

The Values and Beliefs of FGDM
adapted from FGDM Overview Training
Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program

- Families have strengths and can change
- Strengths are what ultimately resolve concerns
- Strengths are discovered through listening, noticing and paying attention to people.
 - *J. Nice, Family Unity Project*
- All families have the greatest investment in seeing their children safe and successful
- All families have the ability to come together and solve family concerns
- Family Members should be the primary decision makers for their family
- Families should choose which relatives, friends and providers will attend their conference
- Family Members know their family's best
- All families have some resources they can count on to help them in times of need
- Empowering people is preferable to controlling them
- Empowering families will lead to families controlling their lives
- Families are the experts
- Children are best raised in families
- Families should be respected
- Mistakes are opportunities for growth and development
 - *Kinpower Associates, New Zealand*

Family Group Decision Making Overview

adapted from the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is more a family gathering to which service providers are invited, than an agency meeting to which family members are invited.

J. Nice, Family Unity Project

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is being implemented across the United States and internationally. FGDM empowers families to work together for the purpose of providing a safe, secure environment, free from abuse and neglect for the child/children.

Purpose:

- To establish a process for families to join with relatives and friends to develop a plan for ensuring that children are cared for and protected from future harm in ways which fit their culture and situation.
- To extend the responsibility for child safety, well-being and permanence to families, communities and natural support systems.

For years dominant practice has held the belief that families have problems and professionals are hired to fix them. It has focused on looking for problems and giving advice about handling those problems. It gives little credence to the idea that families have strengths and are experts on themselves.

Core Values and Beliefs

The Family Group Decision Making Model (FGDM) is based on values and beliefs about people and relationships:

- Families have strengths and can change.
- Strengths are what ultimately resolve concerns.
- Strengths are discovered through listening, noticing, and paying attention to people.
- Family are the experts on themselves
- Strengths are enhanced when they are acknowledged and encouraged.
- People gain a sense of hope when they feel someone has really listened to them.
- Options are preferable to advice.
- Empowering people is preferable to controlling them.
- A consultant is better than a boss.

Why does FGDM work?

- FGDM values people and relationships.
- FGDM removes the worker from the role of problem finder and advice giver.
- FGDM communicates in a language of “concerns”, which invites listening, compassion, and responsibility.
- FGDM strengthens families by harnessing their commitment, wisdom, and responsibility to protect children and insure their well-being.

- FGDM counters isolation of at-risk families.
- FGDM enhances the family's feelings of security, belonging, respect and understanding.
- FGDM encourages collaboration between service providers working with the family.
- FGDM decreases the burden on service providers and balances power.
- FGDM creates an opportunity for families to realize their potential in caring for their children.
- FGDM increase the family's investment and ownership in decisions.

Preparation for a FGDM Meeting:

Coordinators help participants plan for a successful meeting. Participants include the agency worker and the family in addition to those who are invited to the meeting: extended family, friends, community members, and service providers.

During the pre-conference coordinators are responsible for:

- Making sure that the meeting referral meets the agency criteria.
- Helping the family and the case manager agree to a meeting purpose that is clear and motivates everyone to attend.
- Ensuring the family has all of the information they need about the process, the agency mandates, legal requirements, the roles and responsibilities for a successful conference.
- Assuring that the referring worker has hope for the family and is willing to consider a family plan.
- Assuring that the family is choosing to hold a FGDM meeting, and understands its purpose. It is an entirely voluntary process that offers significant advantages to a family and their children.
- Helping the family identify who to invite to the FGDM meeting. This is often an ongoing process, encouraging the family to reach out and widen the invitations to all family and community members who care.
- Preparing invited service providers. The purpose of the meeting should motivate the providers and they must understand their role in the FGDM meeting.
- Helping the family plan for a safe meeting.
- Keeping the family central to the meeting. They must be involved in deciding who is invited, where and when it is held, what considerations are important, including food, and what, if any, rituals should open and close the meeting. This is primarily a gathering of their family.

The Meeting

The FGDM meeting itself is divided into three main phases, each of which encompasses equal value for the process. The guiding principal should be that the meeting is a family driven professionally infused process. Families must have a say in what their family meeting looks like and what they need in order to make decisions about their family members.

Phase I – Opening and Information Gathering

During the opening, facilitators welcome everybody to the meeting and thank the participants, on behalf of the family, for attending. A family member should be invited to do an opening to reflect their family's cultural customs and traditions. This time is very important because it creates the tone for the remainder of the meeting.

After the welcome and introductions, facilitators present participants with guidelines for the meeting in order to establish safety, behavioral expectations, and legal mandates. Sample guidelines are listed below:

- Focus on the purpose
- Be respectful of each other
- Encourage honesty without blaming or shaming
- One person speaks at a time
- Okay to disagree
- What is discussed at this meeting is confidential with the exception of mandated reporting criteria and the meeting summary.
- Any additional guidelines necessary to create and preserve the safety of each participant.

Once the guidelines have been reviewed and agreed upon, the facilitators review the purpose of the meeting with each individual ensuring that all participants agree to the identified purpose.

Strengths

Discussing the family strengths begins the dialogue necessary to build hope in the family's abilities and willingness to change. Strengths encompass areas of success for particular members and/or the family as a whole. They also provide a foundation upon which to rely when families face particular struggles or barriers in the process. Some of the information sharing of strengths (as well as concerns) should have already started during preparation.

Concerns

Participants generally struggle the most during this time because they share their worries around the identified purpose. For example, "I'm worried that Johnny has difficulty controlling his anger, which may cause him to hurt himself or someone else." These concerns often create pain and anguish within the family system. Paramount to the planning process is clarifying these concerns and identifying what must happen to ensure the safety and well being of the child. It is also helpful that the concerns be expressed as worries and not shaming or blaming.

Service Resources

This time allows service providers to explain any and all services and resources available to the family that will help them successfully complete and implement their plan. In addition, it allows them to be informed consumers of available services within their community. Critical to this sharing is that the resources be readily attainable and information is viewed as options, not as mandates or predetermined solutions.

Sharing of a Meal

Once Phase I is complete, all participants receive the opportunity to share a meal together. This provides a unique opportunity for the participants to join together in a manner that generally differs from all other interactions. The service providers, the referring worker, any community members, and the family sit down and break bread together, creating an atmosphere of alliance and teamwork. Some families choose to begin their private family time while they eat, which is their choice, but most families share the meal with all the other participants.

Phase II – Private Family Time

During this phase, the family meets without the service providers present to discuss the information gathered during Phase I. This also provides time for discussion of any issues that they were uncomfortable discussing with service providers present. The family then works together to develop a plan proposing the resolution of the concerns. The plan details who within the family will do what, and when it will be done.

Phase III – Decision Making and Plan Acceptance

During this phase, the family has an opportunity to present their plan to the service providers and the referring worker. At this point the referring worker considers the plan as written and accepts the plan. If the plan meets the agency's concern regarding the child's safety, all consideration should be given to approving the family's plan. At times, the referring worker may supply the family with suggested changes before approving the plan, but the suggestions should be linked to the agency's concern and everyone should be clear about these concerns and the purpose of the meeting during preparation for the conference and the information sharing phase of the conference. The referring worker has the responsibility of accepting the plan. Before the participants leave, they receive an evaluation form utilized for determining the effectiveness of the meeting.

After the Meeting

Each person at the meeting receives a copy of the final plan in the mail. This becomes the Family Service Plan and is incorporated directly into the file. When applicable, this plan is presented to the court for final approval. If the case is open with a formal service system (CYS, JPO, etc.), case monitoring and support services should continue as necessary and appropriate. The agency should provide resources to assist the family in meeting the goals set forth in their plan. Follow-up FGDM conferences can be held to celebrate successes and/or refine goals and actions. Follow up conferences should also be held to bring the family and agency team together as additional decisions need to be made, incorporating private family time for the family to be the leader in the decision making. Minus any immediate safety concerns, first consideration should be given to the family prior to any revisions to the plan.