



## **Family Group Decision Making** A Solution to Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in Child Welfare

The concept of extended families gathering together to help the children in their lives is not new. It is a concept that has been implemented for generations, across cultures, to make decisions about their children's safety, stability, and care. But many do not realize that the formal practice of Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) stems from a need to address disproportionality and disparities in child welfare.

More than 20 years ago, New Zealand recognized the importance of involving families as key decision makers in case planning, and so passed the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act. This legislation mandates the use of FGDM – also referred to as Family Group Conferencing or FGC – in New Zealand's child welfare system.

The driving force behind this legislation – and the implementation of FGDM – was to address “issues of institutional racism experienced by Maori,” the country's indigenous people (Connolly, 2004, p. 1). It was thought that New

Zealand's existing child welfare practices were contributing to the overrepresentation of Maori children in out-of-home care, and that processes – such as FGDM – that engage families with their specific and cultural needs in mind could help remediate this disproportionality and improve outcomes for all New Zealand's children and young people.

When FGDM came to America in the early 1990s, the U.S. child welfare system had not fully recognized its own issues of disproportionality and disparities as it has today. As a result, addressing these issues was not highlighted as an incentive for adopting FGDM policies and practices. But now, as in New Zealand, research into disproportionality and disparities in child welfare has grown, and FGDM is recognized as a promising practice to rectify these imbalances.

Today, equity for children and families of color in the child welfare system is a primary motivator for U.S. jurisdictions implementing FGDM. For example, Casey Family Programs' 2005



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Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) on Reducing Racial Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System sought to apply strategies that “target institutional and practice biases in order to improve outcomes for children and families of color” (Miller & Ward, 2008, p. 213). The result: A consistent, strategic element across all 13 BSC sites was FGDM and other forms of engaging families in decision making.

### **Better Outcomes Across the Board**

According to the BSC report (Miller, 2009), teams that focused on family engagement in case planning and decision making reported:

- More children remaining in their homes, with their families having access to community resources and support
- Greater rates of kinship placements when removal from the home was necessary
- Increased exits from out-of-home care
- Shorter lengths of stay in care

In American Humane’s *Protecting Children* journal, Merkel-Holguin, Nixon and Burford (2003) synthesized international research regarding FGDM to date. Of the 22 studies analyzed, eight used comparison groups or

data to evaluate the effectiveness of FGDM. The studies considered common outcomes of child and family safety, child permanency, and child well-being, along with family functioning and predictors of project success. Results were categorized into implementation, process indicators, and outcome indicators, and revealed the following major trends and patterns:

- FGDM compares favorably in providing child safety
- For children who require out-of-home placement, a high percentage remain with extended family
- FGDM plans create stability for children
- FGDM provides for timely decisions and results
- FGDM increases family supports and helps family functioning
- FGDM safeguards other family members.

Collectively, the studies showed that, when given the opportunity, family groups participate in meetings; develop comprehensive plans that mesh with service providers’ expectations; address concerns regarding children’s safety, permanency, and well-being; and contribute their resources to complement the formal services provided.

### **Better Outcomes for Children and Families of Color**

One recent study in Texas examined child permanency and well-being outcomes of children whose families participated in FGDM, and children whose families experienced traditional child welfare practices (Sheets, Wittenstrom, Fong, James, Tecci, Baumann, & Rodriguez, 2009). The study found:

- Both parents and extended relatives were more satisfied with FGDM than with traditional child welfare practices
- Children reported feeling less anxious if their families participated in FGDM

- Children may have been “more adjusted” in kinship placements if their families experienced FGDM

Moreover, this study found that, when families participated in FGDM, child exits from the child welfare system were faster and child exits to reunification were increased. Importantly, this finding was especially the case for African American and Hispanic children.

**A natural fit.** Many have also identified FGDM as a culturally compatible and natural approach to working with families of color. A focus group with African American, Native American, and Hispanic professionals and non-professionals revealed that, for this population, family group conferences are not a novel concept. African American participants said it is often customary for African American families to solve problems amongst themselves “as a result of their history of enslavement” (Lemon et al., 2005, p. 22). Likewise, participants added that for families of color extended kin already plays a large role in their everyday lives.

### **Greater community, trust, and awareness.**

In addition, FGDM connects families with accessible resources in their own communities. Because child welfare agencies tend to be concentrated in neighborhoods of color, community-based strategies are often advised to both prevent and reduce disproportionality and disparities (Roberts, 2007). At several of the BSC sites, including Texas, Connecticut, and Iowa, key community members, such as ministers and community organizers, were asked to facilitate their family group conferences. In doing so, they found that family members were more willing to

“fully participate” with the overall case planning process (Miller, 2009, p. 34).

This greater willingness to participate in case planning and to work with agency providers is remarkable, especially for marginalized communities of color that may historically, and understandably, fear the involvement of the child welfare system. Through FGDM, families of color may begin to trust the child welfare and court systems, which could result in the reduction of child welfare disproportionality and disparities.

What is more, FGDM is inherently racially sensitizing for child welfare workers, as it exposes these workers to customs, practices, and creative problem-solving abilities that they may not witness in traditional service models.

### **FGDM – an Answer to Disproportionality and Disparities in Child Welfare**

This research and experience illustrate that the further FGDM can be implemented and promoted, the more families – including families of color – the practice can reach. The more families it reaches, the greater likelihood that children of color will stay connected with their extended kin and community networks, will exit foster care sooner, and will reunite more quickly with their families of origin. The disproportionate number of families of color that come to the attention of child welfare will encounter a system that recognizes – through formal processes like FGDM – the importance of kinship networks. And ultimately, from New Zealand to America – across cultures, generations, and countries, there will be a sustainable reduction in disproportionality and disparities in child welfare.



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