Youth Participants Speak About Their Family Group Conference

By Angel Dawson and Briana Yancey

In Washington state's child welfare system, many of the highest-need children are older youth in a Behavioral Rehabilitative Services (BRS) placement, also known as “group care.” Because of the difficult histories of these youth, the services they require make their cases among the most resource intensive in child welfare. These placements are distinguishable from regular foster care homes because they are designed to respond to children or youth with serious emotional, behavioral, or medical needs which typically cannot be served adequately by foster families.

As this BRS population moves closer to aging out, their odds of becoming adopted decrease (Wertheimer, 2002). Further, as these youth approach the age when the state will no longer fund BRS care, they have often lost contact with family and have limited support networks. This is important because, as the literature reviewed by Charles and Nelson (2000) suggest, foster youth who have contact with their family while in care have better outcomes (i.e., less likely to become involved with juvenile justice and more likely to complete high school) than those who do not maintain family contact.

Family group conferencing (FGC) is a model that appears to hold promise for improving the outcomes of youth in resource-intensive placements and reconnecting them with family (Velen & Devine, 2005). An underlying philosophy of the FGC model is that extended families have the commitment, information, and capacity to create safe and caring plans that achieve safety, permanency, and well-being for their children. In this way, FGC facilitators1 must consider optimal ways to generate family participation so that the families’ synergy can be mobilized into successful family plans.

Youth contribution and participation can be central to a successful FGC. Studies, such as one in Calgary (Siepert & Yvonne, 2003), emphasize that children should not be overlooked as capable of offering knowledge, leadership, or power. Unfortunately, though, they are overlooked all too often. Studies of youth participation in FGCs have revealed the importance of additional steps that should be taken into consideration by facilitators (Heino, 2003). Involving youth in their FGC requires focused attention, from pre-planning to follow-up, to ensure that the strengths, assets, and perspectives of the youth are integrated.

This article shares youth comments, based on their experience as conference participants, and offers recommendations for facilitators to maximize youth participation.

The Connected and Cared For Project

A recent FGC project in Washington, funded by the Stuart Foundation, attempted to shed light on youth participation by asking participating youth for feedback on their experiences as participants in FGCs.2 The Connected and Cared For Project evaluated how FGCs affected children ages 11 to 18 in BRS placements. The FGCs were held between 2002 and 2004 with the intention of bolstering placement, relationships, and legal permanence for these youth. Using the state database system, placement and other outcome data for 57 youth were tracked at 6 months and 1 year post-FGC. The outcomes were dramatic. Following the FGC, 36% of youth moved to less restrictive foster care placements, and 37% returned home to their parent(s) or were placed

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1 In Washington state, the term “facilitator” is equivalent to an FGC coordinator who is responsible for both the preparation and conference facilitation.

2 In this project, each youth referred for a conference was considered as a potential participant and contributor to the conference itself. Depending on each youth's developmental capacity, however, the youth's therapist, case worker, and/or other imperative persons helped to determine the appropriateness of participation.
with relatives. The move to a less restrictive placement was achieved and maintained throughout the 1-year follow-up period for 75% of youth who changed placement following an FGC.

In-person interviews were conducted between 3 months and 1 year post-FGC with some of the youth (N=21). All of the youth interviewed attended their entire FGC, and consent from their guardian, as well as their own assent, was obtained prior to the interview. After completing the interview, youth received a phone card as a token of appreciation.

The most consistent theme reflected in the interviews was that the conference succeeded in its goal to make youth feel connected and cared for. The majority of youth felt like the conference made a difference in planning for their future (60%), agreed that they would attend a conference again (85%), reported feeling safe (95%), and said that they felt listened to at their conference (85%).

Many youth were surprised at the number of family members who attended their FGC. Each youth, whether a participant or not, had input as to the family, friends, and support persons in attendance. A total of 441 family members and fictive kin attended conferences on behalf of the 57 youth, averaging 2.7 maternal and 2.5 paternal family members. The number of family members or fictive kin per FGC averaged 7.8, and ranged from 3 to 15. Despite their often tumultuous family histories, youth felt comforted by the reminder that they have family that cares for them.

“I couldn't believe they were all there, mainly just to see how I was doing.”

“Before, I thought my mom didn't care about me, but when the conference came she got to voice her concerns and I thought, ‘Wow, she does care,’ and it blew me away, and all my other family, too.”

“I was surprised there was so much family willing to take me as a placement. They wanted me to just be a kid, and that’s what I want, too.”

Youth reported an increase in family contacts and improvement in family relationships. Even youth who did not return home to parents or relatives reported a positive impact on their relationships with family. For youth who had been in care a long time, and had experienced long breaks in family contact, the FGC was often credited with the rebuilding of family relationships. Better communication was frequently cited as key to this reconciliation. Youth spoke with pride about the strengthening of their relationships.

“We really came to understand each other and how we could work together as a family.”

“My mom understands me more. She used to yell instead of listening. It's so much better now. Just having the space to really talk to each other makes such a difference.”

“I am like a craftsman and I build things like shelves and boxes, and my mom didn't know that before the conference. Now, we work on projects together.”

“Before the conference, I hadn't seen my dad for 5 years, but after the conference I see him like once a week.”

Lessons learned

Despite these positive results, there are lessons to be learned. Overwhelmingly, the majority of youth who criticized the FGC did so because the placement recommended at the conference was not realized. Two major recommendations emerge from this criticism: (a)

Youth had a say in terms of the family, friends, and support people who would be present. Depending on other factors, such as the youth’s age or developmental capacity, other professionals and/or family members might have a stronger voice in deciding who would attend.
give youth a developmentally appropriate sense of control about their role in the conference, and (b) be mindful that disappointment may happen, and plan for it. In achieving this, it is necessary to have honest, respectful communication with youth to explain that there is no guarantee that an FGC will result in a placement with family.

**Sense of control**

It is important for youth to understand the conference process and be involved in pre-conference decisions. Preparation is critical. Youth felt best about the FGC experience when they fully understood their role and knew what to expect as a participant in their FGC. This sense of control began as early as their first contact with the facilitator. Youth appreciated having a say in the details of the conference.

In the preparation phase, the facilitator should work with the youth to find the safest and most comfortable way to include them in the FGC. Some options for youth inclusion are: (a) being physically present; (b) providing a videotaped or audio-taped statement; and (c) making a written statement that the youth presents in person or is presented by a support person or via speaker phone.

“I thought it was cool she brought snacks that I wanted. I don’t remember the order people talked in, but I like the format and how it was organized. I felt like people were thinking about how I felt.”

“It felt somewhat sprung on me. My father’s side of the family was there, and they were out of my life for 14 years. I could have done without them there.”

“They explained it over the phone. She (facilitator) told us who would be there and made sure we knew we could bring whoever made us feel comfortable.”

Youth expressed the importance of feeling heard, acknowledged, accepted, and respected.

“I liked the way people talked about me. They didn't make me seem like an angel or a bad guy at the conference, people were neutral. They told the story the way it is but also talked about what I do well.”

“It meant so much to me that it felt like people were finally really listening to my concerns.”

“When I asked questions I felt that people answered them as much as possible.”

In a few cases, youth felt anxious about not knowing the extent of their control.

“I didn’t really understand what I was supposed to do. I got to fill out a packet about what I would want in the next family they were trying to move me to. But I didn’t know what this would do.”

“I’d like to tell youth to not worry about making the decision about placement. I stayed up for a whole week every night, but I didn’t have to make the decision. Everyone else did it for me.”

**Plan for outcomes that may be disappointing to the youth**

Permanent placement was achieved for most youth. For others, relationship permanence, but not placement permanence, was the primary positive outcome. Some youth expressed disappointment following their FGC. In some cases, their disappointment was so deep that it overrode positive outcomes, such as family connections, help with sobriety, and transportation to visits with siblings.

“Everything stayed the same. I asked for visits with my dad and it’s been 2 months and I haven’t seen him. The whole experience taught me to not trust the government and to save money. When I’m old enough, I’m moving to the mountains and picking my own food.”

4 In Washington, permanent placement is defined as adoption, reunification, guardianship, or long-term foster care (either with kin or non-kin). However, it is the authors’ opinion that the best permanent option for youth should be considered on a case-by-case basis.
“It gave me so much hope. Unfortunately it didn’t work out. My family didn’t follow through on the plans. They should have made certain that it could happen before I got my hopes up.”

“It doesn’t seem that anything long term followed through. We were supposed to be with family, but my brother is still in foster care and I’ll be leaving my uncle’s to foster care ‘cause he can’t keep me.”

This feedback underscores the importance of candid pre-conference discussion with the youth. The FGC facilitator must help youth address their hopes for the conference and the range of potential benefits, as well as potential pitfalls, which might result. Relationships with family members and the various ways that family can be supportive should be discussed in addition to the potential for permanent placement. In this process, the facilitator should never make guarantees about the FGC, and should prepare youth to the best of their ability for the range of potential emotions the FGC and its outcomes may produce.

**Follow-up**

Post-conference follow-up and support are also critical. The youth should have an identified support person, not only at the conference, but afterwards. Time should be built into the FGC process to meet with the youth after the conference, since they have a lot of emotional investment in their FGC. If needed, the facilitator should maintain extended contact with the youth and with other family members and service providers so the youth will have support if their hopes are not realized.

The youth participants in this project offered valuable insight about the FGC process and what it meant to them. The evaluators were inspired by the participants’ willingness to share their thoughts and experiences, regardless of the FGC outcome. Youth described feeling loved and accepted at the conference and afterward. While most plans included action steps to move youth toward a permanent placement, all plans outlined ways to increase family connections and support. Many youth described the FGC as a new beginning in their lives, where they felt connected and cared for. This new beginning contributed to moving some of the highest-need youth in Washington’s child welfare system toward permanence and revitalized family connections.

**References**


**About the authors**

Angel Dawson received her BA in psychology from Hampshire College in 2000. Since then, she has worked on program evaluation with community-based agencies and public child welfare. She is currently the Washington state evaluator for the Child Welfare Training and Advancement Program (CWTAP) and is pursuing an MSW degree (expected in 2006).

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