



Family Group Conferencing: Building Partnerships with Kin in Washington State

By Karin Gunderson, MSW

Family group conferencing (FGC) is first and foremost about engaging families in decision making. Working with extended families is widely considered to be best practice in child welfare. But because the infrastructure of the formal child welfare system is so deeply oriented toward the nuclear family and non-relative foster care, it can be challenging for practitioners to engage and partner with kin. As a result, many social workers tend to shy away from FGC because of the complications and challenges inherent in working with kin. The challenges to working with kin are widespread:

- State social work and legal systems typically focus on the nuclear duo of mom and dad, and oftentimes just mom.
- Confidentiality statutes create a thicket of barriers to communication.
- Forms do not ask for the names of extended family members, and invitations to case staffings seldom reach out to extended family members.
- Some social workers believe that the “apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”
- Parents often refuse to disclose the names of their relatives.

It is no surprise that the importance of extended family often is not reflected in the consciousness and practice of professionals. If the norm involved maternal and paternal extended family when a child entered the child welfare system, it might be more natural for social workers to use FGC to engage and partner with those family members.

This document reflects results of a brief qualitative research project to identify what helps and hinders social workers in their efforts to engage and work with families. To understand the reality behind these challenges to working with kin, the researcher conducted confidential face-to-face interviews with 20 social workers and relative search specialists in Washington State over the course of three months from June through August of 2003. The degree to which these social workers engaged and placed with kin varied.

Why locate, engage, and place children with relatives?

The social workers interviewed believed most social workers in Washington State consider it a good day if an emergent or complicated placement needs to be done and a safe and responsible relative is available. One 17-year veteran of child protective services (CPS) said, “Relatives are more likely to be a permanent option, kids are more comfortable, you get a more relaxed form of care.” He said, in his experience, parents were happier when their children were placed with relatives.

One Native American social worker commented on the connection between relative placement, culture, and adult wellness: “Culture is living and breathing and eating and sleeping in your own. Eventually the child is going to grow up and if he isn’t adopted by family or fictive kin, not only will he ask, ‘Why didn’t my family want me?’ also he will ask, ‘Wasn’t there anyone among my people who wanted me?’”

Social workers who had been with the system a while cited experiences from their practice. Watching children they had removed from their parental homes grow up in care without permanence was too painful for many. One child welfare system (CWS) worker said the “angry kids” she had seen as an after-hours worker made a tremendous impression on her. She said that no one seemed to care about those kids and she was determined not to let that happen with her current caseload.

While these social workers found benefits with kinship care, seeking that care presented a number of barriers.

Practice barriers

Every social worker interviewed expressed frustration with the time and resource constraints that affected their kinship practice. Not one social worker felt they were able to engage in effective practice fully, citing the following challenges:

Time, workload, and administrative hurdles

By far the biggest barrier to effective kinship practice identified by social workers is the amount of time it takes to find and place children with relatives. One CPS social worker described it this way: “Deadlines are a real obstacle. Sometimes we can’t even find the parents, and then if we find them, we have to assess them, get reports written, get med coupons, get the school file. Often things are

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complicated by custody stuff, it's beyond what a human being can do." Another worker described "the immediacy of everything, it takes so much time and foster care is just so much more accessible."

Workers also reported that placing children with foster parents is administratively much easier than placing children with kin. Access is relatively easy; in fact one worker reported, "Someone else will do it for you." Foster parents constitute a generic resource that has already been assessed and trained. Funding streams and payment processes are in place. One worker said, "Foster parents have training and support, experience, and someone to call. They understand the system; relatives often don't have any of those things."

In contrast, kinship care must be individually tailored to each child and every aspect attended to with each new placement. Finding relatives in the first place is a time-consuming process, often hampered by issues of trust, access, and confidentiality. Each potential placement must be assessed for safety and permanence. One CWS worker said, "It is a hassle, relatives quarrel with each other and get you involved. Calls come in day and night, it can be very irritating."

Funding streams and payment processes are not in place for kinship care providers. Social workers have to work with each new placement to determine needs and find creative ways to meet them. "Lots of relatives won't go through the stress and humiliation of getting TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) relative payee money. It is confusing and they often feel like they aren't treated respectfully."

Training and orientation hurdles

With kinship care, training and orientation to the system – a built-in part of the foster care licensing process – has to be attended to with each new placement. Workers report there is no orientation for relatives about how to work with the state's child welfare department. One worker said, "It takes time to educate relatives about the system and you have to do it every time with every new case."

Cultural dynamics and language hurdles

Cultural dynamics and limited English proficiency add a layer of complexity, as well. One Native American CWS worker said, "I worry that I didn't look long enough and hard enough, that I don't know who will be coming and going...who comes through the house on those powwow days, those basketball

tournament days, who stays in the house. Lots of times people are sleeping on the floor because they are all relatives...some real extended relatives, then something happens with one of the cousins and the grandma is so ashamed because she didn't know the cousin from Montana would do that."

Kinship care is a relational process from the first relative search call to the ongoing placement process. Case and data management tasks keep social workers at their desks, making relationship building difficult. One CPS worker said, "Once you get a kid in the system, there are so many things to do. I don't think there is as much institutional or attitudinal resistance to placing with relatives as people believe. I think it is just that you don't want to add more work."

Liability hurdles

Even social workers who support relative placements worry about liability. A CPS worker highly regarded by peers for outstanding kinship practice put it this way: "The line worker is ultimately responsible. If something were to happen, then they will be all over the file. They will probably find something you didn't do...there is no way you can do everything. It is entirely possible that you may have missed something with a relative placement. With a foster home, the responsibility feels more shared."

Replicating the processes of the formal foster care system with every kinship care placement can be overwhelming. While it is no substitute for a structured kinship system in child welfare, FGC does offer hard-pressed social workers and caring family members a new opportunity to achieve positive outcomes for children and families. In this process, the wider network of family is found and engaged. The information giving that occurs at the FGC contributes to an informed and committed coalition of family and professionals building a stronger safety network for the child and family. Family members are informed not only about safety issues but also about the child welfare and legal system. The plans that family make frequently result in kinship placements and the development of resources to support those placements. The relational and empowerment aspect of the FGC process builds trust and important connections among all participants.

Case process barriers

Public child welfare practice is a complicated process involving a daunting amount of paperwork, relentless time pressures, multiple system obstacles,

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emotional minefields, and complicated life and death decision-making. Best practice goals such as working with kin frequently are lost in a thicket of case management. Social workers identified the following challenges in working with and placing with relatives:

Assessment

Social workers report that routine processes are either not in place or not used to effectively assess relatives and foster parents, and social workers lack confidence in their ability to assess relative caregivers.

Distance

More than one social worker said distance was a major obstacle in relative placements. Social workers expressed frustration with what they saw as “dueling mandates,” such as the need to place with relatives who might be out of the area conflicting with visitation or attachment needs being impacted by various process delays.

Technology

Social workers said they would like to use databases to find relatives but expressed frustration with access and concerns about confidentiality.

Interstate Compact (ICPC) and background clearance checks

Just about every worker identified the ICPC process and background clearance checks as a significant and frustrating obstacle to early relative placement and subsequent placement. Social workers said because ICPC and background checks delayed placement with relatives, children attached to their foster parents, increasing the workers’ reluctance to move the child to live with family once relative placements were approved.

Families routinely produce creative solutions to these and other case management challenges in the plans they develop in FGC (Vesneski, 1998). Not limited by professional boundaries and mandates, family members “think outside the box.” Discussions regarding best resources for placement, locating family, managing visitation over a long distance, completing interstate compact requirements, and obtaining background clearance are regularly addressed as family members bring their unique perspective to the process.

Attitudinal barriers

While most social workers interviewed were critical about attitudes and biases that kept colleagues from working with relatives, their own underlying concerns

about relative placement suggests systemic reasons that might contribute in part to those attitudes and biases. The following concerns were expressed.

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Worries about the ability to assess family safety and functioning effectively came up in many interviews. One social worker said, “They (relatives) say, ‘I’ve changed,’ but it is scary to take a chance.” Another worker said, “I worry that the parents will have access to the kids and there will be a failure to protect because relatives are too passive with more dangerous parents.”

Middle-class bias

One social worker said, “When it comes time to move the baby to a relative home after an emergency foster home placement...maybe some time has gone by and now it is in the foster care unit. ... There is just so much difference between the homes, you are having to move the baby from a nice home, clean with everything arranged, to a home that maybe isn’t so sanitary, not laid out. ... You practically have to rearrange the whole house to accommodate the baby. ... It is a really tough decision, even when you know that the relative home has all kinds of love and family around.”

Attachment

The belief that children – especially young children in a placement nine to 12 months – cannot be moved without irrevocably damaging their primary attachment is very widespread. A few CWS social workers felt the move to relatives often happened too late and consequently endangered the child’s ability to make future attachments. In the words of one social worker: “How much more trauma can the kid take?”

Popularly held notions about families of parents and children involved with the child welfare system are often debunked by FGC. Once the circle of family is widened and family members and professionals have a chance to meet in person and recognize that they share the same concern for the welfare of the child, myths and generalizations are often dispelled. One dad said of his FGC experience: “In the past I did not want to deal with them in any shape or form, this time around I am more receptive, and they are too, now” (Yancey, 2000).

Discussion

Successful family group conferences at numerous project sites have illuminated not only the number of family members available to children in the foster

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care system, but also the rich resources, knowledge, expertise, and commitment they bring to decision making. Kinship care research indicates that placement with relatives is a more stable road to permanence than placement with strangers (Courtney & Needell, 1997). One-third of children in out-of-home care in Washington State are placed with kin – a reflection of changes in policy, the decrease in non relative foster homes, and a growing awareness of the advantages of relative placement (Wilson, 2000). Federal and state mandates increasingly call for child welfare agencies to engage kin at the earliest possible time in a case.

In spite of this, kinship care in Washington State has decreased slightly in the last three years and remains low in many other states. Partnership with families in child welfare has not kept pace with research, policy, or need. Indeed, the recent Children and Family Services Review in Washington State found that the state did not meet federal standards for involving children and parents in the case-planning process, preserving connections with family, and seeking family as placement resources.

The social workers involved in this survey understood very well the key elements that contribute to successful work with kin, citing respect, letting go of bias and assumption, fully informing and involving caregivers, and providing adequate support to placements. At the same time, they expressed frustration with the workload and system constraints that make this best practice achievable. The small percentage of social workers who had been part of FGC said it was highly effective in overcoming many of the challenges to working with kin, noting that FGC facilitated the respect, communication, and support that illuminates best practice. Unfortunately, they reported FGC services were constrained because of limited availability and resources.

The more widespread the need and desire to work effectively with the kin of children in foster care, and the more the system orients practice in that direction, the more family group conferencing presents as a powerful way to practice effectively. Family group conferencing widens the circle of family resources available to children, informs them effectively, and facilitates authentic engagement in the decision-making process (Shore, et al., 2001).

Efforts to make FGC available to more families should build on promising research/evaluation results and the desire social workers have to see children reconnected with family and placed within their

family networks. Implementation strategies should highlight the ways FGC can help overcome the challenges inherent in working with kin in the child welfare system and promote the systemic changes needed to establish kin as primary partners in child welfare practice.

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