



## Reviewing a Swedish Outcome Study on Family Group Conferences

By Kathleen Tinworth and Lisa Merkel-Holguin

Since the mid-1990s, family group conferences have been the subject of research and evaluation across the world. In the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, the studies on family group conferencing have demonstrated positive outcomes for children, families, and communities (Gunderson, Kahn, & Wirth, 2003; Litchfield, Gatowski, & Dobbin, 2003; Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003; Pennell & Burford, 2000; Thoennes, 2003; Titcomb & LeCroy, 2003; Velen & Devine, 2005; Walker, 2005; Wheeler & Johnson, 2003).

In 2004, the Research and Development Unit of the Social Services Administration in Stockholm, Sweden, published an outcome evaluation (Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004) following a trial of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) in 10 local authorities. The study compared 97 children involved in 66 family group conferences between November 1996 and October 1997 with 142 children from a random sample of 104 “traditional child protection investigations” by the Child Protective Services (CPS). All children in the study were “followed for exactly 3 years for future child maltreatment events reported to the CPS” (p. 267). The study controlled for the children’s age, gender, family background, and type and severity of problems.

The conclusions of this Swedish study appear inconsistent with the majority of international research and evaluation on family group decision making (FGDM) and, therefore, it has generated significant discussion. The purpose of this Issue Brief is to summarize the Swedish study, present a wider understanding of it and its place within FGC policy and practice, and place its conclusions within the context

of instituting FGC in national and international child welfare systems. The study’s findings, an analysis, and questions follow.

*It is important to note that this Issue Brief is in response to an English translation of the original article (Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004), and there are some difficulties in understanding the authors’ meanings and intentions in describing Swedish child welfare services and their conclusions on repeated child abuse and neglect. For example, the term “substantiated” child abuse or neglect is not used in the Swedish context; instead, the Swedish term that is translated as “re-referrals” indicates reports that were investigated and interventions provided. This example highlights the variations between child welfare systems which focus on child protection (e.g., the United States) and those which focus on family support (e.g., Sweden).*

### What were the hypotheses?

The Swedish study posed several hypotheses:

1. It is reasonable to expect positive process-related results.
2. The risk for referrals should decrease.
3. The likelihood of repeated neglect and abuse should be reduced.
4. When needed, family group conferences should increase reports by the extended family.
5. Out-of-home placement within the extended family should be more frequent.
6. Family group conferences should increase the possibility of closing CPS cases (Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004).

It is possible for hypotheses 2 and 4 to contradict one another, whereas hypotheses 1, 5, and 6 are only minimally addressed within the article.

In the authors’ words, “the first hypothesis was confirmed... [as] descriptive process-related findings

## Reviewing a Swedish Outcome Study on Family Group Conferences

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echo those of other studies, showing that most [family group conferences] have been carried out the way they were meant to” (Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004, p. 281). Without extended narrative as to how these trial family group conferences were conducted and what training was received prior to the family group conferences, and without a clear understanding of measurement of model fidelity to actual practice, the confirmation of the first hypothesis appears questionable.

Of the five remaining hypotheses, the authors believe two were partly confirmed: family group conferences increased reports by the extended family (hypothesis 4) and out-of-home placement within the extended family was more frequent for FGC children (hypothesis 5). The authors express that there was not a decrease in the risk of referrals for the FGC children (hypothesis 2) and that family group conferences did not reduce the likelihood of repeated neglect and abuse (hypothesis 3).

### **Is there consistency between FGC principles and the Swedish practice of FGC in 1995?**

It is stated in the Swedish study that in 1995, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities selected 10 out of 23 interested local authorities for a “trial” of FGC. It is specified that the authorities were chosen to reflect “geographic as well as socio-economic diversity, and demanding local professional and political commitment to the model” (Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004, p. 269). It is also stated that financial support was available for training. It is not discussed what principles guided the FGC practice in Sweden during the study period. Although the authors state that “the trial operated within existing legal frameworks and policy/practice requirements” (p. 269), a delineation of the conferencing principles, practices, and framework of operation is lacking. According to Swedish colleagues, the family group conferences in this study were the first conducted in Sweden, and much has happened to advance FGC practice in the years following. When studying an emerging practice, many

factors may not yet be defined and all principles may not yet be actualized. It is likely that the family group conferences conducted today embrace more core principles than those in the study.

### **Are there limitations to the data collection?**

Data collection throughout the study appears to present several problematic elements. The study primarily relied on quantitative data from child welfare case records and some interviews of caseworkers rather than analysis of those findings in relation to data from other sources, in particular, family group participants. Including families’ and children’s perspectives about their experiences, rather than a heavy reliance on caseworker notes, recollections, and decisions, may have provided a richer, more personalized, and comprehensive view of family group conferences. As a consequence, there is a summary of findings across children over time, but not an in-depth look at what was happening or its meaning for children, their families, and workers.

In addition, according to the authors, Sweden does not have a standardized database for child abuse and neglect cases, thereby increasing the likelihood of subjective and incongruent records across local authorities. Also, over the 3-year follow-up period, many FGC children moved from one location to another and many case workers resigned. In addition, Sundell and Vinnerljung (2004) noted that the inconsistency in case record narrative quality and comprehensiveness, jeopardized the validity of the constructed comparison group.

Pre- and post-measures in the study appear to be markedly different. Information about the family group conferences was collected with [an] adapted version of Marsh and Crow’s (1998) instrument. FGC coordinators, responsible for arranging the conferences, completed a questionnaire on preparations, and on convened conferences (e.g., date and place of the family group conference, participating

## Reviewing a Swedish Outcome Study on Family Group Conferences

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individuals, length of the different parts of the conference, the content of the agreed plan, and the response from the child welfare authority to the plan) (Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004).

Case workers were also responsible for “rating” each FGC family on a severity-of-problems scale, ranging from not serious to very serious. All FGC participants were asked individually to answer a short, anonymous survey on their relation to the child, their feelings of empowerment and other sentiments, and their assessment of the plan and of the child’s future situation. The response rate was 67%. The follow-up (post-measure), however, was based primarily on case file reviews and involved no interviews or surveys with case workers or FGC participants, thus rendering problematic any comparison with FGC evaluations that include client user input.

The above-mentioned limitations highlight that “the study more readily stands out as an illustration of how difficult it is to find and define variables that can be used to give a reliable and authentic measure of outcome” (Erkers & Nyberg, 2003, p. 7).

### Did sample bias impact the findings?

The article makes it clear that there was a bias in selecting children and families to receive a family group conference. Caseworkers employed their individual discretion in selecting cases for family group conferences, resulting in their identification of families with prior CPS involvement as well as cases that they rated as being “more serious” for referral to the FGC trial. Statistically significant differences between children participating in family group conferences (hereinafter “FGC children”) and non-FGC children presented in the study included “severity of child’s problems” and “percent formerly investigated by the CPS” (Sundell & Vinnerljung, p. 274). Some of the study’s results, therefore, are not unexpected, as those variables are the key reasons case workers assigned families and children to the FGC group. Also, as the

authors wrote, “Prior maltreatment known to CPS has been a strong predictor of recurrences in other research” (Sundell & Vinnerljung, p. 274). The referral bias in the selection of trial families is an important factor in data interpretation.

### Why relate FGC to traditional child protection investigations?

The article compares FGC to “traditional child protection investigations.” FGC is not a form of investigation, nor does it impact child abuse and neglect investigations. Rather, FGC facilitates an inclusive decision-making process, whereby families and broader community supporters are engaged by child welfare agencies to make decisions and develop plans that nurture their children and protect them from abuse and neglect. However, it is possible that the English translation of the Swedish study (published in *Child Abuse and Neglect*) reads differently from its original Swedish form, and that the research does compare like with like. This needs to be established.

### What are some of the outcomes noted?

Sundell’s writings reflect a discrepancy regarding this study’s achievement of holding constant the severity of case and other descriptive variables (such as the child’s age, gender, family background, and type and severity of problems) when comparing FGC children to non-FGC children. The study reported statistically significant higher rates of: (a) re-referrals to the CPS authority during the 3-year follow-up period, (b) re-reports to CPS for abuse (not neglect), and (c) re-referrals by the extended family. In addition, FGC children were in out-of-home placements longer, tended over time to receive less intrusive support from the CPS, and were more likely cared for within their extended family system. Finally, significantly fewer FGC cases were reported as closed after the 3-year follow-up period, and FGC children received services for a longer period of time than the comparison group, and thus were monitored for a longer period of time.

## Reviewing a Swedish Outcome Study on Family Group Conferences

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### Are the results negative?

The study further claims that the impact of the family group conference was “scant” and that “the findings did not support the alleged effectiveness of the FGC model compared to the traditional investigations in preventing future maltreatment cases” (p. 267).

As above, Sundell and Vinnerljung (2004, p. 282) make reference to FGC children being “re-reported for abuse” and “re-referred to the CPS” more often than the non-FGC children in the 3-year follow-up period. This conclusion is presented as negative in the study, asserting that re-referrals to CPS are indicative of a failure of FGC to protect and promote the safety of children. In fact, the study claims that a re-referral indicates that “families have not been successful in preventing further maltreatment.” An alternative explanation for FGC children having higher re-referral rates, particularly by extended family networks and given the sample bias, is that families have been exposed through FGC to the seriousness and severity of child maltreatment and to the role of CPS and their extended family system in protecting children and their well-being. This could reflect family responsibility and commitment to child safety. Re-referrals could then be interpreted as a positive result, indicative of families being more involved with CPS and more comfortable and confident with their own roles and the roles of the public agency in promoting the safety of children.

Additionally, the study characterizes CPS support that FGC children received within the 3-year follow-up period as negative, implying that it indicated less stability in the lives of children. On the contrary, services and supports could be seen to increase stability and well-being, and could indicate that family and community groups know how to better request and access needed services. Also, the informal resources and supports that family group members and the broader community contribute to shoring up safety, permanency, and well-being of children do not appear to be fully documented.

While more FGC children than non-FGC children were placed in out-of-home care, more FGC children also remained in their extended family system. This finding can be interpreted in a positive light because FGC children were being cared for by their family and cultural group. Given that the caseworkers rated the FGC cases as more serious and that the FGC families had prior involvement with CPS, it is logical to surmise that family support options may have been previously explored, that the extended family members may have reached their limits in their helping role, and that children with more serious issues require a higher level of care. Without a full unveiling of the children and families’ presenting issues or adequate description of their prior involvement with CPS, this finding requires additional analysis.

While again these qualms may be an issue of translation, the Swedish study appears to interpret both positive and ambiguous results in a negative way, thereby concluding, rather tenuously it is felt, that both FGC and family support are ineffective.

### Conclusions

The Swedish study is a research endeavor to address long-term outcomes in FGC. The study not only attempts to fill the gap in FGC research, but does so in a way that strives to incorporate randomized trials in a country and regions where FGC has not been used previously. The authors are aware of several limitations in their study. They acknowledge “the FGC model is primarily a model for decision making in child protection cases, and to a lesser extent a method to select appropriate services” (p. 282). The study relates that the implementation of a plan stemming from a family group conference may fail to be effective due to poor service quality. Additionally, the study acknowledges that FGC children may have received more attention from CPS during the follow-up period because of their previous engagements with CPS. Finally, the authors relay that the socio-cultural settings of Sweden might not favor the FGC model. As this is one of the first outcome studies of FGC in Sweden, it appears too early to determine the utility of

## Reviewing a Swedish Outcome Study on Family Group Conferences

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the FGC for Sweden's families. The authors recognize the need for more outcome-focused research both in Sweden and abroad.

The Swedish study concludes that “the results do not verify the presumed superiority of [family group conferences]” (p. 283); however, it also states that the results do not disqualify the method. The strength of statements made in the English version of the study, such as that the study’s findings “serve as a reminder of the necessity to evaluate models based on untested theories or on extrapolations from other countries/cultures, before these models are widely spread in a national practice context,” (Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004, p. 267) induce a far more severe and definite stance than can be backed by the data and analyses presented in the article.

The bold statements in the conclusions of the 2004 article are particularly curious, and somewhat inconsistent with what one of the authors wrote previously about the same body of research:

“In summary, the Family Group Conference only partially met initial expectations, but it is too early to dismiss the approach in part, because the statistical attempts to control for initial differences between the groups may have failed. In order to avoid this problem of non-comparable groups, future evaluations of methods within the child welfare system should employ an experimental design. Another reason is that Family Group Conferences may have worked as a decision model and there may be other explanations behind the results, e.g., the lack of knowledge about which interventions effectively resolve social problems and that action plans may not have been carried out as planned” (Sundell 2003, p. 2).

Upon further analysis, it is not clear from the study that FGC was an ineffective method of engaging family groups involved with child welfare systems. On the contrary, according to Nyberg (n.d., p. 7), the study

reminds all involved in FGC that it is “difficult to find and define variables and methods that can be used to give a reliable and authentic measure of outcome.”

It is also noteworthy that many of the municipalities in Sweden that engaged in FGC during the study continue to use FGC.

In summary, while most FGC outcome studies to date have produced positive results, this study appears to offer ambiguous conclusions. Focused research in this area is imperative to developing FGC. It is also important to note that because FGC is not a traditional model, non-traditional ways of examining its function and utility may be required. Thorough analyses are needed in order to fully understand FGC ideology, including discussions around concepts such as responsibility, power, and democracy (Erkers & Nyberg, 2003). The FGC process is based on cooperation, collaboration, and communication between professionals and families, and differs significantly from the orthodox, professional-expert methods of contact between families most usually associated with CPS agencies. More practice-oriented descriptions will provide the distinguishing elements of the FGC process when compared to other forms of contact between families and those traditionally in positions of authority. Due to the innovative nature of FGC, it may prove necessary to be just as innovative when analyzing and interpreting its effectiveness. Traditional studies and analyses may fail to provide an accurate depiction of the utility of this approach to working with families involved with the child welfare system.

## Reviewing a Swedish Outcome Study on Family Group Conferences

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