



**National Center on**  
 **Family Group Decision Making**

**Quick Reference Guide:**  
*Various Approaches and Models to Engage the  
Family Group in Child Welfare Decision Making<sup>1</sup>*

**Child Protection Mediation** - Child Protection Mediation has been used since at least 1985 to engage families and others involved in the child protection case in collaborative, informed and consensual decision making. Research has demonstrated it to be effective in any case type, at any case stage, in resolving disputes and other barriers to case progress, in a wide range of legal and social service issues. Effective approaches to Child Protection Mediation are based on values of empowerment and self-determination and utilize specially trained, impartial mediators who set a tone of respectfulness and cooperation for sharing information, opinions and feelings to help participants engage in a discussion-oriented forum to develop their own creative solutions that address their real needs and concerns. The mediators' understanding of important cultural issues and incorporation of elements of the family's culture and traditions enhances the family's sense of ownership and engagement. Preparation of families and all participants for Child Protection Mediation is vital so that the process and roles are understood and there is clarity about the extent to which mediation is voluntary and confidential. Preparation also helps ensure that mediation is safe and appropriate, and that the right people are there. Participation is not limited to the legal parties, but is driven by the issues to be mediated and the needs of the family and other participants.

**Family Group Conferencing (FGC)** - FGC places family groups as key participants in a process of decision making when their children come to the attention of child welfare (and youth justice) systems. It was first legislated in New Zealand in 1989 through the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act. A Family Group Conference is not a conflict-resolution approach, therapeutic intervention or a forum for ratifying professionally crafted decisions. Rather, through FGC, the collaboration and leadership of family groups in crafting and implementing plans that support the safety, permanency and well-being of their children is actively sought. The FGC approach cannot simply be "added" to child welfare services — the principles, philosophies and associated practices must be integrated throughout the child welfare and related systems. The Family Group Conference is one process that meets the five criteria of Family Group Decision Making (described below), and it is organized and implemented to meet those criteria.

**Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)** - 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 criteria are critical to supporting exemplary practice in FGDM2:

1. ***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.
2. ***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.
3. ***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.
4. ***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.
5. ***Follow-up processes after the family group decision making meeting occur until the intended outcomes are achieved, to ensure that the plan continues to be relevant, current and achievable, because family group decision making is not a one-time event but an ongoing, active process.*** Follow-up efforts include but are not limited to: ongoing family group-driven follow-up FGDM meetings that are scheduled to accommodate the family group's needs and availability, focused on progress, achievements, unresolved issues/concerns, new information, and additional resources, resulting in the plan being updated and revised as needed; and frequent proactive communication between system and family group representatives to support the successful implementation of the plan.
6. ***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 The National Center on FGDM wishes to acknowledge the following individuals for their contributions to this document: Marilou Giovannucci and Karen Largent (on Child Protection Mediation), Paul Vincent (on Family Team Conferencing), Nicole Wright-Gurdon (on Family Team Meetings), Sarah Greenblatt (on Permanency Teaming) and Patricia Rideout (on Team Decision Making).

2 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.

**Family Team Conferencing** - Family Team Conferencing is an approach to engagement of the family, assessment, planning and intervention that uses a family-driven team to develop strengths- and needs-based, individualized child and family plans. This approach is based on the adoption of a larger system model of practice emphasizing:

- Family strengths
- Family involvement in planning and decision making
- Inclusion of the family's informal supports
- Assessment of underlying needs and conditions
- Individualized plans and flexible services
- Routine team meetings to track progress and adapt plans to changing circumstance

Team goals are to achieve safety, permanency and well-being. The approach assumes that each child and family will have its own team composed of the family, informal supports and the professionals involved in serving them. The team is expected to support children and families throughout their system involvement with the goal of creating a sustainable team that will provide assistance after formal supports conclude. Face-to-face preparation of families for their first meeting is expected, and facilitation is usually provided by the lead case manager, who has been trained and coached not only for the facilitation role, but also in the fundamentals of engagement, assessment, planning and intervention.

**Family Team Meetings (FTMs) – Washington, D.C., Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA)** - The FTM approach is a child welfare strengths-based model that was designed specifically to address the unique issues and best-practice goals of the District of Columbia's child welfare system. FTMs are based on the ideals of FGDM, and this approach is one of the methods CFSA is employing to increase family and community involvement. FTMs are structured planning and decision-making sessions which engage the "family" members as they define themselves and other interested individuals at times of critical decision making. Since the family is vital to the identification of family team members, a variation of team participants may emerge. In a neutral context, all identified stakeholders invested in the placement and well-being of the child(ren) in question are able to engage in strengths-based and solution-focused discussions to address child safety, permanency and well-being.

CFSA believes that engaging family members and other vested participants in a focused discussion will facilitate the identification of individuals and resources within the family network which may have otherwise been unknown. This ultimately creates opportunities for children to be cared for within their own family and community network. Additionally, these meetings create opportunities for the child welfare agency to work in partnership with the family's community to provide services that address the child and family's needs. Since its implementation in January 2005, the FTM Program expanded to include a variety of family engagement meetings. Initially, the FTM Program focused on removal FTMs for all children being removed from their home of origin. The meetings have since expanded to address issues of placement stabilization, prevention of entry into care, system of care needs for children/youths with severe mental health challenges, guardianship stabilization, and permanency planning for children/youths, particularly those with an APPLA goal.

**Permanency Teaming Process – Casey Family Services** - Since 2005, Casey Family Services has used a Permanency Teaming Process to engage children and youths of all ages and their families in comprehensive planning and collaborative decision making. In the Permanency Teaming Process, a social worker identifies important people in a youth's life and engages them in a teaming process to identify, develop and sustain lasting family relationships. Facilitated by the social worker, Permanency Teaming uses a blend of individual, joint and large team meetings over time to address the youth's needs for safety, well-being and permanence through reunification, kinship, adoption or legal guardianship. Teams include individuals whose lives will be most affected by the decisions that are made and who may also have the power to "make or break" any decision, including the child, birth parents, siblings, extended family members, foster parents and/or caregivers, other adults significant to the youth, the state agency worker, and key professionals, such as the youth's therapist, attorney, GAL, residential treatment provider, etc. The Permanency Teaming Process prepares youths and families for permanence, clarifying life events, resolving conflicts, integrating important relationships and carefully transitioning children and youths to permanent families with post-permanency supports. Permanency Teaming employs family finding, concurrent planning and other best practices in permanency planning to create lasting family relationships that are safe and provide for a child's well-being into the future.

**Team Decision Making (TDM)** - TDM, a key strategy of the Family to Family initiative, emphasizes the engagement of family and community through their involvement in the critical child welfare work of placement-related decision making. The primary goal of TDM is to make the best possible decision with families about their children's placement. Meetings are held at three primary decision points: 1) When used in initial placement situations, TDM focuses on the central issues of safety and risk, to ensure that only those children in imminent need of placement are placed; 2) When children already in care are facing potential placement disruption, or even when a planned move is considered, the team meets to assess whether the move is necessary and to prevent unnecessary disruptions; and 3) Finally, late in the case, TDM reviews changes in family capacity and strengths as they impact safety and risk, to guide plans for reunification or alternative permanency arrangements.

The family's social worker convenes the family/community group, and a trained, dedicated agency facilitator leads the TDM process. Case planning and review functions are important but secondary to the main purpose of the meetings: to make an immediate decision and plan regarding a child's placement. In TDM, the agency maintains its responsibility and ownership for the ultimate decision, while inviting and welcoming the input of family and community partners. TDM is narrow in focus but very broad in its application, since TDM meetings are held as a prerequisite to all court petitions for removal, reunification or TPR, and prior to any placement disruptions which could result in a new placement.

