
- “Given the information, the power and the resources families will make safe and appropriate decisions for children DSW 1990”
What did we hope to achieve through FGCs in UK

- Democratisation of decision making – recognition that families must be central;
- Children and young people to also feel central to decision making about their and their families lives;
- Transparent model of practice;
- Culturally sensitive practice;
- Increase in children placed with friends and family carers;
The challenge

• Despite the message of partnership child welfare systems entirely professionally led;
• Youth Justice separated off and with a different legal process and even harder to make a new process fit- youth justice not seen as a child welfare issue;
• Had to introduce FGCs as good practice construct alongside other more dominant approaches to decision making;
• Has started to appear in policy and guidance but as professional choice with professionals remaining as a dominant force;
• Two current policy initiatives
  • Professionalise social workers;
  • Develop “service user involvement”
So what have we achieved?

- Started with five pilot projects in 1994
- In 2001 56% children services EITHER had a project, or were considering their use
- Hard to keep exact track as projects have come and gone
- The move from project with its sense of impermanence to service which means we are here to stay has been difficult
- Have some large providers of FGCs i.e. 400 + a year and some very small providing 20 conferences a year
- Most decision making for children and YP happens still in professionally prescribed and dominated meetings
So what have we achieved

• Early days focus on development of the model and how it could be delivered in an empowering way to families:
What have we achieved?

- In child welfare clear model of practice with distinct core elements which looks almost the same as your process;
- Amazing adherence to this model, but challenge to detail;
- In youth justice a number of different models have emerged particularly in relation to role of victim
In child welfare core elements are

- Independent coordinator neutral of decision making and culturally competent “she speaks my language”;
- Clear straightforward information provided in new ways;
- Focus on getting the right people there;
- Focus on preparing people to attend the conference;
- Making the day of the conference right, the right venue, the right food
- Role of the multi-disciplinary group as information providers
• Children and young people enabled to participate directly (even if we are still arguing about how best to achieve this)
• Children and young people feel a connection to family as part of the process
• Can feel left out in an adult oriented process;
• Are keen advocates of the FGC
Have applied the model in a number of areas

- Started with child welfare – but worry about addressing serious child protection concerns;
- Now used across the continuum from support to where children will not remain with birth parents;
- Importance of self referrals;
Also

• Developed as a response to education based problems
• Youth Justice
• Young carers
• Domestic violence
• Adult mental health
• Vulnerable adults
What have we achieved
Good quality research base

• Know that families can make decisions in FGCs that are in the best interests of children - 90% do;
• Families very positive about the process
• Good attendance by fathers and other male family members
• FGC process involves extended family early on when there are child welfare concerns;
• Increase likelihood of placement of children in extended family (with attendant positive outcomes)
• FGCs have reduced re-offending and achieved good levels of victim participation;
• FGCs produce good outcomes where there are concerns about school attendance bullying and school behaviour problems.
Developments

- Families and children involved in planning and development of FGCs
- Recruitment
- Training
- Materials
- Talking the Government
What have the challenges been?

- Good practice construct not mandated practice nationally so marginal to overall practice for families
- Some local mandates
- Delivering resources to families
- Recognising the value of kinship carers
- Being culturally competent
- Persuading reluctant staff
- Looking outside of the FGC world a
- A new agenda about outcomes where family are outside of a professional network
Where have we got to...

• Move from family v Professionals about the best interests of children
• To family and professionals sharing knowledge and expertise for the wellbeing of children;
• Children not objects of concern but active participants in family life
The way forward

• Hope we will be inspired and motivated
• Get a national mandate – many new policy directives mention FGC
• Crumbs at the table
• Hope for the future
Final word

“Its my family you know and its my life – I know its hard but I want them there – I want them to work things out” boy of 8