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Widening the Circle

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We know what children and young people need. They need supports, protections, clear limits, real opportunities, and pride in themselves and their heritage. These are the safeguards for their becoming full members of society. As social workers, we have repeatedly witnessed what happens to those who grow up without these safeguards. We can testify to the vicious cycles of neglect, abuse, poverty, and discrimination that stunt the potential of these children and youths. Everyone loses when young people cannot fulfill their aspirations of growing into responsible family members, workers, and citizens.

As social workers, we also know that we cannot help children and young people without attending to their key relationships and surroundings. They need us to take them seriously as individuals, and they need us to consider carefully where and with whom they live, study, work, and have fun. Our profession is founded on the principle of paying attention to both "person and environment." This principle appears simple and self-evident, but in practice is extremely difficult to follow. To assess and intervene in difficult situations, we are directed to take into account multiple, complex, and often volatile interactions. None of us can or should attempt this task on our own, especially when seeking to overcome the vicious cycles entrapping so many young lives.

This book proposes a means by which we can join with others to break down the vicious cycles and enlarge the lives of children and young people, as well as those with whom they have close ties. Called "family group conferencing" (FGC), this practice widens the circle of those committed to safeguarding children and other family members (Pennell & Burford, 1994). The use of this approach is becoming increasingly more common in child welfare, juvenile justice, and school systems, and it is gradually expanding into adult services (Bazemore & Schiff, 2004;

Burford & Hudson, 2000; Merkel-Holguin & Wilmot, 2000). To describe and evaluate FGC, the authors draw upon their experience with the model in the United States and Canada. Their primary focus is on its use in child welfare, but they also look at ways that its use in child welfare conferences can be extended to address juvenile offending and domestic violence.

What is FGC?

Family group conferencing is a means of involving family and close support people in making and carrying out plans to safeguard child and adult family members. The family group develops a plan to resolve the issues endangering young and adult family members. Before the plan can be carried out, the involved protective services must authorize the action steps and necessary public resources. Child welfare workers and family group members monitor the implementation of the plan and evaluate its impact. As needed, the family group may reconvene to make major revisions to the plan.

What is distinctive about FGC?

A conference belongs to the family group. Even so, the family group members are not left on their own. If they could have solved their relatives' problems without outside help, they would already have done so. Throughout the conferencing process, the family group receives supports and protections from involved public agencies and community organizations. The following features heighten family group ownership:

- *Independent coordinators* organize and convene the conferences for the families referred for FGC. These coordinators do not carry the referred families on their caseload. This separates the FGC coordinators' role from that of the child welfare worker or other involved service providers. By minimizing role confusion, the FGC coordinators and family members can stay focused on preparing for the conference.
- *Conference preparations* ensure that FGC participants can take part safely and effectively in making plans. The coordinator consults with the family group members on how to organize their conference and what supports they require. Preferably, there are more family group members than agency personnel invited to the conference. The service providers often need coaching on how to respect the family group's decision making while maintaining their own roles.
- *Family private time* during the conference makes it possible for the family group to develop its own plan. During the private time, the FGC coordinator and other service providers leave the room, but are available as needed. (Before they leave the room, they make sure that the family group members have the information needed to develop a plan that will address the areas of concern.) Once the family group members have created a plan, they invite the coordinator and protective authorities back into the room so that the plan can be finalized and approved.

What is the origin of FGC?

The FGC model was first legislated in New Zealand. *The New Zealand Children, Young*

Persons and Their Families Act of 1989 entitled family groups to have a say over child welfare and youth justice matters related to their young relatives. The intent was to move away from expert-driven intervention and to promote family group responsibility, children's safety, cultural respect, and community–government partnerships (Hassall, 1996). The impetus for this radical redesign of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems came from economic reforms to reduce the role of the state in the lives of citizens, public demands for greater professional accountability to clients, and protests by Indigenous people against European-based models of intervention (Doolan & Phillips, 2000; Rangihau, 1986).

Is FGC a new approach?

Formally including FGC in the child welfare system and other human services is new, but its practice is not. The model is based specifically on the cultural institutions of the Maori, a New Zealand Indigenous people (Love, 2000), and generally on those of South Pacific islanders (Shook, 1985). In actuality, FGC is part of the traditions of people from many continents. Focus groups with African Americans, Latino/Hispanics, and Cherokee communities in North Carolina perceived FGC as congruent with their cultural practices (Waites, Macgowan, Pennell, Carlton-LaNey, & Weil, 2004). Furthermore, it is not an innovation for relatives to make plans to care for children when their parents die or fall seriously ill. It is, however, an innovation for the child welfare system to establish a program that invites the family group members to develop a plan and provide them with the supports, protections, and privacy for doing so. Taking these steps, though, is congruent with "good" social work practice that emphasizes the safety of children and other family members, family empowerment, and a collaboration of informal and formal networks (Maluccio & Daly, 2000).

"We just get together, and we just do it."

—Cherokee woman speaking on FGC

Similarly to New Zealand, *FGC in the United States and other countries builds on and complements child welfare initiatives toward family-centered practice and community–state partnerships* (Briar-Lawson, Lawson, & Hennon, 2001; Parton, 1997; Pecora, Reed-Ashcraft, & Kirk, 2001). The intent is to move from adversarial to collaborative relationships between child welfare agencies and families; encourage family involvement in decision making; draw upon community supports; respect the cultural heritage of families; and, thus, to advance children's safety, permanency, and well-being.

Gaining parental input into child welfare decision making is supported by the Child and Family Services Reviews conducted by the U.S. Children's Bureau. The reviews found that state systems that involved parents in case planning were more likely to have stabilized children's living arrangements, heightened families' ability to care for their children, and met the children's educational, physical, and mental health needs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003).

How do child welfare systems encourage planning with families?

To encourage family involvement in child welfare planning, a number of models, including FGC, have been applied in the United States. Among these other models are Family Unity, Family Team Conferencing, and

Team Decision Making; hybrids of various models have developed over time. These models all share beliefs in family strengths and team approaches while retaining the mandate of child welfare to protect children at risk, and each has its "unique features" or guidelines on how to encourage family input (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2002, p. 2; and see chapter 11). As previously discussed, FGC emphasizes that the conference belongs to the family and their close supports and advances this ownership by using independent coordinators, preparing participants, and ensuring family private time to deliberate. Data comparing the results of the various models are limited. Fairly extensive research is available on how FGC is carried out, and some studies examine its outcomes in child welfare.

What does FGC accomplish?

For family members, FGC is an opportunity to have a say over their lives. Repeatedly, studies have shown that family groups accept the invitation to take part, are willing to make a plan, and feel respected by the process (Lupton & Stevens, 1997; Paterson & Harvey, 1991). This is the case for families from diverse cultures and nationalities (Burford & Hudson, 2000).

"It was great. It was something to help me stay out of trouble and get on the right path."

—Teenager for whom a conference was held

Research on FGC shows promising outcomes for children, young people, and their families. Multiple studies (Merkel-Holguin, 2003) have reported that FGC keeps children connected with their siblings, parents, and family group; stabilizes their placements; and enhances family and worker relationships. Some studies report gains in the safety of children (Gunderson, Cahn, & Wirth, 2003) and their mothers (Pennell & Burford, 2000a) and reduced costs (Marsh & Crow, 1998). At a minimum, studies report that FGC is implemented without substantially endangering children's safety (Berzin, 2004; Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004) and without a significant difference in total costs even when conferencing expenditures are taken into account (Andy Rowe Consultants, 1997; Berzin, 2004; McDonald, 2000; and see chapter 9).

How does FGC enhance child welfare services?

At the conference, social workers benefit from hearing the best thinking of the family group members on how to improve the lives of their relatives. Social workers make contact only with the mothers and children in much of child welfare work; with FGC, however, they make contact as well with fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, godparents, close friends, and many others with ties to the family of concern (Gunderson, Cahn, & Wirth, 2003). Family group members not only contribute their strategies, but also their resources. They may offer their homes to children, serve as a big brother to a teenager, or make regular telephone calls to a lonely single mother.

"The family worked as a team."

—Child protection worker after a conference

"The social worker outlined everything well. . . . Brought up all of my concerns during the conference."

—Guardian *ad litem* after a conference

Family group conferencing can be used along with other approaches. In the United States, for example, FGC does not replace court proceedings that are mandated by law; nevertheless, the judge may choose to use an FGC plan in determining the disposition of a child welfare case. Judges often welcome such input, because they know that the plan has the consent of the family group and the approval of social services.

At other times, FGC may be the preferred means for planning. For instance, when the relationship between the family and the social services agency has become hostile, the social worker may decide against calling a case conference or family meeting. Rather than negotiating case decisions in a hostile environment, the social worker can make a referral to an FGC coordinator. Then the coordinator, who does not carry the case, can organize the conference with the family. By taking part in the conference, the family members and their caseworker often improve their relationship and are better positioned to implement the plan together (Marsh & Crow, 1998).

How does FGC widen the circle?

Family group conferencing widens the circle by combining the strengths of the family group, community organizations, and public agencies to resolve the issues threatening family members. Issues that bring families to the attention of public authorities are usually extensive and complicated. These kinds of issues require a cooperative effort to identify and assess what is happening, develop a plan of action, carry out the plan, and review and modify the plan as needed. This team effort is based upon five central values:

1. *Goal of Safeguarding*: The team effort should have as its goal the safeguarding of children, young people, and other family members. Against this goal, all of the key participants—family group, public authorities, and community organizations—need to evaluate their efforts.
2. *Family Voice*: To be part of a team effort to aid their young relatives, the family group members should have a voice. To exert a constructive voice, they need preparation to take part safely and effectively, an opportunity to communicate among themselves, and confidence that the involved authorities will listen to them.
3. *Worker Accountability*: In this team effort, child welfare workers should uphold their primary role of protecting their young charges. As part of carrying out this role, child welfare workers must be accountable for their actions to other key players, including the family group, the legal system, and other service providers and community groups.
4. *Community Involvement*: To strengthen this team effort, the role of other public agencies, community services, and cultural groups should be recognized. Their participation makes it possible to go beyond meeting minimal standards of protection and to establish longer term means of safeguarding young community members.
5. *Consensus Building*: To carry out a team effort over time, all of the key participants should build together a consensus on how to proceed. Consensus building requires opportunities to share ideas, build trust, form a plan, act on the plan, and regroup as needed.

These five values orient the team effort. In working together, the participants create pathways to safeguarding children, young people, and other family members. Three crucial and mutually supportive pathways for widening the circle are (1) family leadership, (2) cultural safety, and (3) community partnerships. The nature of these pathways is based on an analysis of participants' views on their conference (Pennell, 2004; see chapter 7). *Family leadership* means that extended family members and those who feel "like family" are central to planning with social institutions, such as public agencies and community organizations, supporting their efforts. Rather than a family therapist, the FGC coordinator can be characterized as a network assembler who connects people by cutting across generations and enabling them to share past experiences and future involvements (see Speck, 1998; Speck & Attneave, 1973). To exert leadership at an FGC, families require culturally safe forums.

Cultural safety refers to a context in which family members can speak in their own language, express their own values, and use their own experiences and traditions to resolve issues (Fulcher, 1998). Structures and practices that recognize the cultural background of the family, particularly if the family belongs to a group marginalized by the dominant society, create such a context (Polascheck, 1998; Ramsden, 1993). These structures and practices develop through *community partnerships* in which families work in collaboration with local organizations to achieve common goals. The partners each bring their own way of looking at the issue at hand and generate from their differences a direction in which to head together (Gray, 1989). In working as a team, the partners retain their distinctive roles while increasing their overall effectiveness in finding solutions that work.

The aim of widening the circle is to change for the better the lives of children, young people, and their families. As a theory of change, widening the circle is grounded on social work values, practice experience, and research on the FGC process and results. Widening the circle is conceptually specified by turning to theory on empowerment. Empowerment theory has been used by numerous FGC proponents to define the model's goals and principles (for example, Connolly & McKenzie, 1999; Hudson, Morris, Maxwell, & Galaway, 1996) and assess its results (for example, Lupton & Nixon, 1999; Marsh & Crow, 1998).

What is the theoretical framework for widening the circle?

Theory on empowerment frames widening the circle, and in the context of FGC, empowerment can be articulated through ideas on cultural inclusiveness, participatory democracy, and civil society. The profession of social work has a long and fruitful tradition of empowerment dating back to the late 19th century (Simon, 1994). This tradition is evident in social workers' efforts to form alliances with diverse groups to address human ills and right social inequities (Simon). The term "empowerment" gained prominence among social workers in the United States through Barbara Solomon's (1976) work in African American communities and then spread to other Western countries in the late 1980s and the 1990s (Parsloe, 1996). Empowerment does not mean to give power to an agent or

subordinant. Instead it refers to the process and product of joining with others to responsibly share power and advance individual and collective well-being (Guetiérrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998). Empowerment entails critiquing social relations, affirming people's strengths, and realigning power to achieve shared goals (Pennell, Noponen, & Weil, 2004). As discussed earlier, the team effort demanded by FGC is guided by five central values. The first and chief of these is the goal of safeguarding children, young people, and other family members. This goal is one of the intended outcomes of empowerment and recognizes that the well-being of individual family members is linked with that other members.

Cultural Inclusiveness. The second value concerns the family exerting a voice in case plans regarding their young relatives. This means more than family members having the opportunity to speak. It also refers to speaking in their own voice about matters of a deeply personal and emotional nature and knowing that they are heard by the involved protective authorities and community groups. This means that the service providers seek to be aware of their own preconceptions about those with whom they work and adopt a stance of learning from people of other cultures (Green, 1999). In such a culturally inclusive atmosphere, families can communicate the extent of their connections, push their own agendas beyond those specified by professionals, and affirm their sense of identity. For these expressions of caring to be received with respect, the deliberations cannot be restricted to reasoned and calm argument alone. This means opening the conference to encompass various forms of discourse:

- Greeting or public acknowledgment—the explicit recognition that others are not objects of discussion but full participants;
- Affirmative use of rhetoric—emotional and colorful expression that highlights injustices, appeals to varied audiences, and urges action; and
- Narrative and situated knowledge—storytelling to break the silence, form a common identity, challenge preconceptions, and foster mutual understanding. (Young, 2000)

All of these approaches to discourse help to generate a context of cultural safety in which family groups can take part as full members.

Participatory Democracy. Encouraging multiple forms of expression deprofessionalizes the conference and makes it possible for families to join in the deliberations. With adequate preparation and acknowledgment of their competence, family group members can contribute productively to the planning process. The private time permits the family group to confront each other, express their mutual caring, and develop a sense of pride as they develop a plan for the benefit of their young relatives (Pennell & Burford, 1995). Contrary to fears that the private time will be dominated by abusive parents (for example, Bartholet, 1999), decisions are primarily made through democratic or inclusive processes—consensus, bargaining, and following an inspiring leader (Pennell, in press-a; and see chapter 3). The conference adheres to the value of building a consensus as it engages in collaborative planning, and through adopting strong democratic practices (Barber, 1984), the family's leadership is advanced.

Civil Society. A setting of cultural inclusiveness and participatory decision making fosters the trust necessary for promoting a civil society in which every man and woman has the right and responsibility to participate as a full member (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1975), to serve as a check on authoritarian government (Baker, 2002; Cohen, 2001), and to engage in non-coercive decision making (Fullinwider, 1999). With attention to their needs and level of maturity, children and young people can play an important role in the deliberations concerning their lives (Gal, 2004; and see chapter 3). A civil society differentiates and upholds boundaries among family, community, and government (Kelly, 2003) and, thus, allows space for family privacy while upholding the values of community involvement and worker accountability to the public. People with supports, protections, clear limits, real opportunities, and pride in themselves and their heritage are prepared to contribute to their society. These contributions, as occur often in smaller communities, may include taking part in conferences for their relatives and friends (Pennell & Burford, 1995). The family group members can develop "democratic competence" through conferencing about themselves or those close to them (Braithwaite, 2000). FGC educates young and adult family members about exercising the freedom and caring necessary for acting as responsible members of society. Social workers, given their enduring tradition of empowerment, have the commitments and competencies to encourage family members to take charge of their lives individually and collectively and to form community partnerships.

What are the key principles for implementing FGC?

To advance these three pathways, FGC must be responsive to the family group's leadership, culture, and partnerships. One way to conceptualize such a model is to depict it as a series of principles (Pennell, 2002c, 2003). This approach helps to prevent rigid prescriptions while still offering guidance on widening the circle. *Nine key principles give direction to FGC implementation* (Pennell, 1999):

1. Have the conference belong to the family group.
2. Foster understanding of the family and creativity in planning.
3. Help the conference participants take part safely and effectively.
4. Tap into the strengths of the family group in making a plan.
5. Promote carrying out the plan.
6. Fulfill the purpose of the plan.
7. Build broad-based support and cultural competence.
8. Enable the coordinators to work with family groups in organizing their conferences.
9. Change policies, procedures, and resources to sustain partnerships among family groups, community organizations, and public agencies.

These principles have been derived from empowerment theory, based on a study of the intervention in diverse cultural contexts, and tested in training and consultation in different countries. The following chapters explicate how these nine principles can be translated into empowering practices with families, communities, and agencies.