Overview

The restorative justice philosophy incorporates a wide range of front-end diversion programs, such as victim offender mediation, sentencing circles, and victim impact panels. Family group conferencing (FGC) is another alternative to formal court processing that promotes a restorative justice principle of rebuilding disrupted relationships.

FGC originated as a conflict resolution technique used by the Maoris, New Zealand’s indigenous population, in the mid-1980s. New Zealand’s legislature formalized this tribal ritual and its emphasis on family responsibility by passing the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act in 1989. The Act made family group conferencing the key process in resolving child protection and delinquency cases (except homicide). FGC pilot projects appeared in the United States as early as 1990.

The Process

The process begins once the juvenile offender admits his or her guilt. A trained facilitator brings together the affected parties to address the harm done and determine appropriate sanctions that help restore the community and victim while holding the offender accountable. FGC differs from other diversion programs because it uses a more flexible and inclusive definition of victim. Group participants include the offender and crime victim, their families (even extended family members) and supporters, and community members. Participation is voluntary.

In this safe and controlled environment, victims can freely express their feelings about the crime and ask questions about it. Offenders gain an understanding of the consequences of their behavior, are held accountable for their actions, and must repair the harm they have caused. Family members are asked to take responsibility for helping the offender. This is especially important because family dynamics may contribute to juvenile delinquency. Group members can pool their resources to help the offender reintegrate into the community.
Groups may use schools, community centers, and churches as meeting sites. Restitution is a common sanction. There are also police- and school-based family group conferencing models that use police officers or school officials as the facilitators.

In addition to diverting delinquency cases from the juvenile justice system, FGC can resolve child welfare cases. In families where the parent is at-risk of maltreating a child, family members, friends, and clergy meet to formulate a plan. Participants may decide that the best way to care for the child is to place him or her with a family member. In other situations, family members may agree to help the at-risk parent improve the situation.

**Juvenile Justice System Resources**

- **Family Group Conferencing: Implications for Crime Victims**
  

  This document, prepared for the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office for Victims of Crime, discusses family group conferencing’s potential pitfalls and opportunities and its impact on crime victims. Five potential dangers are identified: inadequate preparation; victim insensitivity and coercion; young offenders feeling intimidated by adults; lack of neutrality; and the process’ inflexibility. FGC’s advantages include: the involvement of more people in the community; the acknowledgement of a wider range of victims; more follow-up support for victims; and the importance placed on family.

  To order, contact: Center for Restorative Justice and Mediation; School of Social Work, University of Minnesota; 383 McNeal Hall; 1985 Buford; St. Paul, MN 55108; (612) 624-4923; fax (612) 625-8224; ctr4rjm@che2.che.umn.edu; or http://ssw.che.umn.edu/ctr4rjm.

- **Family Group Conferencing Comes to the U.S.: A Comparison with Victim-Offender Mediation**
  

  This article compares family group conferencing (FGC) to victim offender mediation (VOM), a more popular program in the U.S. and Europe. Viewed as a natural expansion of VOM, FGC: involves more people in the community; allows a wider range of people to express their emotions about the impact of the crime and to assist the victim and offender’s reintegration into the community; and makes more deliberate distinctions in the meeting between condemning the offense vs. condemning the offender.

  Contact the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, University of Nevada, PO Box 8970, Reno, NV 89507; (775)-784-6012 for more information.

- **Family Conferencing and Juvenile Justice: The Way Forward or Misplaced Optimism?**
  

  This document is a collection of papers presented at a one-day seminar called “Family Group Conferencing: Debating the Issues.” The Australian
and New Zealand Society of Criminology and the Criminology Department at The University of Melbourne sponsored this seminar to give both proponents and skeptics of FGC a forum in which to express their opinions. The United States’ juvenile justice system is not the focus.

To download this publication, go to: www.aic.gov.au/publications/lcj/family/index.html.

- **Client Evaluation of Family Group Conferencing in 12 Sites in 1st Judicial District of Minnesota**


In 1998, the Center for Restorative Justice and Mediation finished its evaluation of crime victim and offender satisfaction with family group conferencing in 12 Minnesota communities. Results indicate that client satisfaction was high: 93% of crime victims and 94% of juvenile offenders were satisfied with the juvenile justice system’s handling of their case. Most cases involved shoplifting (60%). This document’s appendix has copies of the pre-conference victim and offender surveys; post-conference victim and offender interview schedules; and post-conference support person interview schedule.

To order, contact: Center for Restorative Justice and Mediation; School of Social Work, University of Minnesota; 383 McNeal Hall; 1985 Buford; St. Paul, Minnesota 55108; (612) 624-4923; fax (612) 625-8224; or ctr4rjm@che2.che.umn.edu. Download it from: http://ssw.che.umn.edu/ctr4rjm.

- **Dakota County, Minnesota: Repairing Harm and Holding Juveniles Accountable**


This article describes Dakota County, Minnesota’s Balanced and Restorative Justice initiatives. The county has a crime repair crew, a victim restitution fund, victim offender meetings, and family group conferencing. Their FGC program often combines community service, a written apology, and restitution as the sanction.

To order, contact: Juvenile Justice Update, Civic Research Institute, 4490 U.S. Route 27, P.O. Box 585, Kingston, NJ 08528; (609) 683-4450.

**Child Protection Resources**

- **Family Group Decision Making: A Promising New Approach for Child Welfare**


Family group conference and family unity meetings are the two primary models of family group decision making used worldwide. When a child welfare agency or judge or private agency determines that a child needs care and protection, a care and protection coordinator arranges a family group conference. The parents, extended family members, close friends, and tribal elders (where appropriate) are invited to participate. Other professionals attend the conference, but the family makes the decisions. Family unit meetings do not focus on whether the child is being abused. Instead, they are designed for brainstorming options for the care
and protection of the child. The family, not a care and protection coordinator, invites the participants.

To order, contact the American Humane Association, 63 Inverness Drive East, Englewood, CO 80112-5117; phone: (303) 792-9900; fax: (303) 792-5333.

- **Family Group Conferences in New Zealand**


This article discusses family group conferencing in New Zealand, a process that involves extended family in key decisions in abuse and neglect cases. Sections of the article focus on how family group conferences work, their legal origin, the political impetus for family group conferences, their effect on out-of-home placements, the effect on the role of social workers, attorneys, judges, and the family, the effect on transracial placements, delinquency cases, and questions about FGC.

To order a copy, contact: National CASA Association; 2722 Eastlake Avenue East; Suite 200; Seattle, WA 98102-3143; (206) 328-8588.

- **The Santa Clara County Family Conference Model Year One Process Evaluation Report**


This report is the result of a process evaluation of Santa Clara County’s Family Conference Model (FCM) after one year of implementation. FCM is a community-based alternative to the traditional child welfare system. The report’s charts depict the similarities and differences between several family group conferencing models, including Santa Clara County’s program. FCM brings family members into the decision-making process to plan for the care and protection of children.

To obtain a copy, contact: Walter R. McDonald & Associates, Inc., 7311 Greenhaven Drive, Suite 273, Sacramento, CA 95831.

- **Family Group Conferencing: General Resources**

- **Family Group Conferences: Perspectives on Policy and Practice**


This book, which is part of the “Australian Studies in Criminology” series, is a collection of papers on the use of family group conferences in the juvenile justice and child protection systems. There are papers on the origin, development, and uses of the technique in New Zealand, Australia, Great Britain, and Canada, along with one paper on the use of family group decision-making in Oregon.

To order, contact the Willow Tree Press at: PO Box 249, Monsey, NY 10952; phone: (914) 354-9139.

- **New Zealand Social Work Tactic Hits Shore, Makes Waves**

This article traces the roots and philosophical origins of family group conferencing from New Zealand to the United States. The process’ strengths and weakness are outlined as well as the challenges of conducting an outcome evaluation on this type of program. In a sidebar, the author describes her firsthand observations of a family group conference in Santa Clara County, CA.

To order, contact Youth Today at: 1200 17th Street, NW, 4th Floor, Washington, DC 20036-3006; phone: (202) 785-0764 or www.youthtoday.org.

On-Line Links

- **Prison Fellowship International**
  
  http://www.prisonfellowshipintl.org/

Prison Fellowship International (PFI) is the global association of national Prison Fellowship organizations, Christian ministries that respond to the needs of prisoners, ex-prisoners, crime victims, and other individuals affected by crime. A section of the PFI web site is dedicated to restorative justice. The web site has information on the history, implementation, description, elements, and evaluation of family group conferencing and an annotated bibliography.

- **Center for Restorative Justice and Mediation**
  
  http://ssw.che.umn.edu/ctr4rjm

The Center for Restorative Justice and Mediation at the University of Minnesota’s School of Social Work provides technical assistance, training, and research on restorative justice practices and principles. Their web site has five sections on resources, training, the Center’s staff, the Balanced and Restorative Justice project, and links to other sites. Visitors can download the full text of publications on restorative justice, including reports describing family group conferencing.

This summary is a product of the National Center for Juvenile Justice, the research division of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. Summaries provide information on topics relevant to the Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grants (JAIBG) Program administered by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. For more information about this and other summaries contact us at:

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For information about the JAIBG program, contact:
Development Services Group, Inc. at 1-877-GO-JAIBG (465-2424) or www.dsgonline.com

This summary was supported by funds under grant #98-JB-VX-0102 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent any official position, policy, or view of the U.S. Department of Justice.