Engaging family members in decision making in child welfare contexts

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Learning goals

This chapter will enable you to:

1. Develop an understanding of the origins of family decision-making models of practice in child welfare
2. Place this development in the context of rights-based practice
3. Identify the key elements and knowledge base of family decision-making models of practice
4. Understand the key stages of the Family Group Conference as an example of family decision making
5. Reflect upon the possibilities of using family decision making in your own practice.

Introduction

Many services support the notion of involving families in decision making. The nature or extent of that family engagement in a child welfare context, however, creates a range of responses that are often influenced by societal pressures and competing demands (Connolly, 1999). Conceptualising family participation across levels of practitioner response is a useful way of understanding the extent of service commitment to meaningful family involvement (Connolly & Ward, 2008).

At the most basic level, families are consulted and their views taken into account. This requires that the practitioner listen to the family and

consult over what may need to happen to resolve the concerns they may have. The next level will see families actively contributing to solutions. Here service providers demonstrate confidence in the family and trust family-led problem-solving. A higher level still of family participation might then see the proactive seeking of family feedback as a service user – and using that feedback to constructively improve services. But arguably the highest level of commitment with respect to family participation in service matters promotes the direct involvement of families in decision making and sharing responsibility for implementing those decisions. It is this level of family participation that we will explore in this chapter.

It is widely recognised that family decision making, and its innovative practice model the Family Group Conference, has originated in Aotearoa New Zealand. Introduced into New Zealand law in 1989, the Family Group Conference brings together professionals and the family, including the extended family, in a solution-focused meeting to sort out matters of care and safety. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and members of the broader kinship system are entitled members of the Family Group Conference who come together at the meeting to support their child. Through a process of discussion and private family deliberation, family-led decisions and plans are made to strengthen the family and protect the child.

Whilst Family Group Conferencing is nested within New Zealand legislation and provides the key mechanism through which statutory decision making occurs, it has also been adopted and adapted as a practice model across international jurisdictions, including Australia (Harris, 2007). For example, in Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Co-operative Ltd, in partnership with the Department of Human Services, provides an Aboriginal Family Decision Making Program called Dhum Djirri (Wurundjeri words meaning to gather and unite). Dhum Djirri has two convenors, an Aboriginal community convenor and a person from the statutory child protection service, and it aims to place culture and community at the heart of the decision-making process (www.vacca.org/01_program/afdm.html).

This chapter will look at the motivation for involving families in decision making, and will examine both the practice and knowledge base of Family Group Conferencing. While this chapter explores the use of Family Group Conferencing in child welfare contexts, Chapter 13 describes how it has been more broadly applied in a range of practice settings (e.g., child care and parent–adolescent conflict resolution).

Why involve families in decision making?

Traditionally, Western systems of child welfare have a legacy of using systems of non-family care as a primary means of looking after children who

could not live at home. In general, professionals made care decisions for children and many children in foster care lost touch with their family and their broader kinship network. Growing numbers of children were placed and spent extended periods of time in out-of-home care (Merkel-Holguin & Ribich, 2001). While some children remained in stable foster placements, many moved from one foster family to another, damaging attachment opportunities and resulting in a loss of family connectedness that other children take for granted. Children in care often missed out on being part of an extended family group who could be there for them as they grew into adulthood. This child welfare rescue model, with its heavy reliance on alternative care, also saw large numbers of Indigenous children in Australia and New Zealand being dislocated from both their families and their cultural heritage causing deep cultural losses (Connolly & Cashmore, 2009; Gilbert, 2009).

The increase in the numbers of children coming to the notice of protective services, the spiralling costs in providing out-of-home care, and the growing realisation that established professional processes of decision making and care were increasingly unable to address the care and protection needs of children sharply highlighted the limitations of the state as sole protector. A growing impetus for more family-centred approaches emerged from these insights: 'After 150 years of removing children from their homes in response to a wide range of family problems, the wisdom of this approach has been questioned. This questioning reflects at once a new understanding of the importance to children of family ties and a new tolerance for diverse family forms and family styles' (Nelson & Landsman, 1992, p. 202).

The New Zealand experience of introducing the Family Group Conference demonstrated that involving family in decision making provided the means through which families could be supported to resolve their own problems and care for their own children, with a consequential reduction of children being placed in out-of-home care. Across international child welfare systems there was pressure for change and many countries adopting the New Zealand model of Family Group Conferencing achieved notable success (Marsh, 2008).

Arguably, however, the key reason to involve families in decision making about their own life issues rests in its intrinsic association with their basic human rights. Families have a moral and human right to meaningful participation and self-determination (United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Further, a core principle of human rights that critically defends human autonomy, is the right to lead one's own life, and to 'evaluate, choose, deliberate, and plan' for one's self (Nickel, 2007, p. 63). Building on the work of Orend (2002), Connolly and Ward (2008, p. 24) argue that 'social recognition is essentially concerned with acknowledging the rights of individuals to direct the course of their own lives and to be treated in a dignified and respectful manner in accordance with their status as autonomous agents'. Once establishing a human rights justification for participation and

self-determination, there is no option other than to embrace family engagement in decision making as a basic human right.

Of course, the issue of whether parents have their human rights curtailed when they are deemed to have failed in their responsibilities is an important one to consider. Professionals may struggle to reconcile that abusive or neglectful parents also have a right to 'evaluate, choose, deliberate, and plan' (Nickel, 2007, p. 63) for their children. Taking a rights-based approach helps to navigate a fair course through these ethical dilemmas. If parents who have hurt their children are nevertheless valued as fellow humans who deserve the opportunity to work with dignity toward positive solutions to keep their children safe, then there is no reason *not* to take a rights-based approach and involve them in decision making.

Taking this a step further it is also possible to argue group rights for extended families on the basis of a collective rather than individualistic rights perspective. While it is true that individuals are the actual holders of human rights, family members, as part of extended family groups, may see their individual rights given effect, collectively within a group setting.

In essence, on the basis of a human rights perspective engaging family in decision making, whilst having positive implications in the longer term for the child, is also the ethical and fair thing to do.

Reflective questions

What do you think are the key challenges in engaging families in decision-making in your practice? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of engaging families in decision making from the point of: parents; children; extended family members; practitioners; and services in general? What are some of the challenges for practices that are rights based?

Family Group Conferencing: an example of engaging families in decision making

The Family Group Conference as practised in New Zealand begins once a child is considered to be in need of care and protection. Firstly the family, including the extended family, and the professionals are brought together. The emphasis is clearly on building the problem-solving potential within the family. It is important to bring together as many family members as possible in a harnessing of family strengths. Considerable attempts are made therefore to engage people in the process. The 'family group' who are entitled to attend the Family Group Conference is broadly defined in New Zealand law to include people with whom the child has a biological or legal relationship, and people to whom the child has a significant psychological attachment.

The emphasis is on maximum family group attendance, minimal professional attendance, although professionals other than the referrer may be asked to come to the meeting if they have information that will be helpful to the family in their discussions.

Because attendance at the Family Group Conference is legally mandated, individuals, family members or otherwise, cannot place restrictions on who can attend the Family Group Conference. Only the coordinator of the meeting, a statutory position under the legislation, has the power to exclude a person with legal entitlement to attend. This action can be taken on the basis of the person's attendance being potentially detrimental to the interests of the child or undesirable for other reasons. Exclusion decisions are not made lightly, and if a person is excluded from the meeting the coordinator is required to record their views and present them to the Family Group Conference in their absence.

Preparing for the Family Group Conference

Preparing well for the meeting is very important to good outcomes. Families, and in particular extended families, will not necessarily be used to having an active role when working with professionals. Just as professionals have to make a shift from professional decision making to family decision making, so too the family needs to learn about the Family Group Conference and their essential role within it. Early discussions with the family may also reveal family tensions that require attention before decision making can occur during the Family Group Conference itself. Developing a comprehensive family genealogy is important, and can also help to identify potential areas of conflict. Using genograms and ecomaps in family work (Barker, 1986) can provide an enormous amount of important information very quickly, not only with respect to who is in the family, but also who is significant to the family and who is lost from it. Different family members can identify where the gaps are in the family information, and building the genealogy can provide support as the strengths within the family become more apparent.

Responding to the family's cultural needs is also an important part of the preparatory work. Appreciating family cultures broadly to include such things as religiosity and affectional preferences as well as ethnicity, will help to ensure that you have the right people at the conference and processes that are responsive to the family's needs. Culture plays a significant part in family dynamics and taking a strengths-based approach will help in achieving good outcomes.

Understanding issues of power within the family system and across family/worker systems will also help to anticipate and manage dynamics during the Family Group Conference. When bringing extended family members together it is critical that the interests of vulnerable members of the

family are protected. It is important to know if violence characterises family dynamics, or if there is any likelihood of scapegoating as alliances develop. This depth of knowledge can influence decisions about meeting attendance – for example, whether support people need to be at the meeting, and how the meeting is managed on the day.

The purpose of the preliminary work is to prepare the ground for the effective coming together of family in a solution-focused process. As Saleebey (1997, p. 4) notes, focusing on strengths will shift attention to decisions that enhance possibilities: ‘mobilise clients’ strengths (talents, knowledge, capacities, resources) in the service of achieving their goals and visions and the clients will have a better quality of life on their terms’.

Getting people together

Whenever possible the Family Group Conference meeting is held in a child- and family-friendly place and typically begins by welcoming the family in ways that respond to their particular cultural needs. Marsh (2008, p. 170) notes the importance of thinking about what will help the family contribute positively to the Family Group Conference process, ‘worry, hunger and other emotions can get in the way of engagement’. Managing child care matters sensitively so parents are not left worrying about stressed children might be another way of supporting their involvement. The meeting can take time and it is important that the workers do whatever they can to support full engagement with the process.

Once the family is warmly welcomed, the purpose of the meeting is explained in plain language and in ways that will further engage the family. The meeting then moves into its first phase: information sharing.

Information sharing

This phase of the meeting is important because it is critical to the development of safe decisions and plans for children. Information is shared relating to the nature of the concerns for the child and the assessments that have been undertaken. Mostly information is provided by the social worker who made the Family Group Conference referral, but sometimes the coordinator will bring other professionals to the meeting who have been working with the family, for example, medical or educational professionals. Rather than the information being read out in a report, professionals are encouraged to think creatively about ways of sharing information that will engage the family’s interest and commitment to problem-solving. The information sharing phase of the meeting can be conflictual when information is disputed, and the coordinator needs to be skilled in the facilitation of group dynamics and able to refocus attention to the child’s needs.

This time is also an opportunity for the family to clarify information and asking questions is encouraged. Once it is clear that the information is fully understood by the family the meeting moves to its second phase: private family discussion.

Private family discussion

This part of the meeting is probably the most innovative of the Family Group Conference process. Here professionals are required to withdraw from the meeting and leave the family to talk in private and make decisions and plans on what should happen next. It is clear that the intent of the New Zealand law is to ensure that the family have time to talk by themselves without professional pressure or influence. Whilst private family time is at the heart of the Family Group Conference and is seen to be of key importance to the process (Walton, McKenzie & Connolly, 2005), there are times when it also needs to be carefully managed by the coordinator when issues of safety may be present. This is where the preparation work before the conference is critical to successful Family Group Conference outcomes. Before bringing people together the coordinator needs to understand the family dynamics and, whenever possible, anticipate how these may impact on the Family Group Conference. Listening to family members will help the coordinator mediate difficult dynamics without compromising important elements of the Family Group Conference.

Once the family have had the opportunity to discuss the issues in private and come up with a plan for the way forward, the conference enters its third and final stage: reaching agreement on the decisions and plans.

Reaching agreement

It is the coordinator's role to bring the conference members back together and seek agreement to the family's decisions and plans. Often finer details of the family plan are negotiated during this phase and in the vast majority of situations agreement is reached. In situations where agreement is not able to be achieved, the matter can be presented to the family court for resolution.

Although originally developed in the context of child welfare, as Family Group Conference practice has spread across the world it has been used whenever issues of care or family support arise. By bringing extended family together practitioners have found that previously untapped resources and supports within the family can be found and positively engaged to help resolve family issues. The following case example illustrates how extended family, once alerted to concerns, can gather together in a circle of support for a troubled family.

A case example: the Jennings family

Mr and Mrs Jennings were referred to a family support service by a school counsellor concerned about the general care of their son Billy. The Jennings family had six children, aged from two to 12 years. Billy, aged 12, also had three siblings attending the school - John aged nine, and twin sisters Mary and Sarah aged seven. The children often came to school without breakfast and were poorly clothed. Over the years the school had expressed their concern to Mr and Mrs Jennings about the children's care but recently they had been found stealing food from shops in the area and scavenging for food in the rubbish bins located around the fast food outlets near the school. It was clear to the teaching staff that the children were becoming increasingly isolated from their peers and appeared lonely in class. In particular, Billy's behaviour was deteriorating and he was starting to become disruptive. Mr and Mrs Jennings indicated that they would welcome some support but nothing they had tried had worked in the past. Various services had tried to help and things had improved for a short time, but in the end everything went back to how it had been before when the workers withdrew.

The family support worker, Sue, found the family to be under financial strain. Mr Jennings worked in a factory and Mrs Jennings, who was limited intellectually, cared for the children at home. The couple also had two pre-school children, Ted aged four and Chantelle aged two. It was clear to Sue that Mrs Jennings had little control of things at home.

In talking with Mr and Mrs Jennings, Sue found that they had a large extended family, most living locally. This included a maternal aunt, two paternal aunts and paternal grandparents. Both maternal grandparents were deceased. Sue talked to the Jennings about the possibility of bringing the extended family together to see what could be done to help. Whilst Mrs Jennings seemed keen, Mr Jennings was initially uncertain as he had not seen his family for a number of years, despite living reasonably close by. They were not on bad terms with family members, however, and so he agreed to Sue bringing a Family Group Conference together.

Sue was delighted that all the available family agreed to attend the Family Group Conference. On the day of the meeting Sue encouraged them to share some family stories and catch up with what had happened since they had last seen each other. Then Sue talked about her work with Mr and Mrs Jennings, describing some of the difficulties in raising six children on a low income. Mr Jennings did not feel happy about the children being at the meeting and so Sue spent some time with them prior to the Family Group Conference so they would understand what the meeting was about and be able to contribute if they wanted to. The children agreed that Billy would represent them by writing a letter to the conference. Billy's school teacher was invited to the Family Group Conference and was given the responsibility of reading out the letter. Although the letter was not very long, it had quite an impact on the family. Billy talked about how much the children loved their parents and what it was like being in a big family. He also talked about school and how he worried about John, Mary and Sarah going to school hungry. He told his family how sad they were that other children didn't like them and how they had to stick together.

After the letter had been read out Sue asked the family if they needed any more information before moving into private family time. Sue reassured the family that the problems had been long-standing and that they would most likely take time to resolve. She did not want them to feel pressured to find solutions in the limited time of the meeting.

The family, in fact, took a long time to deliberate. They came up with a plan across a range of areas including greater supportive contact, respite care, a sharing of 'family clothes' (there were lots of children across the extended family and lots of opportunity for good quality hand-me-downs). One of the aunts – a nurse who worked part time at the local hospital – decided that she would come over every second day to see if they could, together, get the house on track. A subsequent review of the decisions revealed significant improvement in the home situation. For the first time in years the extended family spent Christmas together.

Activities

Identify what you think the tangible and intangible benefits of family engagement in decision making might be. Think about the ways in which professionals can positively influence the Family Group Conference process. How can they inhibit family engagement in decision making? Think of some ways Sue could help maintain family enthusiasm and momentum for change over time.

A case example: the Williams family

The following case study, drawn from Connolly (2006, p. 346) illustrates the way in which a Family Group Conference can also be used in complex situations where dispute between family members, in this case sexual abuse, is an aspect of the family dynamic.

Janice Williams lived at home with her parents and two younger siblings. She was 12 years of age when she first came to the notice of protective services following allegations that she had been sexually abused by her father. Subsequent to the abuse disclosure, Mr Williams admitted that he had abused Janice, although social workers were concerned that he minimised the extent of the abuse and the impact it had on his daughter. He moved away from the family home but had made it clear that he wanted to come back. He believed that the family should stick together.

Mrs Williams relied heavily on her husband for support, both in terms of the day-to-day running of the home and the emotional support he provided. When he left she struggled to cope and found even the most straightforward tasks impossibly difficult. She was feeling increasingly depressed, and while she was supportive of Janice, she missed her husband and wanted things back the way they were.

The Williams family had a reasonably large kinship network. Although both sets of grandparents were deceased, Mrs Williams had a brother who lived close by, and Mr Williams had two sisters living within driving distance. Only one member of the extended family was unable to attend the

Family Group Conference: Mrs Williams' older brother who was encouraged to send a letter to the meeting expressing his views. Janice was very fearful of seeing her father so soon after the abuse, and because of this, Mr Williams was excluded from the meeting. His views, however, were recorded and presented to the family group as part of the information sharing phase.

Prior to the Family Group Conference the Williams' extended family had largely lost touch with each other, and so the first part of the meeting provided an opportunity to rekindle links. Mrs Williams was uncertain how her husband's family may react to the problems raised in the Family Group Conference, particularly because her husband's letter to the Family Group Conference was so full of expressions of apology and distress. However, the coordinator encouraged the family to talk about the issues confronting them, and it was clear that family members on both sides wanted to support Janice and her mother.

The family took a long time to talk privately. When they finally returned to the meeting, they explained that they were troubled by Mr Williams' desire to return home and were concerned that Mrs Williams' reliance on her husband could create dangers for Janice. Their decisions reflected the need to both support Mrs Williams and protect Janice. They recognised the need to provide both emotional and practical support for Mrs Williams, and a plan of family support and child care was proposed. Additionally, the family requested that the social worker initiate court proceedings to secure a restraining order with respect to Mr Williams. It was acknowledged that he would find this a difficult family decision and that he would need support to understand the position taken by the family. One of the paternal aunts took responsibility for explaining this to him and to support him through the process and the criminal court proceedings that were to follow.

Activities

Consider yourself the coordinator bringing together the Williams family for the Family Group Conference. What would you do to prepare them for the meeting? What do you think the issues for each side of the family might have been in this situation and how might these have an impact on the Family Group Conference?

What do you think the implications were of Mr Williams being excluded from the meeting? What do you think will be important for this family into the future?

Knowledge for practice

As the practice of Family Group Conferencing has flourished internationally, researchers have been active in examining the functions and outcomes of family group decision making in practice. This research continues to strengthen the knowledge base and increases our capacity to learn from different systems as they adapt and use the model.

The Family Group Conference is about finding safe solutions for children and maintaining them within their kinship system if that is possible. It is important, therefore, to understand the ways in which the Family Group Conference supports child safety and the child's connection with their family network. With respect to child safety, researchers have found a reduction in child maltreatment and resubstantiation of abuse following the Family Group Conference (Pennell & Burford, 2000; Titcomb & LeCroy, 2005). Supporting the retention of the child within the kinship network, a key aim of Family Group Conferencing, several studies have reported increased rates of relative care for children at risk (Edwards et al., 2007; Gunderson, Cahn & Wirth, 2003; Koch et al., 2006; Morris, 2007; Titcomb & LeCroy, 2003; Walker, 2005). Greater placement stability has been noted (Gunderson, Cahn & Wirth, 2003; Pennell & Burford, 2000) and shorter periods of time in care for children (Wheeler & Johnson, 2003). Importantly, increased kin support has also been identified (Kiely & Bussey, 2001; Morris, 2007); with Horowitz (2008) finding increased emotional support (75%), increased help with transportation (44%) and increased respite care for the family (35%). Not surprisingly family relationships have strengthened, and the relationship between the young person's home and school have also improved (Crow, Marsh & Holton, 2004; Staples, 2007). Although the Family Group Conference is not a therapeutic process, researchers have found potential for the Family Group Conference to have a therapeutic or healing effect for family members (Holland & Rivett, 2008).

As with most practice models that have been adopted across international systems, some Family Group Conference research has presented challenging findings. Sundell and Vinnerljung (2004) undertook a Swedish three year follow-up study that found 69% of their Family Group Conference group sample had at least one new child abuse notification, and 60% were substantiated. It was noted, however, that the Family Group Conference group presented with increased histories of investigation and more serious problems than the comparison group which may be relevant to this finding. Worryingly, however, both the Family Group Conference group and the comparison group had low levels of re-reporting by members of the extended family. Given that the Swedish study contradicts other positive research it is necessary to take care when making international comparisons. It may be that notions of extended family involvement in child protection decision making may find a more sympathetic fit in societies supporting a greater collective responsibility for children (Burford et al., 2009). Countries that have a nuclear family focus may find processes involving extended families more challenging, raising issues relating to cross-cultural application. That said, the Family Group Conference has been found to have supported successful outcomes across international jurisdictions (Kiely & Bussey, 2001; Marsh & Walsh, 2007; Pennell & Burford, 2000) and successful cultural adaptations

of the Family Group Conference have been promoted (Desmeules, 2003; Glode & Wien, 2007). This reinforces the need to appreciate the context within which the Family Group Conference is developed and the ways in which it is implemented.

Interesting findings have been reported relating to private family time during the Family Group Conference. Whilst some research suggests that private family time promotes 'within-family challenge and self-regulation' (Connolly 2006, p. 355) and is seen as an empowering process by professionals, one study has indicated mixed responses from families (Holland et al., 2005). Some families have also indicated a reluctance to involve wider family in their own family matters (Terry Stanford Institute of Public Policy, 2006). Notwithstanding this, a significant number of studies have found high levels of family satisfaction with the Family Group Conference process (Crow, Marsh & Holton, 2004; Falck, 2008; Holland, Aziz & Robinson, 2007; Titcomb & LeCroy, 2003; Titcomb & LeCroy, 2005) with increased father involvement (Falck, 2008; Holland et al., 2005) and importantly, increased involvement with the paternal family (Koch et al., 2006).

Whilst research will continue to support and challenge the development of practice, it is nevertheless clear that a growing body of international research supports the use of family group decision making. 'Collectively, the results of the studies reinforce and realise many of the hopes held for Family Group Conference in child welfare. They undermine myths that have persisted to exclude families from planning processes... The evidence... offers considerable support for the advancement of Family Group Conference and good reasons to further mainstream its practice' (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon & Burford, 2003, p. 11).

Voices of participants

With the spread of Family Group Conferencing, every day across the world families and professionals come together to work through complex family matters. Here some of the participants talk about their Family Group Conference experience:

I liked the way people talked about me. They didn't make me seem like an angel or a bad guy at the conference, people were neutral. They told the story the way it is but also talked about what I do well.

(Young person quoted in Dawson & Yancey, 2006, p. 3)

Before the conference, I hadn't seen my dad for 5 years, but after the conference I see him like once a week.

(Young person quoted in Dawson & Yancey, 2006, p. 2)

Really bad at first. They made me so mad. But it ... really turned out good. We are talking now.

(Mother quoted in Pennell, 2005, p. 28)

I wasn't sure at first... I know how our attitudes can be... When we get on each other's nerves, we are awful. ... We accomplished a lot. We're doing great - we talk to each other every day.

(Father quoted in Pennell, 2005, p. 28)

My most abiding memory when I leave this job will be the courage of people, the courage of parents having to front up to that process. I'm always amazed and impressed at their courage - defending themselves, sitting here and hearing all that history about them and how their children came to notice. It's really hard. I suppose it's like going to confession.

(Coordinator quoted in Connolly, 2006, p. 350)

There was non-agreement, nothing. Not because we didn't do a good job but there was going to be non-agreement because of the dynamics. But at the end of that they all hugged each other, kissed each other, and exchanged phone numbers and to me that was success because they hadn't been talking before the conference.

(Coordinator quoted in Connolly, 2006, p. 353).

Reflective questions

What do you think it would be like being a participant at a Family Group Conference? What would a Family Group Conference involving your family be like, and how might the dynamics impact on the process? What do you think marks a successful Family Group Conference?

Barriers to mainstreaming family decision making

Over the past two decades, despite promising research and the enthusiasm of strong advocates of family decision-making practices, the Family Group Conference's mainstream potential has not been realised (among other programs, Chapter 13 examines the spread of family group conferencing across Australia). Across Western jurisdictions, a heightened awareness of child abuse has resulted in greater numbers of children being referred to child protection services, which has put pressure upon the responsive capacity of statutory systems. Increased negative media exposure of high-profile cases and growing expectations that services will never fail a child at risk has created risk averse systems of response (Scott, 2006). It is within this environment that family empowerment and participation must compete with risk

discourses and the forensic application of procedure and law. When practice is shaped more conservatively by external pressures, then it is more likely that we will also see shifts toward more professionally driven processes. And the more professionally driven practice becomes, the harder it is for systems to embrace notions of family decision-making in practice.

Even in New Zealand where Family Group Conferencing is deeply embedded in the child welfare system, there are indications that practice is not immune to this increasingly forensic response. Professionally driven elements can easily creep into an essentially family-led process (Connolly, 2004). As practice develops, even when practitioners identify strongly with the principles of family-led practice, professional power dynamics can be very influential and can critically shape practice pathways by encouraging a greater dependency of the family on 'expert' solutions.

Assumptions about the efficacy of family decision making have also impacted upon the greater use of family decision making in generalist or mainstream practice. Whilst research has increasingly been supportive of the practice, it is nevertheless erroneous to assume that one or two meetings alone can change the way families function in the longer term. The Family Group Conference is merely a mechanism through which families can be brought together, and needs to be understood in the context of good supportive practice with families. The follow-up work is critical to the success of Family Group Conference plans. Good services need to be provided that will support and motivate families to achieve enduring change. In this sense the Family Group Conference can be seen as one piece of a practice package that supports family rights and enables the development of family-led solutions.

Reflective questions

In what way might professional processes and behaviour influence practice away from the principles of family decision making? If a worker wants to uphold the principles of family decision making, how might they withstand these pressures? How can we rekindle the family's strengths-based potential when practice slips into more professionally driven processes?

Conclusion

Despite the undoubted challenges confronting child welfare systems, practised with integrity it is clear that family group decision making has the potential to provide a 'beacon of hope' for families and workers involved with child welfare systems. Resolving issues of child care and safety is a complex endeavour and workers will always need to carefully navigate child safety and family support imperatives. That said, building ethical and fair

decision-making processes that support work with families is likely to be more effective for children and families in the longer term.

Useful websites and resources

The American Humane Association has demonstrated leadership in the promotion of family group decision making in child welfare and their website is an important resource for practitioners wanting information on the Family Group Conference. This is available at: www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children

Burford et al. (2009), have recently completed an annotated bibliography on engaging the family group in child welfare decision making. This is available at: www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/family-group-decision-making/re_annotated_bibliography/literature-reviews.html

The Family Rights Group – the following UK training video is aimed at people wanting to know more about family group conferences. It shows two fictional Family Group Conferences with comments from participants: *Taking Care of the Children: A Video about Family Group Conferences*. A training video (2001). White, John (dir.) and Surgenor, Gael (prod.). Family Rights Group, Mental Health Media, London.

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Co-operative Ltd provides a broad range of services for Aboriginal children and their families. Descriptions of their programs, including the Aboriginal Family Decision Making Program, can be found on the following website: www.vacca.org/01_program/afdmp.html

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