

# Supporting Pupils, Schools and Families

## An Evaluation of the Hampshire Family Group Conferences in Education Project

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Hampshire County Council has been at the forefront of the development of Family Group Conferences in the UK, and has now had over 400 referrals for its innovative use of FGCs in education settings. These Conferences have been designed to help young people aged from 5-15 with significant problems of behaviour and attendance at school. This study, undertaken by the University of Sheffield, reports on 50 of the Conferences that were carried out in 1999 and 2000.

**The Family Group Conferences were well received by families, young people and professionals, and in over half of them the problems improved, even in particularly serious cases. There was no significant difference in outcomes for behavioural and for attendance problems. There were positive effects even when desired outcomes were not achieved. Changes were generally maintained over the months following the Conference.**

- A very wide variety of families were involved, with no particular factors seeming to indicate unsuitability for the model, although younger children (under eleven) may be particularly successful.
- The FGC led to a significant increase in the number of young people attending school for at least 50% of the school timetable.
- Five non-attenders had re-engaged with the education system - reintegration was most often achieved through a change of placement, although many young people with low attendance remained low attenders.
- A fifth of the schools reported positive changes in the young person's confidence and attitude to school, and a quarter of the schools reported improvements in home-school relationships, with many commenting on the value of having a greater insight into the home situation.
- Where other agencies had been engaged in the FGC, the meeting had often increased liaison and joint working.
- Eighty per cent of the schools thought the FGC had been worth the time and effort.
- Ninety per cent of schools said they would recommend it to others.
- Ninety per cent of family members would also recommend the model to others, and the young people themselves were positive about the FGC model.

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES  
& HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

## THE VIEWS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

All participants were asked their view of the meeting and of the plan made.

### Family members' views

- 82% felt they had been properly prepared for the FGC.
- 90% were happy about the way it was set up.
- 90% or more said the right people were there, that it was at a convenient time and a convenient place.
- Most felt happy about the way the meeting went: they felt that they had enough information to make a plan, they valued being left alone to make a plan, and they were pleasantly surprised by the school's commitment, or by the degree of friendliness between the participants:

*“agreeably surprised by the genuine interest and kindness of the headteacher”*

- 76% felt they had been able to say what they wanted, but a significant minority - 21% - had not felt able to participate fully. Two FGCs in particular were less inclusive, and these strongly influenced the overall figures. However, most family members (82%) felt that their views had been listened to.
- Family members particularly liked the way the FGC brought people together to share views in an informal, open and non-threatening manner to support the child:

*“I felt there was a lot of people willing to support the young person”*

*“more came out of the meeting because of the informal atmosphere”*

- Some of the more negative aspects of the meeting related to the lack of support or respect from some professionals and from some family group members, and the difficulties of getting the young person's views heard in an unpressurised way.
- Family members were very positive about the model - 91% said they would ask for an FGC again and 89% said they would recommend it to others.

### Professionals' views

- The FGC was seen as different from other meetings in that it involved a larger family group and gave greater responsibility to the family, with the young person present. It was seen as less formal, with all relevant information being valued and discussed openly.
- The great majority of the professionals thought the model was good, or at least worth a try; 10% were reserving judgement to see what effect the meeting would have. Nearly all (68 of 71) professionals said they would refer families again.

### Young people's views

- The young people were often unsure about the meeting beforehand, with most feeling worried that they would be asked difficult questions or be 'got at'.
- Three quarters of the young people were surprised by the meeting. For most this was because of the interaction between the participants, the way they talked and laughed and generally were careful to include the young person:

*“they hardly speak directly to me at school, they did much more at the meeting”*

- The great majority felt that they had been able to participate - they thought it was fair, that they were listened to, and that their views had been heard.
- A small but significant group, a quarter of the young people, had felt unable to say what they wanted, because the adults had not allowed them space to do so.
- Advocates for the young people identified by the coordinators were sometimes reported to have been very helpful, but in some cases had not fulfilled their role. A few young people would have liked more help in putting their views across.
- 81% of the young people said that it felt good to have had the FGC and all but one thought that it was a good way to try to sort out problems at school.

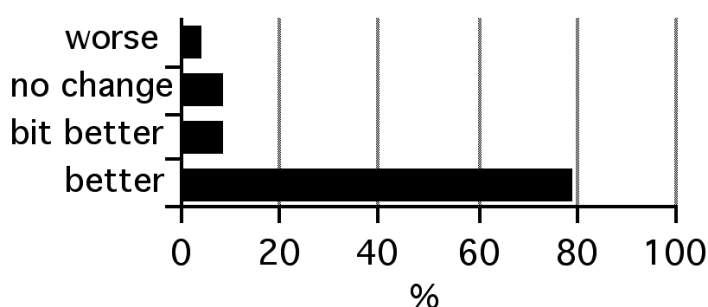
## THE PLANS

- A plan was agreed by the participants in 95% of the FGCs.
- All plans included help and support for the young person from the family group.
- In half the plans the young people agreed to change aspects of their behaviour.
- 58% of the plans made specific mention of improving home-school links.
- Two thirds of the plans included actions by the school, such as finding a mentor for the young person, time out strategies, extra help/timetable changes.
- The lack of involvement of a third of the schools in the plans appeared important to outcomes, as the project progressed much more effort was made to involve them, and involvement is now happening in every Conference.
- Most plans named other agencies as sources of support - often the Education Welfare service, or child and adolescent mental health services.

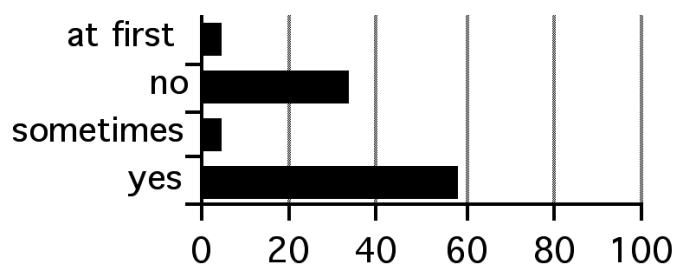
## SHORTER TERM OUTCOMES

- Around a half of the children showed improvement in respect of both attendance and behavioural problems at one month and a significant number of children - perhaps between a third and a half - maintained the benefits at six months.
- A higher proportion of the younger children showed positive changes i.e. the model seems to have more impact on children under the age of 11.
- Older children are more likely to improve their attendance than their behaviour.
- Behavioural changes are generally slow and incremental but can nevertheless make a significant difference, while changes in attendance patterns can be dramatic.

Reports of changes at school



Reports of positive changes at home



## LONGER TERM OUTCOMES

Outcomes were examined over a six to twelve month period.

### Behavioural problems

- Although the pattern of subsequent exclusion was mixed, of the 36 young people referred with behavioural problems, nine young people with previous exclusions had no further exclusions and a further seven had a reduced number of exclusions. Some of these were quite dramatic changes indicating that permanent exclusion probably had been avoided through the FGC.
- Almost all those with no exclusions prior to the FGC remained without exclusions.

### Attendance problems

- Of the 24 young people referred with attendance problems, five non-attenders had re-engaged with the education system with 70% attendance or more and three others had significantly increased their attendance.
- Many of the young people with low attendance before the FGC maintained their low attendance rate, and four showed a significant reduction in their attendance.
- The FGC had a significant effect in increasing the number of young people attending school for 50% or more of the school timetable.

### Special needs

- Overall the FGC had no significant effect on the special needs status of the young people.

### Professional views on outcomes

- Half of the schools made positive comments about the effect of the FGC on the young person, the family, home-school relationships and their own understanding of the situation:

*“he wants to succeed more”*

*“family have adjusted routines at home to help achieve a consistent approach”*

*“it took us from the brink of permanent exclusion to a more stable cooperative relationship with the family”*

*“it has assisted in the liaison between school and outside agencies”*

### Value of the FGC model

- The FGC model provided notable successes for half of the families, appeared to have marginal impact for a quarter, and did not affect deterioration for a final quarter. Improvements did not appear linked to the age of the child, number attending the FGC, the content of the plan or people's satisfaction with it. Predicting in advance which FGCs will be successful appears very difficult.

Referring schools valued the FGC even where the outcomes were not as hoped:

- 80% of the school staff responding thought the FGC had been worth the time and effort.
- 90% said they would recommend it to other schools.

## THE YOUNG PEOPLE REFERRED

Referrals were accepted from schools and Education Welfare staff of children aged between 6 and 14 who were experiencing serious problems in school. Of the first 60 referrals accepted by the project 44 had been held by the end of the evaluation period in June 2000. For the remaining 16, the process was started but did not result in an FGC. There is no clear pattern to suggest why some referrals did not reach FGC.

Of the referrals resulting in an FGC:

- the boys outnumbered the girls, and most of the younger children were boys;
- the boys tended to be referred for behaviour problems, girls for attendance problems;
- 64% of those with behaviour problems had had fixed term exclusions;
- 33% of those with attendance problems were not attending school at all;
- 33% of those with attendance problems were missing 50% or more of school.

Over 50% lived in single parent households, almost 75% had parents who had separated, and a significant minority were living in households affected by disability.

## THE CONFERENCES IN PRACTICE

The FGC process involves preparation to convene a meeting at a time and place convenient for the family at which participants feel able to engage and contribute. The meeting has three stages - information giving, private family time, and agreeing the plan (see THE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE MODEL on the back page).

The time, location, and process of the FGC followed a broadly similar pattern to those in other settings (Marsh and Crow, 1998). Coordinators spent an average of 25 hours in convening an FGC, in a period of around two months. Many FGCs were held just after school, a quarter were held in school hours and almost a third were held in the evening. They took an average of two and a half hours, and all but four of the FGCs were held in the community. Seven or eight family members were invited to the meeting and usually six attended. The smallest family group was two and the largest 18, with the child's main parent/carer being present at each conference. There was a father figure present at over half the conferences, the majority of these being the natural father even though in two thirds of cases the parents were separated. Thirty nine of the 41 children attended their conference - two chose not to attend.

Coordinators identified advocates for the young person in half of the FGCs, but reports of their value at the meeting were varied and the issue of support to enable the young person's view to be heard is a matter of continuing debate.

On average three or four professionals were invited to attend, and three did attend, with the majority being education staff.

**Marsh, P. and Crow, G. (1998) *Family Group Conferences in Child Welfare*, Oxford: Blackwell Science**

## THE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE MODEL

The Family Group Conference is a model for decision making in children's services which involves the wider family in partnership with agencies. The Conferences are convened by an independent coordinator, who arranges a meeting of extended family and professionals in order to consider the needs of the child and to agree a suitable plan to meet those needs.

Four key stages are involved: preparation before the meeting (invitation, discussion, briefing), first stage of meeting (information giving by all), second stage of meeting (private family planning), third stage of meeting (all agreeing on a plan of action).

The process involves the following key elements:

- Clear jargon free information about concerns and resources.
- A wide and inclusive concept of family.
- An independent coordinator.
- Respect and support for family plan, unless there is risk of significant harm to the child.
- Building on family strengths, and negotiation of services.
- Maximum flexibility, for example in setting and style, within the basic model.

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

- Hampshire will build on the success with continuing service, now over 400 referrals.
- Attention will be given to the difficult question 'what is a priority for an FGC?'
- The continuing experimental nature of the work will be supported, for example by considering other areas, such as a child experiencing significant loss in attainment, and children with special educational needs.

## METHODS AND DATA

The study covered 36 FGCs in detail (for practice and views data), 24 FGCs provided follow up material up to six months, and an additional sample allowed 54 FGCs (with 58 young people) to have follow up information collected for up to one year. The report concentrates on the 50 young people followed up for six months or one year (24 with attendance problems and 36 with behavioural problems). The young people were aged between 5 and 15, with boys outnumbering girls due to the greater number of young boys referred with behavioural problems. Views were obtained from: 86 family members representing 75% of the families, 71 professionals who had attended 95% of the FGCs, and 75% of the young people. Interviews were held with 14 senior professionals involved with implementation. As far as possible, objective measures of change have been used. Behaviour problems have been categorised as improved, the same or worse depending on the number of days of fixed-term exclusions before and after the FGC. For attendance problems, a change in attendance rate of more than 10% was counted. Where both problems were of concern, improvement in one or both was counted as positive.

## RESEARCHERS

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## FINDINGS AND REPORT

Copies of this 'Summary of Findings', and of the report, can be obtained from:

Elaine Edwards, Winchester Local Education Office, Clarendon House, Romsey Road, Winchester, Hants SO22 5PW  
*'Please enclose £3.00 (inc. p&p) for the report and make cheques payable to 'Hampshire County Council'*

Alternatively you can download the full report and 'Summary of Findings' at:

[www.shef.ac.uk/~fwpg](http://www.shef.ac.uk/~fwpg) (> Findings: Family Group Conferences) and also at:

[www.hants.gov.uk/TC/edews/fgchome.html](http://www.hants.gov.uk/TC/edews/fgchome.html)