

FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCING

Family group conferencing involves the community of people most affected by the crime - family and friends of the victim and family and friends of the offender - along with the victim and the offender in deciding the resolution of a criminal incident. These affected parties are brought together by a trained facilitator to discuss how people have been impacted or harmed by an incident and how that harm might be repaired. Offenders must admit to the offense. Participation by all involved is voluntary. The trained facilitator contacts the victim and offender to explain the process, invites them to the conference and helps them identify other people who have been affected by the crime and key members of their support systems who are also invited to participate in the conference.

The conference often begins with the offender describing the incident, and subsequently allows each participant to describe the impact of the incident on his/her life. Through these narrations the offender is faced with the human impact of the behavior on the victim, those close to the victim, and on the offender's own family and friends. The victim has the opportunity to express feelings and ask questions about the incident. Following thorough discussion of the impact of the behavior on those present, the victim is asked to identify desired outcomes from the conference. In this way, the victim has an opportunity to shape the obligations placed on the offender. All participants may contribute to the problem-solving process of determining how the offender might best repair the harm of the behavior. The session ends with all the participants signing an agreement which outlines the expectations and commitments to which they have agreed.

Family group conferencing developed from a Maori tradition in New Zealand where it is now used for most juvenile offenses. The process was adapted by police in Australia and then introduced in the United States where it is being used by police, schools and probation. Family group conferencing is most often used as a diversion from the court process for juveniles, but can be used after adjudication to address unresolved emotional issues or to determine the specifics of restitution. The process has been used in a few adult cases. A wide variety of offenses have been resolved through family group conferencing, including theft, arson, minor assaults, drug offenses and vandalism.

GOALS

1. Provide a setting in which the emotional as well as the physical and economic effects of the incident can be explored and addressed.
2. Provide an opportunity for the victim to be directly involved in the discussion of the offense and in decisions regarding appropriate obligations placed on the offender.
3. Increase the offender's awareness of the human impact of the behavior.
4. Provide an opportunity for the offender to take full responsibility for the behavior.
5. Engage the collective responsibility and accountability of the offender's support system for making amends and shaping future behavior.
6. Provide an opportunity for the victim to reconnect to key community support.
7. Provide an opportunity for the offender to reconnect to key community support through responsible action.

IMPLEMENTATION

The family group conferencing process has been implemented in schools, police departments, probation offices and neighborhood groups. Facilitation can be done by volunteers or paid employees. Skills training is required for facilitators.

Some family group conferencing programs are implemented within a single agency, while others are developed through the collaborative involvement of the school, law enforcement, the court and corrections to develop a coordinated approach which uses family group conferencing at multiple levels and encourages responding at the earliest point possible.

LESSONS LEARNED

Research in New Zealand found far more frequent and active involvement of families in the justice process as a result of family group conferencing. Referrals to juvenile court and commitments to correctional institutions were dramatically reduced in New Zealand. Preliminary program evaluations in the United States indicate high levels of victim satisfaction with the family group conferencing process and high rates of compliance by offenders with the agreements.

Practitioners observe a reduction in fear for many victims who participate in a family group conference. When used as a diversion from court, family group conferencing provides a much speedier resolution of the incident. Family group conferencing builds community skills in conflict resolution and participatory decisionmaking.

A successful family group conference distinguishes between the person and the behavior by disapproving the behavior while expressing support and caring for the person who offended.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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