



AMERICAN HUMANE

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Family Group Decision Making in Child Welfare *Purpose, Values and Processes*



Context

In the mid-1990s, the American Humane Association was asked by a major U.S. foundation to study family group conferencing (FGC), a New Zealand innovation, to determine whether it was an effective approach to serving families involved with child welfare systems. The change of law in New Zealand that enabled the practice of FGC followed recognition there that the existing child welfare system was affected by institutional racism and paternalistic organizational and professional practices.

At that time, there was some activity promoting family participation in child welfare proceedings in the United States. Several Oregon communities were implementing the Family Unity Model¹ and others were inquiring about the potential use of the New Zealand FGC model. In Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, a Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) project centering on family violence² was implemented using a slightly modified FGC model. In 1996, American Humane selected FGDM as its preferred term to describe both of the initially identified models (FGC and the Family Unity Model).

In the past decade, there has been significant growth in, and a deeper understanding about, the number of family involvement models serving children and families in the child welfare system throughout the United States, and not all of them fit within American Humane's definition of FGDM. Accordingly, American Humane, assisted by its international and national collaborators and partners³, wants to clarify that definition in a way that aids the understanding of FGDM and enables the accurate classification of appropriate family-involvement practices as being FGDM, for the purposes of funding application, research and evaluation, and training and education.



FGDM Purpose

Children and their parents are nested in a broader family group: those people to whom they are connected through kinship and other relationships. Agency decision-making practices that are planned and dominated by professionals and focused narrowly on children and parents can deprive those children and parents of the support and assistance of their family group — and can deprive agencies of key partners in the child welfare process.

FGDM recognizes the importance of involving family groups in decision making about children who need protection or care, and it can be initiated by child welfare agencies whenever a critical decision about a child is required. In FGDM processes, a trained coordinator who is independent of the case brings together the family group and the agency personnel to create and carry out a plan to safeguard children and other family members. FGDM processes position the family group to lead decision making, and the statutory authorities agree to support family group plans that adequately address agency concerns. The statutory authorities also organize service providers from governmental and non-governmental agencies to access resources for implementing the plans. FGDM processes are not conflict-resolution approaches, therapeutic interventions or forums for ratifying professionally crafted decisions. Rather, FGDM processes actively seek the collaboration and leadership of family groups in crafting and implementing plans that support the safety, permanency and well-being of their children.

National Center on Family Group Decision Making

American Humane established its National Center on FGDM in 1999 as a vehicle for promoting and supporting work in this area. The mission of the Center is to build community capacity to implement high-quality, effective FGDM processes that are philosophically congruent with the central values and beliefs of this approach. Together, we are working to create links, share resources, provide training and technical assistance, and broaden knowledge about this practice.

Please visit www.americanhumane.org/fgdm for more information.

FGDM Values

The values associated with FGDM include:⁴

- Children have a right to maintain their kinship and cultural connections throughout their lives;
- Children and their parents belong to a wider family system that both nurtures them and is responsible for them;
- The family group, rather than the agency, is the context for child welfare and child protection resolutions;
- All families are entitled to the respect of the state, and the state needs to make an extra effort to convey respect to those who are poor, socially excluded, marginalized, or lacking power or access to resources and services;
- The state has a responsibility to recognize, support and build the family group's capacity to protect and care for their young relatives;
- Family groups know their own histories, and they use that information to construct thorough plans;
- Active family group participation and leadership is essential for good outcomes for children, but power imbalances between family groups and child protection agency personnel must first be addressed; and
- The state has a responsibility to defend family groups from unnecessary intrusion and to promote their growth and strength.

FGDM Processes

FGDM processes are carefully managed and crafted to ensure fidelity to the FGDM values and to ensure that those values drive practice. The following five items are critical to supporting exemplary practice in FGDM⁵:

An independent (i.e., non-case carrying) coordinator is responsible for convening the family group meeting with agency personnel. When a critical decision about a child is required, dialogue occurs between the family group and the responsible child protection agency personnel. Providing an independent coordinator who is charged with creating an environment in which transparent, honest and respectful dialogue occurs between agency personnel and family groups signifies an agency's commitment to empowering and non-oppressive practice.

The child protection agency personnel recognize the family group as their key decision-making partner, and time and resources are available to convene this group. Providing the time and resources to seek out family group members and prepare them for their role in the decision-making process signifies an agency's acceptance of the importance of family groups in formulating safety and care plans.

Family groups have the opportunity to meet on their own, without the statutory authorities and other non-family members present, to work through the information they have been given and to formulate their responses and plans. Providing family groups with time to meet on their own enables them to apply their knowledge and expertise in a familiar setting and to do so in ways that are consistent with their ethnic and cultural decision-making practices. Acknowledging the importance of this time and taking active steps to encourage family groups to plan in this way signifies an agency's acceptance of its own limitations, as well as its commitment to ensuring that the best possible decisions and plans are made.

When agency concerns are adequately addressed, preference is given to a family group's plan over any other possible plan. In accepting the family group's lead, an agency signifies its confidence in, and its commitment to, partnering and supporting family groups in caring for and protecting their children, and to building the family groups' capacity to do so.

Referring agencies support family groups by providing the services and resources necessary to implement the agreed-upon plans. In assisting family groups in implementing their plans, agencies uphold the family groups' responsibility for the care and protection of their children, and contribute by aligning the agency and community resources to support the family groups' efforts.

¹ Graber, L., & Nice, J. (1998). *The family unity model*. Authors: Oregon.

² 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 and Labrador, Canada: Memorial University of Newfoundland, School of Social Work.

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⁴ American Humane thanks Mike Doolan, University of Canterbury, NZ, for the initial draft of this section.

⁵ Adapted from Doolan, M. (2007). Duty Calls: The Response of Law, Policy and Practice to Participation Rights in Child Welfare Systems. *Protecting Children*, 22(1), 10-19.