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Family Group Conferencing Ontario Provincial Resource

ISSUE # 1

SPRING / SUMMER 2009

A message to the FGC Coordinators!

We are very excited to be launching our first issue of the FGC Ontario Provincial Resource Newsletter. We would like to thank you for your contributions to this first issue, without them this project could not have been completed.

We hope that the Newsletter will become an interactive tool for all FGC coordinators across Ontario. A platform for sharing experiences and resources about the FGC practice; the opportunity to make your voice heard on the issues you think are relevant in your practice and community.

We sometimes hear from FGC coordinators that working in the community, or being on the road visiting families can be quite isolating, and that it may be days before they are able to connect with one of their peers.

Your contribution and using the Newsletter as an interactive tool will be an opportunity to "stay connected" and be a part of the "Family Group Conferencing



A symbol of unity, "circle of friends"

ing family". It will also provide you with the opportunity to stay informed on current issues, the FGC practices, but most of all it will be an opportunity to read about the challenges and suc-

cesses experienced by coordinators across the province.

As the Ontario FGC Provincial Resource evolves so does your practice. We believe that being able to share knowledge and learn from each other is best practice and that it is your voice that keeps Family Group Conferencing adapting and growing. It is through the stories you share with us that your work with families is reflected, and it is through these stories that you reach and inspire others.

Carolina Pizarro
Provincial Resource Staff

What is the Provincial Resource?

In November 2006 the Ministry proclaimed the Transformation Agenda, which included FGC both as an ADR mechanism and as a family-centered conferencing option under the Differential Response.

The FGC Ontario Provincial Resource was established in order to provide training and consul-

tation to service providers across Ontario wishing to enhance their capacity to deliver effective family group conferencing. To maintain a roster of family group conferencing coordinators, trainers and mentors; maintain and update the FGC manual; and act as a locus of expertise and best practice.

The Provincial Resource is composed of two staff, Daniel Bogue and Carolina Pizarro, as well as a steering committee made of trainers, mentors and FGC coordinators, reflecting all regions in Ontario. The key objective of this committee is to act as a quality assurance group.

FGC Provincial Resource Update

We are very excited about some of the projects that we are working on for this year. One of those projects is the Youth Leaving Care research study. This is a project developed to explore the use of FGC with youth aging out of care. We have promoted the use of FGC to child welfare agencies, particularly adolescent teams, family services teams and Directors of Service and ADR coordinators across the province. The goal is to generate referrals to complete the research study which includes the publication of the findings.

We are clear that in order to

generate these referrals we need to go to the referral source. It is with this in mind that we have developed a brochure for distribution to FGC coordinators across the province. It is our hope that FGC coordinators will share the brochure with referring workers at their intake meetings. The brochure will also be available on our website for downloading.

Another exciting project is the work we have completed with the Office of the Children's Lawyer in developing a consensus on key issues involving FGC cases. A set of guidelines have been devel-

oped in partnership with the OCL and will be presented and distributed at our next PD Day April 2009. We hope that this will encourage collaborative and joint training of FGC coordinators and OCLs across the province.

The Provincial Resource and its pool of trainers and mentors continue to provide training and mentoring across the province. We now have 45 FGC coordinators on the Roster and 15 trainees at various stages of their mentorship.

Provincial Resource Staff



From War to Peace: Families Can and Will!

One of the referrals received by the Thunder Bay Counseling Centre for Family Group Decision Making was a family where the maternal and paternal grandparents had been involved in a custody battle for almost 5 years over their mutual grandchild. This grandchild had come into the care of the grandparents as result of serious physical abuse that the child had sustained at the suspected hands of her biological parents as an infant.

When I met with various family group members to do preparation, most individuals were very doubtful that the grandparents would be able to come to an agreement without going to trial – just given

how many hurtful situations had occurred and given how long the court battle had been waging on. As well, these maternal and paternal grandparents had utilized mediation in the past without success.

In addition, there was lots of uproar about the child's biological mother attending, as several individuals felt that she in particular had lost all of her parental rights due to the physical abuse allegations.

In brief, by the end of the family meeting process there was in fact an agreement and in its final form this family plan was so detailed and thorough that it was 8 pages long! Interestingly enough as well,

the biological mother was heralded as the person who was responsible for creating the whole turning point in the meeting, which resulted in the grandparents reaching and agreement. This family group proved once again that families truly have the capacity to make good decisions and plans for their children – they just need the opportunity!!

Heidi Natri FGDM Coordinator

Thunder Bay Counselling Centre

“By the end of the family meeting there was in fact an agreement”

Family Group Conferencing is also known as Family Group Decision Making in some jurisdictions.



An Overview of Family Group Conferencing in Ontario's Eastern Region

FGC is established in Ottawa-Carleton and activity is underway to realize continued expansion to the surrounding areas in the Eastern Region, including Renfrew, Prescott-Russell and Stormont-Dundas-Glenarry. There have been key investments of time and energy in the Eastern Region to make this progress possible. Here's a summary...

In January 2007 Children's Aid Society Ottawa (CASOTT) assumed a leadership role in the region. CASOTT accessed funding to kick-start the process and by late summer/early fall four Ottawa area professionals had been engaged and trained. A few referrals were then generated to support completion of the mentoring process. In addition, CASOTT officials pursued the involvement of another community organization to assume ongoing responsibility for advancing FGC in the Eastern Region.

In April 2008, Family Service à la famille Ottawa (FSFO) took over the reins of FGC in the Eastern Region by commencing what is now the Alternative Dispute Resolution Program. (Later during spring 2008 this program also assumed administrative responsibility for child welfare mediation in the region.) Also by April 2008, three FGC Coordinators had completed all the training and mentoring requirements. FSFO tirelessly supported FGC by making presentations to numerous protection teams at CASOTT, child protection lawyers, and the Family Court Clinic at the Royal Ottawa Hospital. Promotional materials have been developed and distributed to child welfare and other community organizations. Consultation with the child welfare organizations in the other three jurisdictions in the region is underway.

FSFO receives FGC referrals from CASOTT, then an FGC Coordinator is contracted to provide service. FSFO provides vital logistical support throughout the process of building a family group conference. To date fourteen referrals have been made and nine conferences have been held. The flow of FGC referrals from CASOTT has been steadily increasing since the implementation of the program. As child welfare workers become more familiar with the program it is expected that the numbers will rise further during the coming year.

This overview affords an opportunity to reflect on all that has been accomplished regarding FGC in the Eastern Region as well as the work that lies ahead. This in turn, invites those involved – at the Provincial Resource, the provincial government, FSFO, CASOTT and the other child welfare organizations in the region, FGC leaders elsewhere in the province, the FGC Coordinators in the region - to pause and appreciate how their contributions have supported progress to date.

FGC coordinators, Victoria Norgaard, Maryanne King, Denise Ouellette and ADR Program Coordinator Phyllis O'Neil

QUOTES FROM FAMILIES ABOUT FGC

"It was great that the family had this opportunity to work together for the benefit of the child. He is happy that he is coming home".

Family Friend

"I was very happy with the outcome. I felt supported".

Mother

"To talk about things and develop a plan for the child and not in front of court".

Father

"The conference was very good because it brings out inner feelings that is hurting for so long and you will come to peace with the person".

Aunt

"Having everyone together, letting out and crying and awesome plan".

Child

"We struggled but made it work".

Uncle



Why Conferencing and not Conference?

Because it is a process which includes gathering the family clan, helping it to have access to the relevant information, creating an ongoing platform which honours their voices...it is not just a meeting!



FGC Ontario Provincial Resource

c/o The George Hull Centre for Children and Families
600 The East Mall, 3rd floor
Toronto, ON
M9B 4B1
Phone: 416-622-8833 ext. 412
Fax: 416-622-7068
E-mail: cpizarro@georgehull.on.ca
Website: <http://www.georgehullcentre.on.ca/FGCPR>

Visit our website for an electronic-copy of this issue at
www.georgehullcentre.on.ca/FGCPR

Upcoming Training

Family Group Conferencing Training

Barrie, June 22 and 23, 2009

To register contact:

sgarratt.SIMCAS@simcoecas.com.

Next Professional Development Day

OCTOBER 2009



Confidentiality in the context of diversity

The *Child and Family Services Act*, as amended by Bill 210 describes Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) as a strategy to streamline court processes and encourage alternatives to court. Use of ADR is mandatory for a children's aid society to consider and is voluntary for families to participate in. The following provision of ADR is the subject of this piece of writing: "Use a written agreement, where possible, which is signed by all participants and contains the confidentiality provisions as set out in regulation". This policy directive became effective on November 30, 2006.

The use of a written confidentiality agreement raised a lot of controversy regarding how and when to use it during the FGC process. The Family Group Conferencing Project of Toronto, the oldest in Ontario, has been operating since 1998, which made it eight years old when ADR

emerged. During those eight years, coordinators have developed several strategies and skills to earn the acceptance and trust of the community we serve—the very culturally diverse city of Toronto. Some of the families referred to FGC are immigrants who struggle with English, or in some cases are refugees whose residence papers are still in process. It is our experience that some families do perceive the confidentiality agreement as a binding legal document, and therefore worry about signing it without consulting with their lawyers, or making sure that they clearly understand its purpose.

As part of the FGC coordinator's work preparing the family, the use of interpreters is the key to the process of introducing the confidentiality agreement and subsequently widening the circle.

In Toronto, our practice is to use a

verbal agreement on confidentiality at the beginning of the preparation process and on the day of the conference the family members sign the confidentiality agreement.

To understand and respect the needs and culture of the families we work with in Toronto, we first need to build their trust. In order to do this we need to ensure that there are no barriers to communication of information, that fears and anxieties are discussed and worked through, and that families understand the voluntary nature of their participation in FGC. We hope that by providing some of the elements for trust that family members will sign the confidentiality agreement without any hesitation.

Inshirah Hassabu
FGC Coordinator, Project of Toronto