

**SPECIAL
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Family Group Conferencing Ontario Provincial Resource



ISSUE # 7

SPECIAL EDITION 2011

We have come a long way!

In November of this year, it will be 5 years since the Child Welfare Transformation Agenda was introduced and since the Family Group Conferencing Ontario Provincial Resource was formed (2006).

The Provincial Resource has gone from managing a Provincial Roster of a few FGC/FGDM coordinators to a Roster of 68 coordinators from across Ontario. In addition to increasing capacity for coordinators in Ontario, regions have been gradually building their own capacity for mentors and trainers. The Rosters of mentors and trainers show that 8 regions out of 9 have mentorship capacity and 7 out of 9 regions have active trainers. In 5 years, mentors across Ontario have delivered approximately 3,000 hours of mentorship and approximately 1,000 individuals have participated in FGC/FGDM training in Ontario since 2007.

Some of the special projects we have embarked on have allowed us to build on our partnerships. In 2008, we provided input on FGC/FGDM to the authors of the OACAS Best Practices Manual for Domestic Violence. Over the years, we participated in various American Humane Association work groups and committees, specifically the "blueprint" of the family involvement project, and the FGDM guidelines committee.

In 2009, we worked in collaboration with the Office of the Children's Lawyer (OCL) which resulted in the development of Guidelines for the Involvement of Child's Counsel in the FGC/FGDM Process. This document is being used by coordinators and lawyers across the province and has been incorporated in our training materials and the Coordinator's Manual.

In April 2008, we had our first Professional Development Day, now delivered twice a year. The Provincial Resource along with the Steering Committee continue to strive to improve the quality of these events, relying significantly on the feedback obtained from coordinators to organize the content of the plenary sessions and workshops. To this date we have delivered 8 PD Days.

Furthermore, in 2010, we began filming some of the content of the PD Day, the plenary session and a workshop. We felt it was important that coordinators unable to attend stayed connected to the skills building opportunities and the FGC/FGDM community. We have produced two DVDs since.

Another exciting project has been the development of a Ontario Provincial Resource Newsletter. Our first issue was launched in the Spring/Summer 2009. The goal of this initiative was to use it as a communication tool between the Provincial Resource and the FGC/FGDM

community and more specifically to keep more isolated coordinators connected to the community and the practice. To this date, we have published 7 newsletters; submissions for the content have come from coordinators, supervisors, participants of the FGC/FGDM process and ADR program coordinators.

In 2009, we received research funding from the Child Welfare Secretariat to explore the use of FGC with youth transitioning into adulthood. The study will be completed in January 2012. In addition, in December 2012 we received funding to conduct additional FGC's with Youth. This initiative assisted us in obtaining the necessary sample to complete the research project.

It is evident that our program has evolved significantly since 2007 particularly when we look at the growth of the FGC community which along with the Ontario Provincial Resource has played an essential role in promoting best practice and model integrity. We have come a long way indeed!

Finally, we are grateful to the Child Welfare Secretariat for supporting these special initiatives.

**Carolina Pizarro,
Program Coordinator
Provincial Resource**



HIGH CONFLICT

FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCING PILOT PROJECT

The expression, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, may have some relevance in a discussion of criminal justice, but it has absolutely no place in a discussion of co-parenting following separation or divorce. Good parenting is about raising healthy, happy children, not about getting even”. (Mr. Justice Harvey Brownstone).

While a range of emotions marks the dissolution of a relationship, research suggests that how families conduct themselves during the separation process has far greater impact on children than the actual divorce itself (Amato, 2000). Separated parents may also experience difficulty achieving a working parenting plan. Ongoing adult conflict may be concerning to the child welfare authorities due to the risk of emotional harm to the children. As Family Group Conferencing coordinators we understand the importance of family in developing plans for children and that outcomes improve when families are instrumental in planning for their care. Why should this be any different in the case of custody, access and parenting plans?

To address this question, the High Conflict Family Group Conferencing Pilot Project was developed by Tracey Lipp, Master of Social Work Candidate.

It is hypothesized that a Family Group Conferencing process may potentially have significant value for families to develop a parenting plan that addresses the custody, access, conflict and communication difficulties that these families face. In order to specifically address the pertinent dynamics of the referrals, enhancement to the traditional Family Group Conferencing process were employed.

These enhancements included; a) adjusting the bottom lines to better reflect the best practice guiding principles related to high conflict parenting; b) parent education regarding strategies to reduce conflict and lessen its impact on the children and, c) the inclusion of a guest speaker at the conference who shares pertinent information with the family group about the impact of adult conflict on children based on their age and stage of development.

The families who were referred were at the extreme end of the conflict continuum, had open protection files with the London Middlesex Children’s Aid Society and met the inclusion criteria for an ADR referral.

The individuals completing the Family Group Conferencing Participant Satisfaction Questionnaire indicated a high level of satisfaction with the process for the development of a parenting plan. The themes: the development of a plan, improved communication and putting the best interests of the children first have emerged out of the open-ended questions.

The findings and lessons learned from this innovative research pilot project can inform the work of family group conferencing coordinators and lead to future considerations for creative practice ideas. For more information please feel free to contact, tracey.lipp@rogers.com.

Tracey Lipp, FGC coordinator,
South West Region

Family Group Decision Making: Child Welfare Perspective

Within the past year, we had the opportunity to participate in Family Group Decision-Making. The parents, Sandra and Ted, and the CAS were in the final stages toward Crown Wardship no access, for the purpose of adoption, for 2 year old Sam. CAS was very concerned about the level of adult conflict in the parental relationship as well as the parents’ addiction struggles. Although progress had been made especially by Sandra, Sam’s mother, we could not reach agreement on how to move forward in a safe way for Sam.

The FGDM process was again introduced to the family at Family Court in April of 2010. At that time, there was a lot of conflict, tension and mistrust between the CAS and Sam’s parents. I observed the FGDM coordinator’s meeting with Sam’s parents, who without bias, skillfully allowed the parents to voice their concerns and worries during this meeting. By the end of the meeting, Sam’s parents were feeling more optimistic that a solution could be found in partnership with CAS and they signed the consent for FGDM to occur. The meeting that day in court allowed for a “new beginning” ...“a fresh start” to developing a plan toward the safety and well being of little Sam. It was like giving permission for everyone to start anew and move forward!

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The first conference was held September 2010 at a local Church. Eleven family members, Sam and his half-sister attended as well as the CAS case manager and supervisor. Having skilled child care providers and lunch provided was appreciated by all those in attendance. The comfort level in the room during introductions and explanation of the plan for the day was orchestrated by the coordinator who allowed time for everyone to share their thoughts, feelings and hopes for the day while at the same time not allowing for negative or disruptive communication to occur.

The family reached agreement and presented their collective plan to us which was accepted with relief and excitement. I thought "wow" what a solid plan and I was impressed with the hard work completed by the family. The Plan was for Sam to return to the care of his mother by the next court date which was a couple of weeks away. The family circle collectively addressed all of our concerns and identified specific family members to ensure Sam's safety including a solid back-up plan in the event that Sandra had difficulty or was not able to care for Sam. Additionally the family recommended a follow-up FGDM meeting in six months time to review the progress of the Plan and whether or not we could withdraw service.

A second FGDM meeting did occur which became a celebration for the family circle and us. The parents and family circle accomplished all of the goals and tasks of the first Plan and we received no reports from family, friends or the community about Sam being exposed to adult conflict or addictions. The family circle's second Plan included the request that child welfare service be terminated and provided a solid safety and support plan for Sam's future. We accepted the family's plan and to honour the family circle's success, we presented a congratulatory cake to the group, an 8x10 colour photo of Sam with each of his parents and a time capsule of the final Order returning Sam to the primary care of his mother. The closing circle provided an opportunity for everyone to share their feelings about the FGDM process, what they had accomplished, how they were able to reunite as a family and express their love and pride for Sam and his parents' accomplishments. The process also helped them heal.

I would absolutely recommend the FGDM process especially in "stuck" circumstances. This process helped take me as a worker "outside the box" and demonstrated to me that child protection workers do not always have the answers but if given the chance, the families sure do!

Simcoe County Children's Aid Society, Family Service Worker

Family Group Decision Making: A Dad's Perspective

My name is Ted and I am Sam's dad. My girlfriend, Sandra, and I had an open case with the CAS since our son's (Sam) birth, at which time he was apprehended by CAS. For the first 2 1/2 years of our son's life we fought tooth and nail with CAS and it was looking bad for our young family. Our time was up and it was looking like poor Sam was going to be a Crown Ward.

We, on the other hand, were determined to do anything to keep him, and it was at that time that we were invited to meet the FGDM coordinator. It was at a pre court meeting. Present were our CAS worker, my mom, me and Sam's mother. We were all there in that tiny room, and let me say it was a most uncomfortable atmosphere for all of us. I especially was quite excited to say the least. The coordinator let me speak my side of the story for what seemed like the first time ever. Our worker had to listen that day-and that was the day that our relationship with CAS changed for the better indeed. The coordinator suggested that we give FGDM a chance as a way of planning for Sam's future. We agreed and let me say it was exactly what we needed in our situation.

The coordinator organized and got both of our families' together-people who were all related to Sam and some of them he'd never even met! Our issues were all brought out in the open, and plans were made so if a situation was to come up, it was covered and taken care of by family members rather than CAS workers. The coordinator brought us lunch, we solved the problems, and CAS closed our file! And I have to say, 'WOW'!

We can finally concentrate on being a family without worrying about CAS taking our son. No more foster homes, no more bad blood. Both of our families' came together and put old differences aside. Plus, we always have a family member available if Sam needs anything whatsoever. We have the coordinator and her FGDM program to thank for our lives with our son back. And I can honestly say that things are really looking up for us all as a result. I owe her at the very least this letter of thanks!

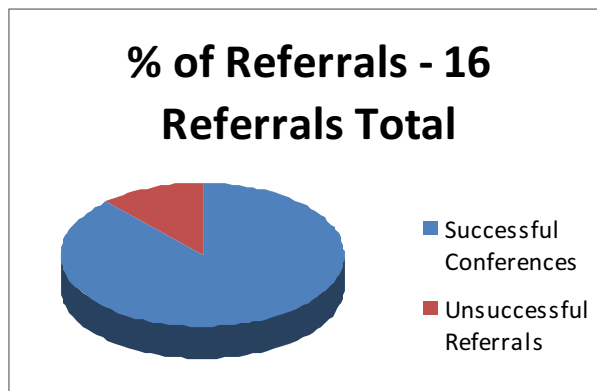
Ted, Sam's dad

USING FGDM WITH “YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE “

JusticeWorksYouthCare was founded in 1999 with a mission to provide value added services which fill in the gaps in service delivery systems to troubled youth and families. Our goal is to build better futures for youth, families, and communities and our operating strategy is to do whatever it takes to achieve our goals. JusticeWorksYouthCare is currently in 16 counties across the state of Pennsylvania as well as in the start-up phase in South Carolina. We are currently providing FGDM/FGC services in 10 counties for Child Welfare Organizations and Juvenile Justicesectors.

JusticeWorksYouthCare supports the mission of FGDM to encourage families to work together to find their own solutions that assure safety, well-being and permanency of children with their own family. We use FGDM to assist families to develop and utilize their own strengths and resources to solve critical issues. At the same time, we assist families to identify and utilize appropriate community resources that may help them achieve their goals. Our program has experience and skill working with families, older teenagers and delinquent youth to help develop specific and achievable continuing care plans and supervise the transition back to the community and family. JusticeWorks has seen positive FGDM results for, but not limited to: truancy, preservation, reunification, aging out of care youth, delinquency and custody issues.

In Westmoreland County, JusticeWorks had the opportunity to work with youth that were aging out of the county system. We were given 16 referrals to plan and coordinate a FGDM conference for youth in foster care, group home settings and residential placements. Our outcomes reflected that FGDM was more successful with these older youth than with families involved in the FGDM process for preservation reasons. JusticeWorks was able to complete 14 out of 16 conferences (2 youth refused the process) for an 88% successful outcome.



Renee Kresge, Regional Director Northeast Pennsylvania

For more information on JusticeWorks Youth Care Inc go to www.justiceworksyouthcare.com



Upcoming Training/Events

1st FGC/FGDM Canadian Conference—Sept 25, 26 & 27, 2011

Family Group Conferencing Training—Nov 14 and 15, 2011

Next Professional Development Day—April, 2012

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Family Group Conferencing Provincial Resource is funded
by the Ontario Child Welfare Secretariat