

# PROGRAM PROFILE

## Family Team Conferencing It Takes a Team to Make a...Good... Decision

It's not often that new casework requirements imposed by government funders prove to be popular with folks on the front-line. Family Team Conferences may be the exception.

"They are excellent," says Celina Ovando, Family Team Conference Coordinator for the Adoption and Foster Care Division at The Children's Village. "Excellent" is a word she uses a lot in describing the impact that Family Team Conferences are having on services for children and families at CV.

Family Team Conferences are designed to improve critical decision making in foster care and preventive cases by ensuring the active participation of parents and children themselves, as well as foster parents, agency case workers, Administration for Children's Services (ACS) staff, other service providers, community members and others offering support for the family. Conferences are intended to promote open and honest dialogue among all participants and ultimately reach a case decision based on group consensus.

Key to the FTC process is the participation of a Facilitator who promotes discussion, helps a group reach consensus and clarifies agreed upon next steps including who will be responsible and timeframes for

when the steps will be taken. Facilitators are specially trained and independent of the case, having no prior involvement with the family.

Family Team Conferences follow a carefully choreographed series of steps:

- Introduction
- Issue Identification
- Assessment
- Development of Ideas
- Decision Making and Plan Development
- Recap/ Evaluation/Closing

The facilitator guides the conference through the process and ensures that children and families are respected and heard throughout the meeting:

It is this commitment to respect and really hear what families and children have to say that accounts for the power of the FTC model, say participants. "We are getting very good feedback from families," says Catharine Rafael, Supervisor of Family Team Conferencing at Abbot House. "They are telling us that it is a very good process for them to express their needs and their concerns. They really feel that they have a stronger voice in the planning process."

During the assessment stage, the Family

Team Conference formally identifies and records the strengths of families and children. "They often react very positively to this part of the session," says Susan Kyle, Administrative Supervisor for Family Support Services and Mental Health at Good Shepherd Services. "Very often, they are not used to having their strengths recognized. When a child or a parent hears that they are good at this or that, it balances out the discussion about things that are of concern."

Equally valuable, say FTC participants, is the clear statement of next steps that must be taken by individuals involved in the case. "It holds everyone accountable," says Celina Ovando. "Case planners know what they need to do. It holds family members accountable for what they need to accomplish. It holds the agency accountable for what needs to be done."

The requirement to use Family Team Conferences as the vehicle for making case decisions is a fundamental component in ACS' Improved Outcomes for Children (IOC) service model. Nine foster care agencies and five preventive services providers began piloting the model in November of 2007. Last June, all child welfare agencies under contract with ACS made the transition to IOC and FTCs.

Under IOC, there are several different types of Family Team Conferences. ACS itself facilitates critical decision conferences. These include:

- Placement Preservation when there is a potential disruption to a child's current placement;
- Discharge/Reunification prior sending a child home or discharging him or her from care; and,
- Changes in Permanency Planning Goals

The conferences are making a difference, according to ACS.

"In the past, a foster parent who might be overwhelmed by a child's behavior would call and ask that the child be removed," says ACS Deputy Commissioner Lorraine Stephens. "The agency would come pick the child up and move them to a new foster boarding home. Now, we are saying that a child can not be removed until we have a Family Team Conference. A lot of times we find the foster parents want to discuss services or supports they need. We have been able to preserve that placement for 35-40% of those cases. That means those children did not have to move. We are definitely starting to see some successes."

Agency staff also believe – if only based on anecdotal evidence – that the conferences are having an impact. "I feel that kids are spending less time in care," says Celina Ovando. "People are really understanding that there is a time limit for everything they have to do. It is definitely working pretty well."

Case conferences, of course, are not new. In theory, child welfare agencies have always gathered casework staff and families to discuss critical decisions in the lives of children. In fact, however, ACS believes that all too often family members and children themselves were left out of the decision making process.

"We were concerned that agencies were moving forward with planning without the birth parent, foster family or young person at the table," says Stephens. ACS guidelines now require the participation of birth parents (if the child has not been freed for adoption), foster families and children over the age of ten.

Getting everyone to the conferences has not always been easy. ACS ultimately backed off its initial requirement for full attendance and now mandates that agencies make diligent efforts to schedule at least two conferences. If key participants do not show up the second time, the conference moves forward.

Nevertheless, says Stephens, parents and children are now involved. "We are not discharging a child home without having a family member at the table," she says. "We are not discharging an adolescent out of care without making sure he has everything he needs in place."

While ACS facilitates critical decision conferences, agencies themselves are required to hold and facilitate Permanency Planning Conferences. These serve as the Service Plan Reviews (SPR) required by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) and are held three months and six months after a child's removal into foster care and then every six months thereafter.

Creating a new system for scheduling family team conferences – and hiring and training facilitators to lead them -- has been a major task in the transition to IOC.

Catholic Guardian Society and Home Bureau, which piloted the system during Phase I of IOC, has had as many as ten full time staff assigned to the effort. Like many agencies, CGSHB created a unit of facilitators within its Quality Management Department. "We wanted them to be functioning independently, rather than part of the foster boarding home program," says Diane Berg-Appel, Director of Quality Management. Facilitators are assigned to cover conferences at various CGSHB program locations. For conferences to be accessible to participants, each facilitator must include a certain number of nights and weekends in their schedule.

The FTC Facilitator is a new role within the child welfare system – and apparently a popular one. ACS required its own 85 Facilitators to be Masters level social workers. "We gave agencies more flexibility," says Stephens. "We asked that their Facilitators have two years of case practice or group work experience, including some supervisory experience. We did not want young social workers with no experience on case practice."

Many agencies, it seems, have tried to use MSWs. "I was concerned that MSWs might find it limiting and that they wouldn't be doing enough clinical work," says Berg-Appel. "But, they enjoy it. I think they feel like they are making an impact."

"I like the position," says Celina Ovando. "Now I can work with a lot of families. It is a different type of social work. It is excellent."



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