

American Humane FGDM Issues in Brief

Should His and Her Sides of the Family be Invited to the FGC?

By Dr. Joan Pennell

It is believed that concerns can be resolved and peaceful solutions found by bringing together a larger group in which participants listen closely, respect diversity, and form a unity of spirit. Family Group Conferencing (FGC) in situations of family violence has been a real test of these convictions. How does one go about bringing together that larger group when some members are perpetrators of violence, others their victims, and yet others both perpetrators and victims? Is this a path toward peaceful solutions?

Evaluating the effects of widening the circle

FGC is premised on the assumption that widening the circle around a family safeguards child and adult members. In keeping with this premise, FGC more than other child welfare approaches brings to the table not only the mother and her side of the family, but also the father and his side of the family (Gunderson et al., 2003). Strikingly, families like this approach to decision making better than other decision approaches used by child welfare (Marsh & Crow, 1998; Trotter et al., 1999). But do family group members really want the other side of the family there when they are discussing highly sensitive issues? And is this particularly problematic when they are talking about one partner abusing the other partner?

Exclusion of particular participants tends to be the exception rather than the rule in FGC. When exclusions do occur, British studies report that they are usually men, such as grandfathers, male partners, and fathers (Lupton & Nixon, 1999).

The Newfoundland & Labrador project in Canada focused primarily on family violence referrals (i.e., situations of both domestic violence and child maltreatment). This study demonstrated that families really like FGC even when dealing with family violence. Their main complaint at the end of an FGC was that

some key people, usually the father, were missing (Pennell & Burford, 1995). Thus, the issue was not who was invited to the conference but rather who failed to show up.

The North Carolina FGC project studied child welfare referrals of which one-quarter had an identified history of domestic violence (Pennell, forthcoming 2005). The project revealed that participants found high satisfaction with FGC, but again unease about who was missing. Some said that an important family member such as a father or just more family should have been in attendance.

The North Carolina study gives some further insights into participants' views on who should have attended their FGC. Notably, at the conclusion of the conference, family group members expressed they would have greater satisfaction with the process if only one side of the family was in attendance. On the evaluation form distributed at the end of the conference, those who had only one side of the family present tended to give higher scores to the FGC preparations, decision process, and resulting plan. As noted earlier, though, even at this stage some unease was beginning to surface about who was missing from the conference.

Approximately one month later, the North Carolina family group members were interviewed and asked to reflect on their conference. With a month's lag time, they were able to begin to see the results of their conference. Overall, they continued to be positive about the conference but also more aware of its deficits. Now, those who had both sides of the family present were more likely to note that their plan included ways that the family group will help, included steps to evaluate whether the plan is working and to bring the family group back together if needed, and was approved by social services without unnecessary delays.

It makes sense that a conference with both sides of the family present raises the level of discomfort among the participants – they have to face not only their own family but also their in-laws at the meeting. It also makes sense that with hindsight, family group members see the benefits of enlarging the group

Should His and Her Sides of the Family be Invited to the FGC?

of those committed to safeguarding the children, young people, and adults in the family. Having more concerned relatives in attendance makes for more people contributing to the plan, supporting its approval by Social Services, and ensuring that it is carried out the right way.

Answering the question: What about domestic violence situations?

Although the benefits of inviting both sides of a child's family are readily acknowledged, doubts continue as to whether FGC should be used specifically in domestic-violence cases. The question is often asked, "Should families with domestic violence be referred for an FGC?" One response is that domestic violence and child maltreatment often happen in the same family (Edleson, 1999), the referring social workers are frequently unaware of the extent of domestic violence on their caseloads, and, thus, the workers cannot guarantee that only families without domestic violence are referred. Further, in situations of domestic violence, the reality is that the workers are more likely to approve the referral and the families are more likely to agree to take part in conferencing (Crampton, 2001). All this stresses a need to be prepared for referrals involving domestic violence.

Another response to the question demands caution. Before scheduling an FGC for a family with domestic violence, referring agencies must:

- Consult with women and children's advocates in designing programs and preparing for conferences.
- Ask survivors what they want and ensure that their safety is placed first.
- Assess whether an FGC should be held and if so, in what way and with whom.
- Respect existing no-contact orders between partners.
- Encourage those feeling at risk to select a support person to stay by them at a conference.
- Be prepared to cancel or postpone an FGC or stop it once it has started.

Some tools for planning safety measures are available (Burford, Pennell, & MacLeod, 1995; Carter, 2003; North Carolina FGC Project, 2002).

The next question usually asked is: "What are the results for families with domestic violence?"

A broad answer looks at the promising outcomes from many different countries reported in general for FGCs in child welfare (Merkel-Holguin, 2003). Then the closer response looks at the limited but positive Canadian and British findings from FGC projects focusing on family violence.

The Newfoundland & Labrador project found from a review of child welfare files that indicators of child maltreatment and domestic violence fell overall for the 32 FGC families and rose for their comparison group (Pennell & Burford, 2000). This finding is further supported by interviews with 115 family group members and a review of police files for the FGC families. Such a strong convergence from multiple sources supports the validity of the findings.

Further, a British study (SSRIU, 2003) also reports positive outcomes for the beginning stage of the Dove Project. For the six families taking part in the study, none had violence at the conference, and afterward all six mothers showed a decrease in depression. In later interviews, the five responding mothers said their families were "better" after the conference.

Both the Canadian and British studies support the use of FGC in serious family-violence situations. Given the widespread nature of domestic violence in families receiving child welfare services, the positive results from FGC studies in general also encourage using FGC to address family violence.

Conclusion

Concerns can be resolved and peaceful solutions found by bringing together a larger group in which participants listen closely, respect diversity, and form a unity of spirit. Experience with FGC shows that this is the case even when a family has a history of domestic violence. The conference is an opportunity to bring together members of his and her sides of the family, who all care for the same children and young people, to break the conspiracy of silence around the violence, and to reach consensus on how to move forward together.

Should His and Her Sides of the Family be Invited to the FGC?

References

- Burford, G., Pennell, J., & MacLeod, S. (1995). *Family group decision making: Manual for coordinators and communities*. St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada: Family Group Decision Making Project. Memorial University of Newfoundland, School of Social Work. Available at: <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jpennell/fgdm/Manual>.
- Carter, J. (2003, October). *Family team conferences in domestic violence cases* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Family Violence Prevention Fund.
- Crampton, D. S. (2001). *Making sense of foster care: An evaluation of family group decision making in Kent County, Michigan*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan: Ann Arbor.
- Edleson, J. L. (1999). The overlap between child maltreatment and woman battering. *Violence Against Women*, 5(2), 134-154.
- Gunderson, K., Cahn, K., & Wirth, J. (2003). The Washington State long-term outcome study. *Protecting Children*, 18(1-2), pp. 42-47.
- Lupton, C., & Nixon, P. (1999). *Empowering practice? A critical appraisal of the family group conference approach*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Marsh, P., & Crow, G. (1998). *Family group conferences in child welfare*. Oxford, UK: Blackwells.
- Merkel-Holguin, L. (Ed.). (2003). Promising results, potential new directions: International FGDM research and evaluation in child welfare. *Protecting Children*, 18(1-2). North Carolina Family Group Conferencing Project. (2002). *Family group conferencing in child welfare: Practice guidance for planning, implementing, training, and evaluation*. North Carolina State University, Social Work Program, Raleigh, NC. Available at: <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jpennell/ncfgcp/pracguid>.
- Pennell, J. (forthcoming 2005). Safety for mothers and their children. In J. Pennell & G. Anderson, *Widening the circle: The practice and evaluation of family group conferencing with children, young persons, and their families*. Washington, DC, USA: NASW Press.
- Pennell, J., & Burford, G. (1995). *Family group decision making: New roles for "old" partners in resolving family violence: Implementation Report* (Vol. I-II). St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada: Memorial University of Newfoundland, School of Social Work. Available at <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jpennell/fgdm/ImpReport/index.htm>.
- Pennell, J., & Burford, G. (2000). Family group decision making: Protecting children and women. *Child Welfare*, 79(2), 131-158.
- Social Services and Research Information Unit [SSRIU]. (2003, June). *The Dove Project: The Basingstoke domestic violence family group conference project*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Portsmouth, Hampshire, UK.
- Trotter, C., Sheehan, R., Liddell, M., Strong, D., & Laragy, C. (1999). *Evaluation of the statewide implementation of family group conferencing*. Victoria, Australia: Department of Human Services.

Joan Pennell, MSW, PhD, is Professor and Head of the Department of Social Work at North Carolina State University. She is the principal investigator of the North Carolina Family-Centered Meetings Project and previously directed the North Carolina Family Group Conferencing Project, both projects uphold fostering inclusive approaches to planning in child welfare. Before her return to the United States, she served as a principal investigator for a Newfoundland & Labrador (Canada) demonstration of family group conferencing in situations of child maltreatment and domestic violence. For more information, see <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jpennell>.

Author's note: A previous version of this article was first published in the Spring 2004 Edition of *Together, The family group conference network newsletter (UK)* published by Family Rights Group, The Print House, 18, Ashwin Street, London, E8 3DL. (Family Rights Group: phone 0207 923-2628, e-mail office@frg.org.uk, website www.frg.org.uk)