What Have We Learned About Family Group Conferencing and Case Management Practices?

Marilee Sherry

Marilee Sherry, MSW, RSW, began practicing as the coordinator for family group conferencing at the Children's Aid Society of Brant in Brantford, Ontario, Canada in 2005. In 2006, she became an Ontario family group conferencing trainer and Ontario family group conferencing mentor for coordinators in training. Prior to becoming the conferencing coordinator, she spent 5 years as a front-line child welfare worker and manager with the Children's Aid Society of Brant, delivering child welfare protection services in community-based settings.

"Family group conferencing changes you forever after you have experienced one." [1]

Over the past 6 years, I have been privileged to participate in many family group conferences[2], both as a Children's Aid Society[3] manager and as a family group conference coordinator. During this time, I began to wonder about the impact of agency workers' and managers'[4] case management practices[5] and decisions with a family and how these impacted the family group conferencing process. I also began to wonder if the family group conferencing experience affected the workers' and managers' case management practices with other families.

During my time as a Children's Aid Society manager, I started to realize that sometimes I needed to rethink my view of a family, past decisions, or decisions made during the preparation phase. For example, during the preparation phase for one family group conference, the coordinator advised me that some extended family members did not agree with one of the agency's bottom lines. The worker and I arranged a meeting with these family members, and we agreed to change the bottom line based on the new information available to us. Because of this experience, I became more careful about stating the agency's bottom lines for other families.

I also began to notice that sometimes things went smoothly during the preparation phase and the conference and other times there was quite a rocky road before and during the conference. I started to wonder about the impact of the

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[1]All italicized quotes in this article are from focus-group participants.

[2]Family group conferencing is a family-led decision-making process which has been offered to families in Ontario since 1998. The model of family group conferencing practiced in Ontario is based on the Maori model of decision making. It includes an independent coordinator, comprehensive preparation of participants, private family time during the conference, and embracing the family's culture throughout the process.

[3]Children's Aid Societies are the mandated and legislated child welfare agencies in Ontario.

[4]For the purposes of this paper, the term *worker* will refer to the child welfare professional with case management responsibilities for a family receiving services from the Children's Aid Society of Brant. The term *manager* will refer to the person to whom the worker reports.

[5]The case management model of social work practice includes assessment and service planning with a client, linking the client to resources and making referrals to services, and advocacy on the client's behalf.

Children's Aid Society case management practices and decisions prior to the referral to family group conferencing, during the preparation phase for family group conferencing, and during the conference itself.

At times, I have reflected back on my work as a front-line worker, before family group conferencing was available in my agency, and realized that if it had been available, I probably would have worked differently with families and perhaps made different decisions.

As a family group conference coordinator, I have continued to ponder these questions as I coordinated many conferences with families, their friends, and service providers, including the Children's Aid Society worker and manager. I have wondered why some referrals did not proceed to a conference and whether the worker's and manager's case management practices and decisions had an influence on referrals not proceeding. I started to have a clearer sense about the importance of the case management practices and decisions and their impact on the family group conferencing process.

For example, on several occasions a parent has had difficulty with the way one of the agency's bottom lines was worded. If the worker and manager arranged to meet with the parent to discuss the parent's difficulties, usually the differences were resolved and a family group conference was held. If the worker and manager were not willing to do this, the family group conference did not proceed.

On other occasions, a family member has been upset with past decisions the agency has made, usually regarding visits with his or her child. When the worker and manager met with the family member before the conference to try to resolve the difficulties, the conference usually proceeded relatively smoothly. When the worker and manager did not meet with the family member, usually the circle had to deal with the outstanding issue with the agency at the conference, and at times this became quite contentious.

During my time as a Children's Aid Society manager, I also wondered how to support and help prepare the worker who would be attending a family group conference. As a coordinator, I have continued to wonder how to help prepare the worker and manager. I sense that the relationship the worker and manager have with a client family, which is supported by the worker's and manager's case management practices and decisions, affects the family group conference preparation, the conference itself, and plan implementation in profound ways.

Introduction

Child welfare practice in Ontario is undergoing considerable change as a result of new provincial policy initiatives which came into effect in 2006. Among other changes, there is an increased emphasis on collaborative practice with families. Family group conferencing is now embedded in Ontario's policy and legislation. However, policy and legislative change do not necessarily result in practice changes in the field. It may be helpful to identify the practices that help effect these changes, so these practices can be encouraged in transforming child welfare practice.

There is a considerable body of literature about the experience of family member participants in family group conferencing and evaluation of the practice (Helland, 2005; Pennell, 2003; Schmid & Goranson, 2003; Stevens, 2003). Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, and Burford (2003), after reviewing the body of family group decision making research, found that social workers and service providers are satisfied with the family group conferencing process and that social worker rates of referral fluctuate, possibly based on the social workers' values and philosophy. There is, however, very little in the literature about the child welfare case management practices that support family group conferencing or the impact of family group conferencing on the Children's Aid Society workers' and managers' practice in general. This summary of views from Children's Aid Society workers and managers in Brantford, Ontario,

begins to address this need and responds to the following questions:

- How has participation in family group conferencing influenced child welfare social workers in their work with families?

- What child welfare case management practices support family group conferencing?

- Does family group conferencing transform child welfare case management practices?

Children's Aid Society of Brant and the Ontario Child Welfare Context for Family Group Conferencing[6]

Family Group Conferencing and the Children's Aid Society of Brant

The Children's Aid Society of Brant (henceforth referred to as the Brant CAS) is located in Brantford, Ontario, and serves approximately 140,000 people in Brant County. The Brant CAS has a proud history of forming partnerships within the local community (Children's Aid Society of Brant, 2004), developing community-based child welfare initiatives (Frensch, Cameron, & Hazineh, 2005), and supporting children living with kin. In October 2002, the Brant CAS decided to offer family group conferencing to families receiving their services. Family group conferencing is in keeping with the Brant CAS's philosophy and values of collaborative work with families and the commitment to strengthen and value families. Family group conferencing offered a new way to enter into partnership with families.

> Family group conferencing offered a new way to enter into partnership with families

In 2005, the coordinator position became a full-time management position within the Brant CAS child protection staff complement of approximately 200 staff members, with provisions in place to protect the coordinator's independence from the child welfare mandate. This is in keeping with the Brant CAS's efforts to provide seamless service to their client families (Children's Aid Society of Brant, 2004).

By the fall of 2007, approximately 60 family group conferences had been held, giving the social work staff at the Brant CAS a body of experience to reflect upon and to learn from in looking at how family group conferencing has influenced its case management practices.

Ontario Policy and Legislation Changes Affecting Family Group Conferencing Practice at the Children's Aid Society of Brant

In July 2005, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (2005) announced a major policy shift that came to be known as the "transformation agenda." The goal of the transformation agenda was to expand the intervention options to better meet the complex needs of children and families referred to child welfare services. Among others, the expanded intervention options included differential response and strategies to reduce delays in court and encourage alternatives to court. One of the anticipated results of the transformation agenda is more family and community involvement in planning (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies [OACAS], 2007), which is consistent with family group conferencing practice and values.

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[6]At the Children's Aid Society of Brant, this service is called family group decision making, but for the purposes of this discussion, it will be called family group conferencing.

During the policy development by the Child Welfare Secretariat (2005), family group conferencing was included as an approved alternative dispute resolution mechanism under differential response. The goals of alternative dispute resolution are to reduce delays in child welfare court proceedings and to reduce the number of child welfare cases that go to trial (OACAS, 2007).

The legislation governing child welfare services in Ontario, The Child and Family Services Act (1990), was amended as part of the child welfare transformation agenda and now requires a Children's Aid Society to consider an alternative dispute resolution if a child is or may be in need of protection.

Prior to the legislative changes in 2006, referrals to family group conferencing at the Brant CAS were encouraged but not mandated. During this time, referrals tended to be clustered among a few protection teams who enthusiastically embraced this service. This seems to be consistent with the international experience reflected in recent publications when family group conferencing is not legislated and essentially remains a fringe service offered to a few families (Nixon, Burford, & Quinn, 2005).

In the 18 months following the Ontario policy and legislative changes, the Brant CAS has been experiencing an increase in referrals to family group conferencing and a more even distribution of referrals across the protection teams in the agency. This is to be expected, given the policy, legislative, and financial supports now in place for family group conferencing. It is also encouraging that there are now more referring workers and managers using case management practices that encourage family-led decision making through family group conferencing.

The referral criteria for family group conferencing at the Brant CAS have remained fairly consistent during the past 5 years. If a family is interested in family group conferencing, feels that there is a crisis or a decision to be made, and

can "live with" the Children's Aid Society view of the family's challenges, their child welfare worker makes a referral to family group conferencing. Usually, client families learn about family group conferencing through their worker, which means that if the worker does not inform them about family group conferencing, it is unlikely that they will know about this option. It is hoped that over time, the local community and service provider community will have greater knowledge of and experience with family group conferencing and that client families will start to self-refer to family group conferencing.

Children's Aid Society of Brant Social Work Staff's Experience With Family Group Conferencing

With the implementation of the transformation agenda in 2006, the Brant CAS staff is expected to work in a collaborative manner with client families. Family group conferencing is viewed as a collaboration with client families and their extended family and friends (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2005).

Prilleltensky, Pierson, and Nelson (2001) propose a model for promoting family wellness and preventing child maltreatment:

- The two foundational blocks are *vision and values* and *context and etiology.*

- Building on these two blocks are the interventions, which include policies and programs.

- The final block is *implementation and diffusion.*

The family group conferencing program uses this framework and is supported by the policy and legislative changes in Ontario, which grew out of a vision for child welfare and the surrounding time and context. It seems that the Brant CAS, along with all other child welfare agencies in Ontario, is at the implementation and diffusion stage of these policy and program changes. One important

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aspect of implementation is to promote practices that support the particular policy or program being introduced, within the organizational context.

Given this context, the Brant CAS was interested in learning what case management practices had worked in the past to support family group conferencing and how to support further growth in collaborative case management work with families, including family group conferencing. The chosen way to do this was through an April 2007 focus group with the management staff, using the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) model. One of the opportunities identified during this focus group was, "Case management done differently — greater expectation on case manager to do things differently in a collaborative manner/gain skill set." The feedback from this focus group helped define the questions addressed in this discussion.

This discussion will focus on the front-line case management practices that support the implementation and diffusion of family group conferencing as one of the policy changes, rather than on the broader questions of the vision and context of the policy changes, the content of the policy changes themselves, or the practice paradigm in general. It is recognized that many influences, including the ones mentioned, affect front-line case management practices in child welfare.

Based on the SWOT analysis from the April 2007 focus group, Sherry (2007) reviewed Brant CAS staff feedback (evaluations) after a family group conference and identified several themes: (a) increased awareness of family strengths; (b) satisfaction with the plan; and (c) increased satisfaction with Children's Aid Society's role. This is consistent with findings reported elsewhere (Helland, 2005; Merkel-Holguin et al., 2003).

Focus Group Details

To explore the case management practices that support family group conferencing and identify which practices to encourage in future collaborative work with families, the family group conference coordinator at the Brant CAS (Marilee Sherry) invited all workers and managers who had participated in a family group conference over the past 5 years to attend a focus group in October 2007. Invitations were sent to 12 managers and 19 workers. Nine staff participated, with six attending a focus group, one responding in writing, and two meeting individually with the coordinator. Six participants were managers and three participants were workers, which is approximately a 30% response rate. While the response was lower than anticipated, the timing of the focus group may have been a factor. During the same period as the focus group, staff were required to attend many different training sessions regarding changes in child welfare. Participants' experience with family group conferencing ranged from participating in one conference to participating in 15, with an average participation rate of 4.5 family group conferences per participant.

The family group conferencing coordinator facilitated the focus groups, recorded responses as they were given, identified the themes from the responses given, and reviewed the results with focus group participants to ensure that their responses were reported accurately.

Two questions guided the focus groups:

1. What case management practices support family group conferencing?

2. How has your experience with family group conferencing influenced your case management practices with other families?

Participants provided many varied responses and examples for the first question, but seemed to struggle somewhat in articulating the impact that family group conferencing has had on their

case management practices with other families. This may be due to the way the question was worded or due to the tendency to see family group conferencing as separate from everyday case management practices. There is, however, an emerging awareness among the participants about how family group conferencing has affected their own practice.

Impact of the Family Group Conference Experience

"FGC [family group conferencing] is emotional for the worker. Sometimes family members call the worker to vent, after the conference is over."

"When FGC is a positive experience, it helps a worker realize how powerful and able a family is to look after their kids."

"A bridge happens during FGC. The success of FGC has a calming effect."

In reviewing the focus group feedback, the impact of the family group conferencing experience seemed to be an important factor for the group in moving toward a more collaborative practice with both the families who had conferences and the other families served. They did not provide much feedback about the impact of implementing the family group conference plan with families except to identify some systemic challenges they encountered. This may be due to the way the question was worded or due to the developmental stage of family group conferencing at the Brant CAS.

Participants talked about their own emotional reactions to the family group conference and the importance of managing their own anxiety, knowing themselves and what sets them off, and preparing themselves emotionally for the first part of the conference. Participants also talked about feeling as if everything was on hold during the preparation process for a family group

conference and then feeling affirmed after the conference in why they came to work that day.

Based on their responses, focus group participants seemed to struggle somewhat to find the words to describe the impact of the experience. However, it seems to have been a powerful and positive experience for them. This is in keeping with previous findings (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2003; Sherry, 2007).

> "A bridge happens during FGC. The success of FGC has a calming effect"

Philosophy and Values

"FGC needs to fit your own personal philosophy, for both the worker and the manager, or it will not fly. You have to have a personal belief in the strengths of families, and a natural humility about who you are and what you can offer."

"FGC gives a different message to the child."

"FGC has a humbling effect on service providers and you can see the development in the workers in their ability to let go of the belief in their own expertise and in trusting the potential for healthy supports in a family."

Participants stressed the importance of the belief in family support and having faith in the family's ability to make decisions. They also spoke about family group conferencing as affirming their basic belief in the shared responsibility for the safety of children.

Participants also expressed an awareness that their own practice was being assessed by family members. This may be linked to a humbling effect and a sense of vulnerability felt during the conference itself, which they expressed in their responses.

Over the past several years in Ontario, child welfare practice has focused on investigative risk assessment practices, with the child welfare service provider being the expert in identifying risk and forming plans to keep the child safe. The

philosophy and values identified by participants as supporting family group conferencing are collaboration, a focus on strengths, and the belief in the family's ability to make decisions to keep their child safe. In many ways, this is in direct conflict with how child welfare staff has been trained and has practiced over the past several years.

The importance of the worker's and manager's philosophy and values is in keeping with Connolly and McKenzie's (1999) observations that the fundamental principles of shared decision-making practice may be at odds with a service provider's prior training and philosophy. They stress the importance of a Children's Aid Society worker's commitment to the philosophy of family participation and shared decision-making. Merkel-Holguin et al. (2003) also point out the importance of the referring worker's philosophy and values in making referrals to family group conferencing.

These comments hint at a re-ordering of the service provider-client relationship to one that more closely reflects participatory practice (Connolly & McKenzie, 1999). Given the focus on investigative child welfare practice within a risk assessment paradigm in the child welfare field for the past several years (Cameron, 2003; Wharf 2002), it seems reasonable that the move toward collaborative practices will be a gradual one. For some workers and managers, collaborative practice will be rooted in their own philosophy and values.

It seems that somehow the experience of family group conferencing affirms its own underpinning philosophy and values for the focus group participants. It is not clear whether the workers' and managers' philosophy and values shifted as a result of their experience with family group conferencing or if family group conferencing fit the philosophy and values they already held. It may be that family group conferencing provided a way for them to experience participatory practice, as defined by Connolly and McKenzie

(1999), which may either have shifted or further affirmed their philosophy and values. A question for possible further exploration may be how the experience of family group conferencing affects the child welfare service provider's philosophy and values.

Case Management Practices

Connolly and McKenzie (1999) have stressed the importance of the caseworker's philosophy and values being in line with participatory practice. They have also identified some caseworker activities that support participatory practice while a child welfare agency is involved with a family.

Prilleltensky, Laurendeau, Chamberland, and Pierson (2001) point out that "values are the principles that guide our actions" (p. 125) and "are guidelines for thinking and acting in ways that benefit others" (p. 131). They call those who move vision and values into action "practical philosophers."

The following discussion of case management practices identified by the focus group participants reveal some of the ways they are being practical philosophers in their work with families at the Brant CAS, keeping in mind the importance of these practices being grounded in the philosophy and values supporting family-led decision-making processes.

Trusting the process

> *"When the worker presents the idea initially to a family and receives a positive response, these are the ones that usually get to a conference. After the family has said yes to the conference, there are a lot of questions. This takes time for the worker and the worker needs to keep explaining the steps to the family. The worker needs to have a good understanding of what happens at a conference in order to reassure the family members."*

> *"It takes time and effort to engage the family in FGC. The timing needs to be right for the*

family. The worker may need to revisit it several times before the family is able and ready to do this."

"You have to spend the time and that is hard. It takes time for families to start thinking this way and buy in, to open up to other family members assisting in the decisions."

"Sometimes there are hard questions during FGC preparation and this may lead to more work, but I understand that it needs to be done for the sake of the process."

In traditional child welfare work, the child welfare service provider is the expert and holds a great deal of mandated authority. As Connolly and McKenzie (1999) point out, "Just as workers have to make a paradigm shift from professional decision-making to family decision-making, the family have to make a similar shift" (p. 87). It may be a new practice for workers and managers to trust the family-led decision-making process. It may also be a challenge, at times, for family members to believe that they can or will be given the opportunity to make their own plans to keep their children safe.

Participants recognized that increased work may be required before the family group conference, but they experienced their job as much less time-consuming after the conference because family members could be redirected to their plan.

Connolly and McKenzie (1999) discuss the importance in effective participatory practice of the worker's skill of generating hope. They state, "hope is directly related to the family's *participation* in the process, rather than, necessarily, hopefulness with respect to outcome" (p. 79). The focus group participants did not articulate this important distinction. This

response may point out the developmental stage of family group conferencing practice at the Brant CAS, with the current focus being on participation in the process. Perhaps with more experience, child welfare service providers will be able to articulate the importance of generating hope for family members through participation in the decision-making process itself.

Participants identified the importance of being patient and persistent with the process. They stressed the importance of explaining the steps to family members several times, reassuring family members when they become anxious, accepting where the family members are in the process, and working with family members to carry out the plan.

> "It takes time for families to start thinking this way and buy in, to open up to other family members assisting in the decisions"

In traditional child welfare practice, the child welfare service provider is the expert who designs ways to reduce the risk to a child and then tries to find ways to achieve parent cooperation with the plan made. The case management practice of waiting for family members to work through the information and decide if they want to participate in family group conferencing, revisiting the process with them, and working with them in carrying out the plan is a new one. It becomes a matter of waiting for the time to be right for the family, rather than for the child welfare service provider.

The child welfare service provider needs to make decisions to support the family's sense of when the time is right and to advocate with others, both on the child welfare team and in other service provider agencies, to allow the family this time. This practice also ties in with the paradigm shift from plans being made by the service providers with no meaningful input from family members to plans being led by family members with input from service providers (Merkel-Holguin & Wilmot, 2005).

Awareness of strengths in families

> *"Through FGC, deficits are not the only thing you see in clients. You can lose sight of the positives."*

> *"There needs to be an attitude of openness with families, a looking for strengths and belief that the family can deal with this."*

> *"You need to be willing to talk to outside supports like the types of conversation you would have at the FGC without the FGC process. You know families are capable of it — you just have to explore it and trust it."*

> *"You learn about issues the family is facing when support people are involved. You have a realistic view of the support that people are able to offer."*

The Canadian child protection paradigm over the past several years has focused on risk and deficits rather than on strengths of family members (Cameron, 2003; Wharf, 2002). Child welfare workers and managers are highly attuned to their legal responsibilities and the liability that goes along with their work. One of their greatest fears is that a child will be seriously harmed or killed while receiving service from them.

Dumbrill (2005) points out the phenomenon of the pendulum swing in child welfare between family preservation and child safety. During the family preservation phase, the focus is on children remaining with their parents, and avoidable child deaths occur. Public outcry over child deaths moves the child welfare system to a focus on child safety with an inquisitorial practice. This may lead to a public outcry over the misuse of authority, and the pendulum then swings back the other way. Dumbrill proposes a

model of collaborative child welfare practice as a way of finding the balance between these two extremes.

Between 1998 and 2006, the focus in Ontario leaned more toward the child safety end of the pendulum, which tended to focus on a family's deficits rather than strengths, in order to prevent an avoidable child death. The challenge for workers and managers is to find the middle ground, where an awareness of the family's strengths and challenges informs their practice. Focus group participants seemed to identify this challenge in their feedback about a realistic view of a family's strengths.

> Family group conferencing may be one of the only opportunities a child welfare service provider has to meet the members of the client's extended family network

Family group conferencing is built on the strengths in a family and the belief that the family circle will be able to keep its child safe and meet the requirements of the mandated child welfare service. Participants talked about having a realistic view about what family members can do to assist after participating in a family group conference. They also expressed a greater awareness of the strengths in all the families they serve and a greater appreciation for the uniqueness of each family after experiencing a family group conference.

Family group conferencing may be one of the only opportunities a child welfare service provider has to meet the members of the client's extended family network and understand the dynamics at work in the family. For the worker and manager, this may be an experience of learning to trust the strengths present in a family rather than blindly trusting strengths that they are not even sure are present. This realistic view of a family's strengths experienced through family group conferencing helps alleviate their anxiety about their legal mandate and liability.

Widening the circle

"You need to be prepared to have conversations with the wider family, foster parents, etc."

"Our practice is to look at who else is important to the child and family, who in the family can look after the child if the parents can't and what are the barriers to the parent caring for their child. In order to answer these questions, a[n]FGC process makes sense."

"I have a broader understanding of family."

"FGC changed how I view systems. Family is larger than blood family. Just because I do not know about family members, it doesn't mean that they are not out there."

Participants stressed the importance of considering who is in the family support system and actively seeking them out, being willing to have conversations with people in the extended family, and finding ways to support the foster parents.

Traditional child welfare work tends to focus on working primarily with the parent(s) raising the child. Traditional gender roles have given the responsibility of raising children to women, which has limited the role of the father in a child's life (Pierson, Laurendeau, & Chamberland, 2001). These views have contributed to a narrow definition of "family" for child welfare staff.

Workers and managers are keenly aware of the requirement that clients consent to their file information being shared with anyone else, including other family members. They are also aware of the time required to develop relationships with members of the wider family system.

The narrow focus on mother and child, the requirement for consents, and time constraints have tended to result in minimal engagement with the wider family system, especially the paternal family system, in traditional child welfare practice. Participants identified the importance

of engaging in conversation with the wider family system when participating in the family group conferencing process, which does not usually happen to any great extent in their practice. Practicing in this way includes expanding the view of "client" to include the wider family system and working out the issue of the clients' consent to share information with their families.

This expanding view of the client seems to be particularly challenging during the preparation phase. The challenge may be due, in part, to the increased anxiety of the worker and manager and the family system as the family group conference approaches. It may also be because the worker and manager have not yet experienced the strength in the family that becomes evident during the family group conference.

Sometimes during the preparation phase, a particular family member may challenge the worker's and manager's previously held assessment regarding a child's safety, and the worker and manager need to be prepared to address these issues as they arise. Other times, extended family members may want to resume access to the child or have other requests for the worker. Such requests require the worker and manager to have a measure of humility and the willingness to revise previous assessments and engage in conversations with the wider family prior to the conference.

When implementing the plan, collaborating with the wider family circle seems to flow more easily for the worker and manager than it did before the conference occurred. This may be due to the family circle and the child welfare staff being committed to working together to implement the plan, as well as the impact of the family group conferencing experience on the worker and manager.

After experiencing a family group conference, participants identified how they are applying the principle of widening the circle in their case management practices in general. Applications include being more open to learning about the

relationships within a family, being more aware of who the family's supports are, and having greater skill in asking questions about a family's support system.

It is very encouraging that participants talked about being able to transfer the experience of a family group conference circle into their everyday practice in this way, since many times the informal supports of client families tend to be invisible or discounted in traditional child welfare practice. This is also an important step in moving toward strengths-based and collaborative practice in the child welfare field.

Awareness of family dynamics

"The number of people involved may escalate conflict within the family. The family dynamic and the anxious phone calls from family members are just part of the process."

Child welfare service providers work with many of our community's most vulnerable members. Conflict or abusive or neglectful behavior between family members, or generational family difficulties are often found in their client families. When working with a mother and child, the worker may not see the need to explore the wider family dynamic or may discount someone in the family as a source of support based on what the client says about that person.

When engaging in collaborative practice, the child welfare service provider needs to balance building a therapeutic relationship with the client family with engaging extended family members in planning processes. The balance becomes challenging for both family members and the child welfare service provider when there are conflicts between family members involved in the planning process.

Family group conferencing engages the whole family system and may bring family conflicts and dynamics into the view of the child welfare worker and manager. This helps the worker and manager have a realistic view of what support various family members are able to offer and may challenge previously held opinions. This also requires the worker and manager to manage the conflicts that may arise within the family and support the family before and after the conference.

Participants stressed the importance of remaining neutral, or not getting pulled into the family dynamic and not taking attacks personally. They stated that they need to remain neutral when family members try to get the workers' opinion about "mini plans" before the conference and not get pulled into discussions when one family member tries to discredit other family members. They also talked about being careful to not feel personally attacked during conflicts between various family members. This seems to be an important skill when engaging with a wider family system and one that requires the worker and manager to pay careful attention to boundaries.

> Child welfare service providers work with many of our community's most vulnerable members

Social workers are trained to help, and this includes helping people resolve conflicts. It requires considerable skill for a social worker to hear all sides of the story in a conflict without appearing to favor one particular person or version of events. Focus group participants identified this as a challenge particularly during the preparation phase of family group conferencing, when family members' anxiety may be heightened.

Awareness of power imbalances

"When I am involved in court, I feel like a detective, gathering evidence and I feel somewhat removed from the family. When I am involved in FGC, I feel like a social worker, working with the family to get them to the decision. I am working with them and not looking for evidence. It is more relaxed."

"There is a sense of relief, that you are not the expert on the family. Pass the decisions to the family. This feels more natural."

"There is a knack to engage families in FGC. The worker starts off with a power differential and needs to acknowledge this. The worker needs to step down and let the family take responsibility to make decisions. The family comes together to look after their own children."

"FGC is a whole new way to see family. The interactions with family members are more equal afterwards."

"FGC gives a model to use in a smaller way when working with families. Calling a family meeting, for example, and making sure to ask the family what they want, how they can solve the problem. It means letting go of power as it is defined as control."

Connolly and McKenzie (1999) state:

A sure way of undermining effective participatory practice is to neglect the significance of power dynamics within and across systems….Using professional knowledge and expertise to further the aims of participatory practice becomes the challenge for workers as they avoid the many opportunities to take the problem-solving lead. (p. 83)

Participants talked about the power differential between Children's Aid Society staff and family members and stressed the importance of personal awareness and acknowledging this differential. Family group conferencing was identified as an anti-oppressive practice and a place where the family understands the concerns of the Children's Aid Society. They also talked about how a family receives a different message through family group conferencing, even if there is no solution, because the family developed a positive plan that was their choice.

This awareness seemed particularly powerful to the focus group participants. There is almost a sense of relief that the child welfare service providers are not solely responsible for keeping a child safe.

In child welfare practice, the child welfare service provider holds the mandated authority and uses it when necessary to protect a child.

> There is almost a sense of relief that the child welfare service providers are not solely responsible for keeping a child safe

The risk for the child welfare service provider is that over time, he or she becomes less sensitive to the power differential and the impact that this power differential may have on client families (Frensch et al., 2005). Family group conferencing may be a way of reminding child welfare service providers to pay attention to this power differential.

Participants spoke about a heightened sense of the power imbalance and an awareness of how to address this in their everyday work with families. They talked about having a greater awareness of the impact that the Children's Aid Society has on a family, and of the importance of starting from a perspective of "what can I do for you," rather than from an authoritative stance.

This is perhaps one of the most hopeful responses from the participants in terms of transforming child welfare practice. The

awareness of the power differential and the impact on families is essential when working collaboratively with family members. The participants hint at moving away from viewing themselves as the "experts," which is necessary in order to move toward a family-led decision-making paradigm.

Timing

> "After you have done one and it was a positive experience, it is always in the back of your head for other families."

> "Adoption philosophy is tangled up with FGC, often because we waited too long for FGC."

> "Through FGC you learn about family members you didn't know existed. Maybe there would be a different outcome or better outcomes for kids? The decisions look different if they are made earlier on."

Participants talked about offering family group conferencing to families earlier in their involvement with the Children's Aid Society, not always using family group conferencing as an alternative to court, and using family group conferencing as a tool for permanency for children. Participants also stressed that review conferences are part of the process, and that the family group conferencing process is shorter than the court process even when there are review conferences.

In child welfare work, workers and managers have many standards and legal obligations to meet, which often include timelines. The sense of timing for the child welfare service provider and the sense of timing for the family may not necessarily be congruent. The skill for the child welfare service provider is to be prepared to offer family group conferencing many times, and let the family decide if or when the time is right. This also ties into trusting the process and being aware of family dynamics.

Participants stressed the importance of thinking about family group conferencing early in a family's involvement with the Children's Aid Society, which might make the decisions look quite different. Participants also talked about considering family group conferencing for decisions other than where the child could be while not in the care of a parent.

The timing of a referral to family group conference is an important consideration. Nixon et al. (2005) reported on the findings of an international survey regarding family group conferencing: "while the agency may set criteria for referral, either prescriptive or permissive, the judgment of whether a family is well-suited for a family meeting rests to a large extent with social workers" (p. 24-25). This trend is continued with Ontario's legislative changes, which require the Children's Aid Society to consider a referral to an alternative dispute resolution mechanism. Just what "consider" means has not yet been fully determined.

Ontario's child welfare policy and legislation do not specify when a referral to an alternative dispute resolution must be considered, and so this is left to the individual agencies to determine as they implement alternative dispute resolution. This will probably result in uneven referral rates to family group conferencing across the province, even though all Children's Aid Societies are operating under the same legislation.

Occasionally, a family group conference has been held at the Brant CAS after the court has made an order allowing a child to be placed for adoption. This puts the family in a difficult situation, since their choices about how to achieve permanency for their child have already been somewhat limited by a court order. This also puts the Children's Aid Society staff in a difficult position, due to their responsibilities toward a child who is legally free to be adopted and the stringent requirements of an adoption home study, even if the person offering to adopt the child is kin.

It is encouraging that participants are considering this question and recognize that things might look quite different for a child and family if family group conferencing is offered earlier. The question of timing ties into who holds the power to offer family group conferencing, determine the timing, or decide whether or not a referral is "appropriate."

Articulating bottom lines

> *"We are trained to identify risk indicators and define things. Bottom lines are often unknown."*

Participants discussed how difficult it is to identify the bottom lines for a family group conference. They talked about how helpful it was to develop these bottom lines through the family group conferencing process since this gave them more clarity about their work with a client family. They also talked about using the concept of bottom lines in their work with other families.

Child welfare work is often crisis-driven. As a result, workers and managers spend considerable time responding to the crises, leaving less time to consider how to address the underlying challenges facing a family.

Social workers' clinical training tends to focus on teaching them to assess and plan. Child welfare service providers have been trained to assess risk of harm to a child and to build service plans that mitigate the risk. This results in a service plan that often includes things the client has to do, without actually identifying the underlying difficulty which has led to the risk of harm to a child. The focus of the worker's and family's work together then usually becomes whether or not the client has done the things expected in the service plan. This is also what usually happens when there is court involvement and a client is expected to follow the court-ordered plan of care.

Family group conferencing is a way for the extended family circle to create their own plan to keep their child safe. This means that the child

welfare service provider needs to identify the underlying difficulty in a family that leads to the assessment that a child is at risk of harm, so that the family circle can create the plan. This has not formed part of the usual practice, and it takes some skill to learn to articulate the bottom lines in strengths-based language.

It is very encouraging that participants identified how helpful it is to identify these bottom lines, how surprised they are at how difficult it is, and that they are expanding this practice with other families they are serving.

Does Family Group Conferencing Transform Child Welfare Practices?

It appears that, based on the participants' responses, family group conferencing is helping transform child welfare practices at the Brant CAS toward more collaborative case management practices. As a result of their experience with family group conferencing, the focus group participants seem to be:

• Affirming their philosophy and values about family-led decision making processes.

• Changing their understanding about their client families in general.

• Maintaining a realistic sense of the strengths in individual families and knowing how to seek out the client family's informal supports.

• Increasing awareness of the power differential between them and their client families and beginning to move away from the "expert" role in the relationship with a client family.

• Asking questions about the timing of family group conferencing referrals.

• Starting to expand the concept of articulating the Children's Aid Society bottom lines to their work with other families.

Participants highlighted some important system supports and challenges as they moved toward more collaborative case management practices.

System Supports

"With differential response, we are starting early to identify supports and link families to people. Drawing in support people is part of the planning all along with differential response."

Participants identified how system supports make family group conferencing and collaborative case management practices easier to implement. A community-based child protection setting and the implementation of differential response were seen as two important system supports.

Child welfare service providers work within a specific legal and policy framework. The Brant CAS has experienced family group conferencing both prior to the Ontario transformation agenda and after the legislative and policy changes came into effect. The Brant CAS already had community-based child protection services before the policy and legislative changes, which may have supported the growth of family group conferencing when it was first introduced.

Participants pointed to the importance of the policy changes, specifically differential response, as supporting collaborative practice, with family group conferencing being one form of collaborative practice. It is encouraging that participants see that family group conferencing fits into a broader collaborative practice framework. It is also encouraging that there are some legislative and policy changes at the Ontario provincial level, as well as at the Brant CAS level, which support this collaborative practice.

> A community-based child protection setting and the implementation of differential response were seen as two important system supports

System Challenges

"CAS [Children's Aid Society] still has the legal mandate — how to bridge the requirements of the mandate and the family-driven process?"

"CAS still has to be the boss, such as 'I have to see you every 30 days' and this may be in conflict with the family-driven plan."

Given the context of the requirements of the agency's usual practices, legislation, legal regulations, and Ministry standards that still need to be met, participants identified some of the challenges associated with implementing the family group conferencing plan and in working in partnership with family members rather than going back to doing business the old way.

They stressed that before the Children's Aid Society staff members can explain to family members the reasons for the agency's requirements, they must reconcile them in their own minds. Participants also talked about the time it takes to engage a family in the alternative dispute resolution process, and that other caseload demands sometimes make it difficult to have the time to spend with family members in this way. They also pointed out that sometimes other service providers in the community find it hard to wait for the family group conferencing process and wonder why the Children's Aid Society does not use their mandated authority to move more quickly.

These system challenges formed an area of some frustration for the focus group participants, and in some ways confirm Connolly and McKenzie's (1999) observation about the conflict between a worker's core values and a worker's prior training.

There appears to be a fundamental conflict between engaging in a family-driven process and the requirements of a child welfare system which tends to view itself as the expert on risk reduction with a focus on accountability and use of mandated authority.

Merkel-Holguin et al. (2003) discuss the challenges associated with integrating family group conferencing into mainstream practice. Family group conferencing challenges the assumptions and "decision making approaches that place power and sanction in the control of service providers" (p. 5). Merkel-Holguin and Wilmot (2005) further articulate this challenge: "Who decides what process a family is offered?" (p. 195) and "Does the promulgation of a continuum of family involvement models give permission to social workers and the system to remain within their comfort zones instead of moving toward better engagement and partnership efforts with families?" (p. 195).

Nixon et al. (2005) identified several key blocks to sustaining family group conferencing or moving family group conferencing into mainstream practice: program drift, agency constraint, budget constraint, lack of resources, and lack of feedback and awareness. Each of these has the potential to keep family group conferencing marginalized and under-used.

While individual workers and managers are finding creative ways to reconcile family-led decision making into the current child welfare system, this will remain an exercise in frustration and futility unless the child welfare system itself embraces family-led decision-making processes and makes the necessary systemic changes to support this.

Where to Go From Here?

While it appears that family group conferencing is helping transform child welfare case management practices at the Brant CAS, there are some important questions about how this happens.

Keeping in mind the importance of policy, legislation, and agency practice, an individual worker or manager's philosophy and values seem to be the foundation of helping him or her practice in a collaborative way. This brings some questions to the forefront, including:

- How does the experience of family group conferencing affect the child welfare service providers' philosophy and values underpinning their practice?

- What has supported their collaborative practice philosophy and values in the child welfare field?

- How can others be encouraged to practice in this way, knowing the importance of philosophy and values?

- What will help a child welfare service provider move toward the philosophy and values underpinning collaborative case management practices?

- What can we learn from those who are less enthusiastic about family group conferencing?

- What case management practices support family group conference plan implementation?

Another area for further attention are the requirements, usually legislated or based on Ministry standards, that may hinder collaborative practice through family group conferencing. Participants spoke about these being a challenge mostly during the implementation phase of the family group conference plan. Some questions to ponder include:

- How will the challenges to collaborative practice be identified both at an agency and Ministry level?

- What changes can be made to further support collaborative practice?

Exploring these questions may further assist the child welfare field to implement family group conferencing and collaborative case management practices in general.

Conclusion

It appears that family group conferencing is helping transform the case management practices of child welfare service providers at the Brant CAS toward a more collaborative practice model. These case management practices that support family group conferencing seem to be multi-faceted and nested within broader policy, legislative, and agency contexts.

The experience of participating in a family group conference seems somehow to be foundational in supporting collaborative case management practices. Encouraging and supporting the philosophy and values underpinning collaborative practice also seem to be important, although it is not clear how the experience of family group conferencing affects child welfare service providers' philosophy and values.

Some collaborative case management practices have been identified, and the next step may be to find ways to support these practices. This may include the broader systemic supports of policy, legislation, and agency practice as well as staff members' philosophy and values. It also appears important to address broader systemic challenges to collaborative practice.

Hopefully, this beginning exploration will help further refine some important questions about building collaborative case management practices in the child welfare field.

In summary, it appears that family group conferencing holds enormous potential to transform child welfare practice from viewing the service provider as "expert" to a collaborative practice with families receiving child welfare services. For family group conferencing to move into mainstream practice and thus have greater influence over case management practices of child welfare service providers, the legislation and policy, local agency policy and practice, and individual worker and manager practices all need to support family-led decision-making processes.

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