

Early Help Family Group Conferences: An Analysis of Family Plans

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Abstract : A Family Group Conference (FGC) is a family-led decision-making process through which a family/kinship group, rather than the professionals involved, is asked to develop a plan for the care or the protection of children in the family. In England and Wales, FGCs are used in 76% of local authorities and in recent years, have tended to be used in cases where the local authority are considering the court process to remove children from their immediate family, to explore kinship alternatives to local authority care. Some local authorities offer the service much earlier, when families first come to the attention of children's social care, in line with research that suggests the earlier an FGC is held, the more likely they are to be successful. Family plans that result from FGCs are different from professional plans in that they are unique to a family and, as a result, reflect the diversity of families. Despite the fact that FGCs are arguable the most researched area of social work globally, there is a dearth of research that examines the nature of family plans and their substance. This paper presents the findings of a documentary analysis of 42 Early Help FGC plans from local authorities in England, with the aim of exploring the level and type of support that family members offer at a FGC. A thematic analysis identified 5 broad areas of support: Practical Support, Building Relationships, Child-care Support, Emotional Support and Social Support. In the majority of cases, family members did not want or ask for any formal support from the local authority or other agencies. Rather, the families came together to agree a plan of support, which was within the parameters of the resources that they as a family could provide. Perhaps then the role of the Early Help professional should be one of a facilitating and enabling role, to support families to develop plans that address their own specific difficulties, rather than the current default option, which is to either close the case because the family do not meet service thresholds or refer to formal support if they do, which may offer very specific support, have rigid referral criteria, long waiting lists and may not reflect the diverse and unique nature of families. FGCs are argued to be culturally appropriate social work practices in that they are appropriate for families from a range of cultural backgrounds and can be adapted to meet particular cultural needs. Furthermore, research on the efficacy of FGCs at an Early Help Level has demonstrated that Early Help FGCs have the potential to address difficulties in family life and prevent the need for formal support services, which are potentially stigmatising and do not reflect the uniqueness and diversity of families. The paper concludes with a recommendation for the use of FGCs across Early Help Services in England and Wales.

Keywords : family group conferences, family led decision making, early help, prevention

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