



Under The Table Or At the Table?

*Supporting children and families in
Family Group Conferences –
a summary of the Daybreak research*

Summary

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What was the Study About?

Daybreak coordinates Family Group Conferences (FGCs) to help families plan for the future and make things better. Daybreak asked independent researchers to find out what people think about the support for children and young people in Family Group Conferences.

The research looked at what best helps children and families to take part in FGCs. It focused on whether or not it helps children to have an independent advocate OR a family supporter

Independent advocates are professionals whose job it is to support children during the FGC. They meet with them before the conference to find out their views. They may spend time in the private family stage of the conference – which professionals don't usually attend – and they may also meet the children after the conference.

Family supporters are a family member or friend who is already known to the children. They are chosen (by the child) and they may advocate for them and try to ensure their views are included in discussions during the family group meeting.

How was the research done?

We talked to children and families who had attended a Family Group Conference with a Daybreak project. The projects were in Brighton & Hove (which offers independent advocacy), the Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Hampshire.

In total, 10 families were included in the research. We compared the experience of six families using an independent advocate, with three that had a family supporter, and one family in which the young person had refused the offer of a professional advocate.

Within each family, the following people were interviewed:

- one to three children with an independent advocate or family supporter
- two close family members who attended the conference
- the FGC Coordinator
- the independent advocate/s OR family supporter
- one or two other professionals who attended the meeting.

We aimed to listen to the opinions of people who took part in FGCs, but also to see whether the things that children wanted were actually put into FGC plans and made to happen. Did having a say in their FGC improve the children's lives? And what was it like for the children to take part? We have also looked at other people's research on these questions.

Please note that this research was done with a small group that is not representative of all families and cannot be generalised to larger groups.

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Here is a summary of the key research findings

What is good support for children in FGCS?

To do a good job, both independent advocates and family supporters need to:

- help the child to understand the questions being discussed
- help the child to think about what they feel and want
- help the child to put forward their own opinion
- encourage adults to focus on the child.

What are the pros and cons of family supporters?

Family supporters can be skilled helpers

- A skilled family member can help a child to consider their opinions and speak their mind
- They have an existing relationship with the child and family, which can help:
 - to gain the child's trust
 - to understand the child's behaviour
 - to understand the family situation
 - as their presence in family time does not disrupt the family group.

'The family supporter knew the child very well. She understood his behaviour very well, and could explain this [to others in the family] in a non-threatening way... She did an excellent job. For example, at one point during the first part of the meeting [the child] was crying and wrote a note saying he wanted to leave. She gently reassured him and ensured that he stayed.' (Co-ordinator)

Some family supporters are less skilled

- FGCs are sometimes organised quickly and coordinators cannot always check the ability of family members to support children well.
- Children may choose family members they hope will give general support but who are not best able to support them with the meeting.
- Family supporters do not always give support to children before and after meetings.

Children may not want to say

- Sometimes children may be worried about upsetting the family supporter's feelings and therefore not say what they really feel.

Family supporters have different roles to juggle

- It can be difficult for family supporters to support the child AND take part in the discussion themselves. They have their own views about the family situation, which they want to share, and they may also want to speak up for other adult family members.
- Family supporters may not always be seen to be able to give an unbiased account of the child's views when there is strong family conflict.
- As a result, family supporters may not always articulate a child's view during the meeting.

What are the pros and cons of professional advocates?

Professional advocates offer skilled support

- Professional advocates offer a consistent level of service that cannot be expected of family members.
- Professional advocates offer skilled preparation (over an average of three meetings) and follow-up work with children.

'The way [the professional advocate] demonstrated what she did [to ascertain the young child's views], it was very short and sweet and very to the point. And it was his voice. We all went quiet..... We all sat back and thought about what she was saying. We really focused on [the child], and that wouldn't have happened otherwise. If I'd said that, everyone would have carried on talking.' (Family member)

Professional advocates have one role

- It is useful to have someone whose only role is to support the children during the Family Group Conference and to prioritise their needs.

'To help me, and if I don't want to say anything in that family conference, she can say it for me.' (Child)

Professional advocates are independent

- Children can talk through concerns about sharing their views – for example, when there is domestic violence in the family – and plan how to deal with this together with an independent person.
- An independent advocate can support children to express their views without being put at risk from angry/violent family members.
- Family members may take more account of children's views when presented by someone independent as this is perceived as unbiased.
- However, family members may see advocates as biased if they have not visited and heard the views of other adults in the extended family, even though this is not part of their role.
- Advocates may be perceived as making an assessment of the children's situations and making recommendations.

Advocacy for younger children

- Some under fives make active use of professional advocates.
- Advocates generally present children's comments directly but sometimes make judgements about their situation.

Professional advocates in family time

- It is valuable for families to have time without any professional present, including an advocate for a child.
- The presence of advocates in family time can change the way family members talk to each other. Daybreak now follows the principle that advocates are only allowed to stay in private family time for a maximum of 10 minutes (and if the child and family request it). They are available to the child outside the room for the rest of this session.

Advocates' short term relationships with children

- Advocates develop trusting relationships with children and these end soon after the meeting. This may be harmful to some children who have experienced a lot of temporary professional contact.

'During family time, in one case, family members stopped in horror when I came into the room. They clearly started talking about something they didn't want me to know about the minute I was out of the room.' (Professional advocate)

Children's participation in FGCS...

The research looked at how children participate in Family Group Conferences.

Children's attendance at FGCs

- Project staff actively encourage children to attend conferences.
- Children sometimes choose to attend more because they want to see parents or family who they rarely see than because they have made a clear decision that they want to attend a Family Group Conference.
- Where it is felt inappropriate for the child/ren to attend an FGC, practitioners sometimes put their photo on the table or on a chair, to 'make their presence felt'.

The role of professional advocates and family supporters

- People can be confused about the role of both professional advocates and family supporters.
- Divisions within families have important consequences for any advocacy support, and family supporters and professional advocates in some cases were seen as aligned to one side of the family.

Involving children in the conference

- Children hear discussions and see upsetting things that may harm them.
- Allowing children to come 'in and out' of meetings can make it difficult for adults to discuss issues that they feel children should not hear.
- When there is concern that a child is allowed a lot of control at home, it may be unhelpful to give them a high level of control within the FGC.

Supporting children during the conference

- Supporting children to bring written information about their views enables them to have an influence on the agenda of the meeting.
- Professional advocates can support children outside of the meeting room, helping them to think through the issues being discussed.
- Family supporters find it harder to leave the discussion because of their own need to be involved in the meeting.
- It is useful to provide another space for all children, including a separate room, crèche workers and age-appropriate toys or games.

'She went with a lot of power because the coordinator had spoken to her before. 'The meeting's about you, I'm going to get your favourite cakes, tell me what you want me to get you, it's all about you'. When she got there all the adults around her let her down. It was very difficult for her. She sat there and she really wanted someone to play with and to go off. When she got there it wasn't what she expected it to be.' (External professional)

Other children attending FGCs

- Sometimes several children attend all or parts of the conference, including siblings, young relatives and friends' children.
- Involving other children creates an informal atmosphere but this can become chaotic if children run in and out of the meeting.
- Children may not always want their peers to hear negative things being discussed about them.

Focusing on key questions

- Attempts to make the conference comfortable for children may sometimes make it feel more like a party, preventing people from focusing on serious issues.
- Children may try to steer discussions away from their own behaviour.
- Sometimes it is difficult to find out the children's views on the questions set for the FGC. There is a danger that the conference is dominated by their agenda but does not address adults' concerns.

Including children's views in the plan

- It is unhelpful to list children's views under decisions made by the family when they do not represent agreed decisions.
- It is clearer to detail their views in a separate section.
- Children may need support to consider the ways their views are represented in the plan to ensure they understand the consequences.

'My mum's got better and my dad he more rings me now. My [grandparents] take me out, not every week but some weeks. [When you say your mum's got better, what do you mean by that?] She hasn't been, like when she's meant to turn up at things like [arranged contact meetings] she has been doing that now, she never used to come, she has now. She's stopped being naughty, she's stopped drinking, she has probably one beer every week now... normally she'd have one every day.' (8-year-old child)

Recommendations

Explaining the advocate role

- Family members and professionals who attend FGCs need more help to understand the role of professional advocates and family supporters.
- The role should be explained both before and at the start of the meeting.
- A written description might be useful. It may help to involve parents and children in drafting a leaflet.
- Care needs to be taken to avoid appearing to be aligned with one 'side' of the family.

Consent for advocacy

- Young children may be capable of having clear views on something without necessarily being able to assess the impact of stating their view within an FGC. There are complex issues around children's consent to advocacy.
- Where a child is offered the support of a professional advocate, as is current practice, care should be taken that key adults are properly consulted, in addition to getting clear permission from the adult with parental responsibility.

Preparing family supporters

- Family supporters need more guidance on how to prepare and support children during the FGC.
- It may be appropriate to offer them coaching and/or a mentor.
- Guidance could include:
 - recommending visits with the child before the conference
 - ideas on how to prepare the child and help them share their views
 - guidance on how to support the child during the conference
 - advice to consider the question of who you will be supporting – will you also want to advocate for adult family members? Will you need to share your own point of view?
 - recommending a visit with the child after the FGC.

'Mum's got a bit kinder, and so's dad and there is not much arguing going on here, only if we're late and stuff.' (10-year-old child)

Putting forward the child's point of view

- Children's views can have most influence in an FGC where children are well prepared for the meeting and have been helped to write what they think.
- It is helpful to make sure the child's view is put at the start of the meeting during the information sharing session.

Preparation

- To achieve most benefits from professional advocacy, the advocates need to be able to offer a high level of support to children. This should include, where possible, more than one meeting before the FGC. Sufficient notice of the date of the FGC will obviously be required for an advocacy service to be provided.
- Where advocates have worked with a child and know that they are going to say something in the FGC that will have a major emotional impact on an adult in the family, they have a responsibility to consider preparing the adult in question before the day. They would need the child's agreement to do this.

Advocacy in Family Time

- Families may need support (and 'permission') to exclude children from parts of the discussion to allow them to talk about issues that are inappropriate for children to hear. It may also be important to support the family to be clear who has the authority to decide that a child should not be in parts of the FGC.
- Professional advocates should go into private family time for only a limited period, to allow families time without professionals present. Towards the end of family time, the family could be asked to invite the professional advocate or family supporter to discuss with the child the agreed points. The advocate or supporter (and/or the child) could be asked to put forward the child's view on the plans to the whole family.

Caring for children during the conference

- Before the conference a decision should be taken on who will look after a child if they become upset during the meeting. This should be agreed and made clear to everyone at the start of the meeting.
- A separate room should be available for all children to use when not present in the meeting. There should be suitable toys and activities, plus crèche worker (or youth worker) support where necessary. This is important for older young people as well as for younger children.
- Where children want to attend to meet up with parents or family who they rarely see there may be a case to consider allowing some 'social' time for these needs to be met, within or around the FGC.
- It may be best for food to be in a different room from the main FGC discussion group, to avoid inappropriate to-ing and fro-ing.

Young children

- It should not be assumed that young children cannot benefit from advocacy support.
- It is important to assess each young child to decide whether they are able to understand the advocacy role and to communicate their views and feelings.
- Advocates need clear guidance on the difference between making an assessment and ascertaining children's views/feelings.
- Guidance is needed (for all advocates) on what to do if a child is unable to understand the implications of sharing their views with the rest of the family, which could put them at risk.

For further copies of this summary and the full report, please contact:
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