



# Fact Sheet

## Family Group Decision Making: Building and Reinvigorating Relationships

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This fact sheet introduces the concept of family group decision making and explores how it positively affects family and other interpersonal relationships. Family group decision making is an inclusive process that positions the extended family to lead key decisions about their children when they have come to the attention of a public institution. Family group decision making has been applied in numerous systems, including:

- Child welfare to address issues of child safety, permanency, and well-being;
- Juvenile justice to address status and delinquency offenses, repair harms, and build community safety; and
- Education to address student performance, truancy, and bullying.

A less common occurrence is the implementation of family group decision making in adult protection systems and economic self-sufficiency programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).



### Origin of Family Group Conferences

The formalized practice of family group decision making originated with the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act of 1989 in New Zealand. This legislation incorporated family group decision making into juvenile justice and child welfare processes to help address overrepresentation of the indigenous Maori people in child-serving systems and a lack of sensitivity to their values (including that children belong to whanau, or extended family, and not just parents). Family group decision making recognizes natural relationships within family systems and among children and their extended family. It harnesses the capacity and wisdom of those closest to the children and, with the support of service providers in the community, results in a stronger safety net for children and families.<sup>1</sup>

### Core Elements of Family Group Decision Making

There has been widespread international application of family group decision making and related family engagement strategies in more than 22 countries and 35 States.<sup>2</sup> With the support of national and international experts, the National Center on Family Group Decision Making defined family group decision making as any model that has the following six core elements:<sup>3</sup>

1. An independent coordinator convenes the family group with social services agency personnel.

2. The agency personnel recognize the family group as their key decision-making partner, and time and resources are available to convene this group.
3. Family groups have the opportunity to meet on their own, without agency personnel and other non-family members present, to work through the information they have been given and to formulate their responses and plans.
4. When agency concerns are adequately addressed, preference is given to a family group's plan over any other possible plan.
5. Referring agencies support family groups by providing the services and resources necessary to implement the agreed-upon plans.
6. Follow-up processes after the family group decision making meeting are employed until the intended outcomes are achieved because family group decision making is not a one-time event, but a process.

Numerous research-based publications have documented many positive outcomes for children, families, and communities that use family group decision making, including family satisfaction, safety, and well-being, as well as professionals' satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>



## Strengthening Family and Agency-Family Relationships

### Family and agency communication

Family group decision making enhances both healthy intra-family communication and agency-family communication. The second core family group decision making element—agency personnel recognizing the family group as their key decision-making partner and making time and resources available to convene family members—requires intensive efforts to identify, find, and engage the largest extended family group possible in the process. This process typically results in a widened safety-net for the family because a circle of caring relatives, community members, and other supporters (e.g., clergy, teachers, neighbors) with a relationship to the family or child are identified and engaged.

Additionally, child welfare decision making processes have historically excluded the perspectives of parents, children, and their extended family circle. Family group decision making processes flip that paradigm; the decision making circle is primarily composed of the family group members and supplemented by various professionals (such as representatives from agencies with whom the family is involved).

Ultimately, this process helps to develop, re-establish, and strengthen existing connections and relationships within the wider family network as they gather to create a plan of protection and accountability. Research has shown that when invited, the extended family is galvanized to attend and participate in the family group decision making process.<sup>5</sup>

An independent coordinator meets with family members before the family group decision making meeting to establish relationships; learn about family norms, culture, and experiences;

and share the purpose of the meeting with them. These pre-meetings are essential to the development of trusting relationships among family members and with the coordinator. The coordinator models relationship skills, such as effective communication, by sharing important pieces of information up front (e.g., meeting purpose, confidentiality) and then listening and understanding family members' views as a neutral observer. Family group decision making participants have reported that they feel listened to and respected throughout the process.<sup>6</sup>

Private family time is another core element of the family group decision making process that increases familial communication. During private family time, the family group can discuss solutions, without the influence of service providers or outsiders. The family's natural decision making mechanisms emerge during this time and they often demonstrate wisdom and knowledge. Family group decision making equalizes the power differential between the agency and family, decreases isolation within families by helping them realize the extent of their support network, and facilitates transparent and clear communication among all parties.

## **Family and agency conflict management**

Family group decision making has also been noted to decrease conflict among family members.<sup>7</sup> Family members have reported feeling better off after the meeting and stronger as a family unit. Many families involved in social welfare systems have family violence issues. There is evidence that family group decision making—properly executed and taking immediate safety factors into account—can reduce repeat child maltreatment and abuse of women.<sup>8</sup>

Information discussed in family group decision making can be difficult for service providers to share and for the family to hear.

Clearly, concisely, and respectfully discussing incidents of child abuse and neglect, juvenile delinquency, truancy, or bullying can be challenging, even for skilled professionals. However, this complicated, but necessary action breaks down the barriers that can exist between agencies, as holders of key information, and family groups, who typically have been

excluded from having this sensitive information. Honest and transparent sharing of information leads to family empowerment. Evaluations have shown that it has decreased conflict between agencies and families and helped these relationships flourish.<sup>9</sup>

### **Spotlight on Strengthening Agency-Family Relationships**

**Family group decision making promotes connections among family members and between family members and service providers. Evaluations have demonstrated that family group decision making increases satisfaction of the helping professionals who participate in it.<sup>10</sup> Sharing responsibility for decision making decreases the burden on service providers (particularly given the magnitude of the decisions rendered), and many who participate in family group decision making believe the process results in increased safety for children.<sup>11</sup> Family group decision making provides agencies with a research-based method to let families lead decisions about their lives, inevitably altering how systems and consumers interact and work together.**

## Strengthening Communities

Families, community and public agency representatives, and other participants in family group decision making work together to create social networks and engage in democratic deliberations. Their contributions to the plan are a form of civic engagement that is purposefully driven toward strengthening families and communities. When young people interact with and observe the adults in their lives participating positively in difficult deliberations, they learn effective communication and conflict management principles and skills and are better prepared to make positive contributions to society as adults.

Ultimately, family group decision making builds stronger communities by increasing trust among participants, building coalitions of individuals who participate in family group decision making, and connecting an exponential number of people within the community to address and resolve social welfare concerns.



## Conclusion

Family group decision making can be seen through various lenses, including evidence-based practice, rights framework, relationship building, and community strengthening. Evaluations have shown that family group decision making results in improved intra- and inter-familial relationships and communication, as well as stronger community capacity to respond to significant societal concerns. These positive outcomes depend on social policy that specifies whether family group decision making is more consistently implemented with fidelity to strengthen families and communities. As one participant said, “Family group decision making is the forming of one huge relationship.” When given the opportunity to come together, family groups and agency and community representatives can forge common understandings and solutions to difficult situations.

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