

**Supporting Pupils, Schools and Families:**

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

## Acknowledgements

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A web version of this report and the 'Summary of Findings' can be accessed 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)

The following research findings on FGCs by Professor Marsh's team are available at [www.shef.ac.uk/~fwpg](http://www.shef.ac.uk/~fwpg)

- Family Partners – A Study of Family Group Conferences
- Family Group Conferences in Haringey
- Family Group Conferences in Youth Justice

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# **I. INITIATION AND IMPLEMENTATION**

Hampshire County Council Social Services Department was one of the first UK agencies to promote the use of Family Group Conferences (FGCs) as a means of involving wider family networks in the support of children and young people. They took their first referrals in 1994. The model originates in New Zealand and has now been subject to significant development and testing (Marsh and Crow, 1998).

In 1998 a bid for education funding by the Principal Welfare Officer allowed the setting up of 'Education FGCs' to be developed. The Conferences try to help young people experiencing some difficulty in school, but as this report will show there are often family issues and welfare concerns as well.

The report evaluates the work of the Education FGC project from its first implementation through the experience of the young people many months after their FGC.

Hampshire LEA continues to be at the forefront of providing Family Group Conferences to young people and their families through the education system, and has, since the start of the project, had over 400 referrals.

## **Process of initiating the project**

Family Group Conferences were first established in child welfare work in Hampshire in 1993. The steering group for this child welfare project included a senior education welfare officer, and the idea of using the model to plan for children having difficulties in the education system stemmed from his involvement. Coordinators in the child welfare project who had a background in education were also interested in using the model in education. Work was then undertaken on a plan for a Family Group Conference Project in education, including costings. This work was not taken forward at that time for a number of reasons although interest from the Child Welfare Project Development Officer (then the Commissioning Officer for FGCs in Social Services) and from within the EWO service remained high.

In 1997 changes in the local and national political context provided the opportunity to take the idea forward. Discussions took place between the Principal Education Welfare Officer and the Commissioning Officer for FGCs in Social Services, and the former wrote a bid for money from the central government Standards Fund for a project aiming to reduce school exclusions. At the same time, work went ahead in informing headteachers and education officers about the model and the potential project. Thus when the funding was

approved in January 1998, the education committee was able to agree matched funding, and headteachers were quickly recruited to a steering committee.

The steering committee's first tasks were to start agreeing the content of the project and to appoint a project manager in June 1998.

### ***Context of the project***

The history of the project to some extent indicates the context in which the project has been implemented. The main factors supporting the establishment of the project were:

- interest in and commitment to the FGC model from practitioners and senior officers within the county, as evidenced by the International Conference held there
- FGCs being used widely in child welfare work supported by the Commissioning Officer, and the expertise this gave to guide and support a new project
- positive feedback from the child welfare work, particularly in the EWO service
- prior experience and training amongst staff groups
- supportive senior staff within education
- central government concern about education, particularly school exclusions
- the high rate of school exclusions in Hampshire and the desire to address this

### **Getting established**

The project proper started with the appointment of the project manager, who then had responsibility to agree the detail of the project plans and implement them. A steering group with representatives from three schools, and eight agencies played a key role in the next stages of the work, including its evaluation.

### ***The criteria and process for referrals***

The project decided to focus on children aged 10-13 in the last two years of primary school and the first two years of secondary school. This was in order to focus on preventing school exclusion and addressing problems relatively early in the child's school career. Referral could be any problem relating to school such as behavioural difficulties, non-attendance, school phobia, bullying or being bullied.

The project 'covered' six secondary schools, six primary schools and four special schools.

Referral to the project could be initiated by anyone concerned about a child falling within the criteria at the focus schools, but referral would need the full agreement of the school, indicated by the headteacher signing the referral form.

The school was thus showing their interest and involvement in the process and a willingness to negotiate over the family's plan. Referral forms also committed them to participating in the project evaluation, which involves completing quite comprehensive monitoring forms.

### ***Fit with other procedures***

The Family Group Conference is not likely to be taking place in isolation. In other words, in any particular case, other services may have been involved already and would remain or become involved. The FGC process therefore needs to interface with other services and procedures. In addition to developing a fit with each school, it was felt to be important to develop agreed links between the project and the EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) service, Exclusion Officers and the Education Welfare Service. Procedures were drawn up addressing the interface between the project and the EWO service, and other services developed similar guidelines.

### ***Training and information***

Training for the project was facilitated by the fact that the county had been running FGCs for a number of years and had a multi-agency programme in place. It was probably particularly helped by the fact that the part time project manager also held a post as multi-agency trainer on this programme. Thus many of the EWOs, school nurses and others would not only have been aware of the FGC model but would have had some training on it and would have met the project manager in this context.

Working for the project, the project manager organised a number of events, focusing on the staff in the initial project area.

Issues commonly raised at these events included liaison between agencies over referral and over agreeing the plan; ways to ensure the plan is implemented; and the implications for practice for each school and agency.

### ***Leaflets***

In addition to the events and meetings arranged, the project manager worked in consultation with coordinators, schools and others to produce good quality information leaflets: *a guide for family members*, *a guide for children and young people* and *a guide for professionals*.

### ***Coordinator employment and conditions***

One of the hallmarks of the FGC process is the use of independent coordinators to convene the meetings.

### ***Recruitment and training***

Coordinators for the project were recruited by asking for expressions of interest from independent coordinators already trained and working for the child welfare and youth justice projects in Hampshire and Southampton. In this way, 16

coordinators who have experience of Family Group Conference work made themselves available to the project in its early stages. Most had some familiarity with educational settings through their work and family histories; those interviewed did not think it was necessary to have additional training in educational procedures and systems. However the project manager did undertake some training in the first meetings held with the coordinators, focusing on the process of writing up the family's plan and on their role in the project evaluation.

### *Support systems*

Regular support group meetings (every two months) are run by the project manager so that coordinators meet and discuss education referrals. Whilst some coordinators clearly appreciated the opportunity to meet others and to learn from sharing experiences of coordinating, others placed less emphasis on this type of meeting. Concern was expressed that although attendance at support meetings was considered to be part of a coordinator's work, some coordinators did not seem to attend ever, and others attended very intermittently so that the group was fragmented. This raised anxieties about monitoring the quality of coordinators' work and the extent to which they are consistently working with the principles and ethos of the model. Some felt that there needed to be better quality support and supervision, with individual as well as peer supervision, and with an emphasis on developing a coherent support/supervision group.

### *Pay and conditions*

The coordinators in the project are paid a fee per conference, which includes attendance at support meetings.

### *Lead-in time*

The 'lead-in' time from the appointment of the project manager to the first referrals were six months (the first FGC was held in January 1999). This is short when compared to the experience of other FGC projects. No doubt the positive context contributed to this, particularly the experience of the model within the county already. The following is a summary of the factors that respondents (fourteen senior staff involved with the project, including three headteachers and six coordinators) thought had affected the implementation process.

## **What helped and hindered the implementation process?**

Those interviewed suggested a number of positive contributing factors.

### **1. The project manager**

The appointment of a project manager who was already familiar with the model, and had experienced it from different perspectives, helped greatly.

### **2. Involvement of schools**

Headteachers were seen as key collaborators in the project, as decision makers and referrers, and were involved in the project from the start. Their



representation on the steering group was good, with a secondary head chairing the group.

3. The clarity of the referrals process

Experience of the model in child welfare work helped the steering group to develop referral criteria with a very clear 'contract' as to what was expected and required from the referring school.

4. Good communication systems

Informing and involving the schools and others was greatly helped by good communication systems which included a newsletter sent to 1000 people, regular email contact, and a 'slot' in headteachers' area meetings.

There were also a few factors that had caused some concern and needed to be addressed in the implementation process. These included the difficulty of engaging social services (despite its involvement with FGCs), a need to focus on one area because of the size of the county, and the need to budget to continue FGCs after the pilot phase.

## **Learning from the experience of FGCs in the early stages**

Coordinators were asked about their experience of working with education referrals and the ways in which this differed from other Family Group Conference work. Coordinators felt that the skills needed were the same as in any other FGC work, so that the experience with these referrals was generally very similar to that with other referrals. An educational background or training was not thought to be necessary but some familiarity with schools and education systems was thought to be helpful. There were, however, some differences noted in the way the participants responded to the meetings, which may be important for the project.

### ***Engaging the family***

Some coordinators reported having greater difficulty in engaging family members in the FGC process. However, beyond the pilot phase, engagement has proved more successful than in comparative child welfare conferences. In the pilot stage this was thought to be because some families don't see themselves as having a role in resolving educational problems, taking the attitude that 'school should sort that out' or because family members don't see the educational problem as a crisis and therefore do not see a need to become involved. This may mean that family members are not so prepared to attend the meeting, particularly if it means travelling a distance. With experience, the project has shown that these issues can be successfully overcome.

### ***The role of teachers***

Teachers were reported to be enthusiastic about the model, and to have little difficulty with the underlying principles, but it was appreciated that this may be because their view of inclusive education had lead them to engage with the

project. Generally they seemed to be willing and able to be open and honest with families, although they may need quite a bit of help from the coordinator in preparing for the meeting. As with other professionals, it was thought that teachers might be disappointed if the outcome of the meeting was not their preferred or imagined outcome, and that there may be the difficulty of them having very high expectations of resolving a difficult and often longstanding problem.

It was felt that the teacher's role was different to that of a 'case' worker, in that they were providing a universal service with little choice, but had less responsibility for the child's welfare. At the same time, it was remarked that the quality of the teacher's relationship with the young person was very different to that of the social worker with a child. The teacher, as information giver, is more familiar with the child but has a position of power, and this could affect the ability of the meeting to hear the voice of the young person. (Although it was also pointed out that the power relationship may be similar to that of a social worker to a parent.)

### ***Types of referral***

The coordinators felt that the issues being dealt with were less serious and more straightforward than those they met through child welfare referrals. In this way the FGC was seen as more of a preventative process. This did not mean that they were less committed to the meeting or that the families were necessarily less motivated to resolve the problem, but that there was less stress and less of a feeling of crisis. Clearly this links to the possible difficulty in engaging family members.

### ***Resources available***

The other issue raised by many of the coordinators was the difficulty they experienced in accessing information about services and resources to help the family.

It sometimes seemed to be necessary to ask education service information givers about entitlement to educational services in order to ascertain what was available, and there was a difficulty for schools in sustaining any specialist resources or funding offered. It was thought in the early stages that scarcity of resources may lead some schools to think that the FGC itself is an intervention so that other available resources can be directed to another child.

In addition to difficulties in accessing resources within the education system, there were difficulties in accessing other services as well. There were few family support services available, particularly for families experiencing education-based problems, and it was found to be difficult to get social services involved even when there seemed to be clear care and protection issues requiring social work intervention. Coordinators were therefore having to work harder in this project to engage information givers in offering resources, and felt that there may be a

greater expectation of and dependence on the family producing extra resources to resolve the problem.

## **Lessons from implementation**

The relatively smooth implementation process and positive reactions to the early Conferences gave the project a good foundation on which to build in the future. There were a number of issues needing to be addressed, some of which the project manager and the steering group put considerable thought and effort into.

1. *Balancing the demand for Family Group Conferences with the resources available.* The project began undertaking consultation meetings across the county to enable referrals to be made from any school and funding of £66,000 p.a. with management time agreed for this, was obtained in the second full year.
2. *Balancing the aim of preventing difficulties by early intervention with the demand for referrals of children in an older age range.* Serious difficulties in school often arise with 14 and 15 year old pupils, who are currently excluded from the project by the referral criteria. The steering group debated the advantages and disadvantages of changing the referral criteria, both in respect of their original aims and of resource implications.
3. *Finding ways to offer resources to families* so that the success of the model is not dependent on the family alone producing extra resources. This entailed considerable thought and negotiation with service providers, particularly in clarifying roles with the social services and possibly in stimulating new services. If families are not offered support services, the model may come to be seen by families not as a partnership but a pressurising process.
4. *Providing efficient, good quality, supportive supervision to coordinators, and considering the issue of non-attendance for supervision.* This needed to be done in liaison with other projects employing those same coordinators and is part of a wider debate within the county relating to the number of FGC projects and the possibility of unifying them in some way.



## II. PROCESS AND EARLY OUTCOMES

This section will describe the 37 FGCs held up to the end of May 2000 in respect of the children referred, their families and their difficulties; the FGC process; the views of the process expressed by the participant young people, family members and professionals; the content of the plans made; and the short, medium outcomes (the long-term outcomes will be discussed in the following section). Consideration will also be given to the referrals that were accepted but which were not in the event convened.

### **Data collection process**

Forms for data collection were designed in conjunction with the project manager and the steering group to meet the needs of the project and to enable comparison with data from other FGC projects. A number of forms were designed:

- Conference Data Form for the coordinator to record the conference process
- short questionnaires for all the participants to record their views
- schedule for interviewing the young people concerned shortly after the FGC
- monitoring and follow-up questionnaires for the schools to record aspects of the child's work and behaviour in school at one month, six months and one year

The project manager was responsible for ensuring that the data was collected and for forwarding the data to Sheffield for analysis.

### ***The referral***

Referrals were made to the project manager on a referral form which requested information about the child, the child's family, the nature of the problem and the other professionals already involved. In each case the headteacher of the school concerned was required to sign the referral form to indicate a commitment to the FGC model and a willingness to engage with the research process.

Referrals were initiated by the education welfare service and/or the school itself, but often a discussion would be held with the project manager before referral to agree it was appropriate. There were no restrictions as to the type of problem to be addressed, but the project was aiming to prevent serious action having to be taken such as exclusion from school or prosecution for non-attendance. To maintain a focus on prevention, the project agreed to target junior school and early secondary school pupils.

Between December 1998 and the end of 1999, a total of 62 referrals were received by the project. These were processed as follows:

39 FGCs held by the end of May 2000, data available on 37 for this report  
5 FGCs to be held in June 2000, to be included in outcomes follow-up sample (which had a final total of 54 FGCs)  
16 children referred and allocated to a Coordinator but the FGC not convened  
2 referrals deemed inappropriate due to the age of the young person

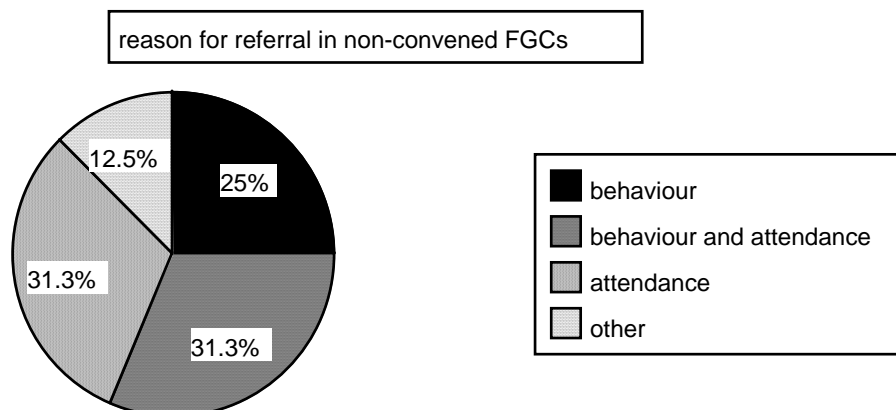
### ***Rate of referrals***

Referrals came to the project steadily over the time of this study and most months saw an FGC being held, with the exception of August. This consistency was the result of a considerable amount of work by the project manager to engage schools in the project and maintain the profile of the model within education. The number of FGCs held within the first year is high compared to the experience of other FGC projects.

### ***FGCs that were not convened***

Sixteen children were referred with problems and were allocated a coordinator, but the process did not result in an FGC. In some instances the coordinator was unable to make contact with the family, and in others a considerable amount of contact took place before the decision was taken not to hold the meeting.

### ***Reason for referral***



The reasons for referral were similar to those in the main study sample detailed later.

### ***Differences between the non-convened and convened FGC referrals***

The referrals were analysed to see if there were any indications as to why some referrals did not result in an FGC.

As with the main sample, most of the boys were referred for behaviour problems, and the girls for attendance problems. Two younger children, one boy and one

girl, were referred because they had separation anxiety and therefore difficulty in getting into school - these are the only referrals specifically requesting the FGC to address separation anxiety, and the fact that they did not happen suggests that this may be a less appropriate issue to address through the FGC.

Although the reasons for referral were similar, there were some differences between the 'did not happen' referrals and those that did take place.

Of the 16 children referred, nine were boys and seven were girls. This sex ratio is different from the ratio in the completed FGCs, with a higher number of girls. Looking at the referrals two issues could be relevant. Firstly, two of the female referrals seemed to indicate the presence of child abuse. Although the reasons the FGCs did not take place were very different - in one case the family moved the child some considerable distance away to live with a relative, and in the other an investigation was instigated - the higher number of girls in this group may reflect the presence of child protection issues.

The second difference is related to ethnicity - of the seven girls in this group, four were of dual ethnic origin. In the main sample, none of the girls were of ethnic minority background, and only two of the boys were. Although we could speculate about whether or why ethnicity is a significant issue in bringing FGCs to completion, the data does not give any clear indication of reasons. Three of the four dual ethnic origin girls were referred for non-attendance, and ethnicity may be a contributory factor in the presenting problem. However, the reasons given by coordinators for non-completion are different for each case, and so the link between ethnicity and non-engagement in the process is not at all clear and needs further exploration.

### ***Reasons for non-completion***

The coordinators reported a range of reasons why the process they started did not result in a convened FGC. The 15 FGCs that did not happen fell into four categories:

*moves:* for two children, moves of residence interrupted the process

*other processes in action:* four FGCs were abandoned or permanently postponed due to the fact that other meetings had taken place and made plans, or other appointments or investigations were in progress

*family reluctance:* five families did not engage with the process and one young person was resistant, so the coordinator could not proceed with these conferences

*problem improved:* in three cases the problem was reported to be improving, and so the referral was put to one side for the time being, although the records indicate that there was little confidence in this

improvement being either real or maintainable. In child welfare FGCs there is some evidence that the involvement of the coordinator contributed to families resolving their problems, but there is no indication of that here.

### ***Time spent***

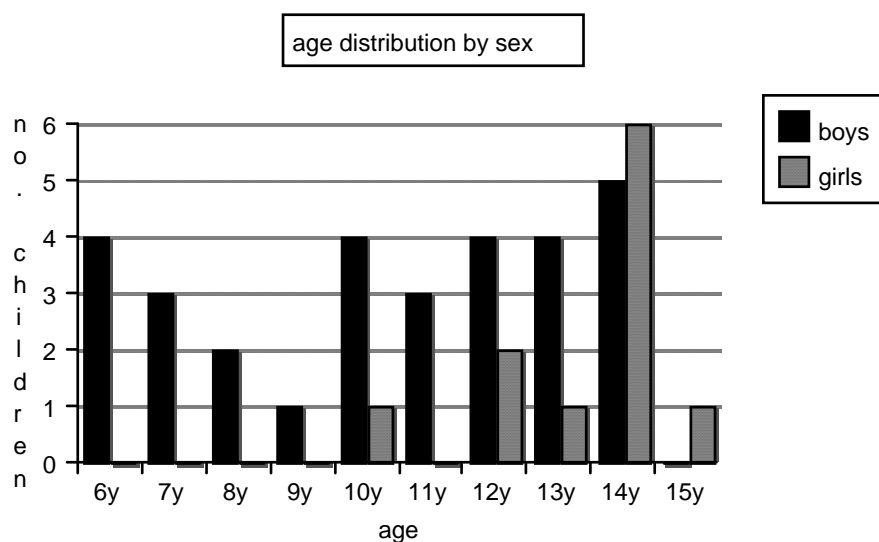
Where the coordinator had recorded the hours they had spent attempting to set up these FGCs there was a range from 6 hours in total to 13 hours, with an average of 10.

## **Data on referrals resulting in an FGC**

Detailed information was obtained on the FGC process for 37 families referred to the project. Four of the referrals concerned two children from the same family, so the total number of children being studied is 41.

### ***The children referred***

The project initially set referral criteria to focus on the transition from junior to secondary school, that is children aged 10 - 13. This was later extended at the request of schools to include children from infant school age up to the school year 9. The children who were the subject of the 37 FGCs studies ranged in age from 6 to 15, with an uneven spread across the age range and between boys and girls:



The ratio of boys to girls was close to 3:1, and although the average age of the children was 12, there was a significant difference in the gender pattern of referral by age, with all of the younger children being boys, and nearly all of the girls being secondary school age. The average age of the boys was 10.3 years and of the girls 13.0 years.



### ***Reason for referral***

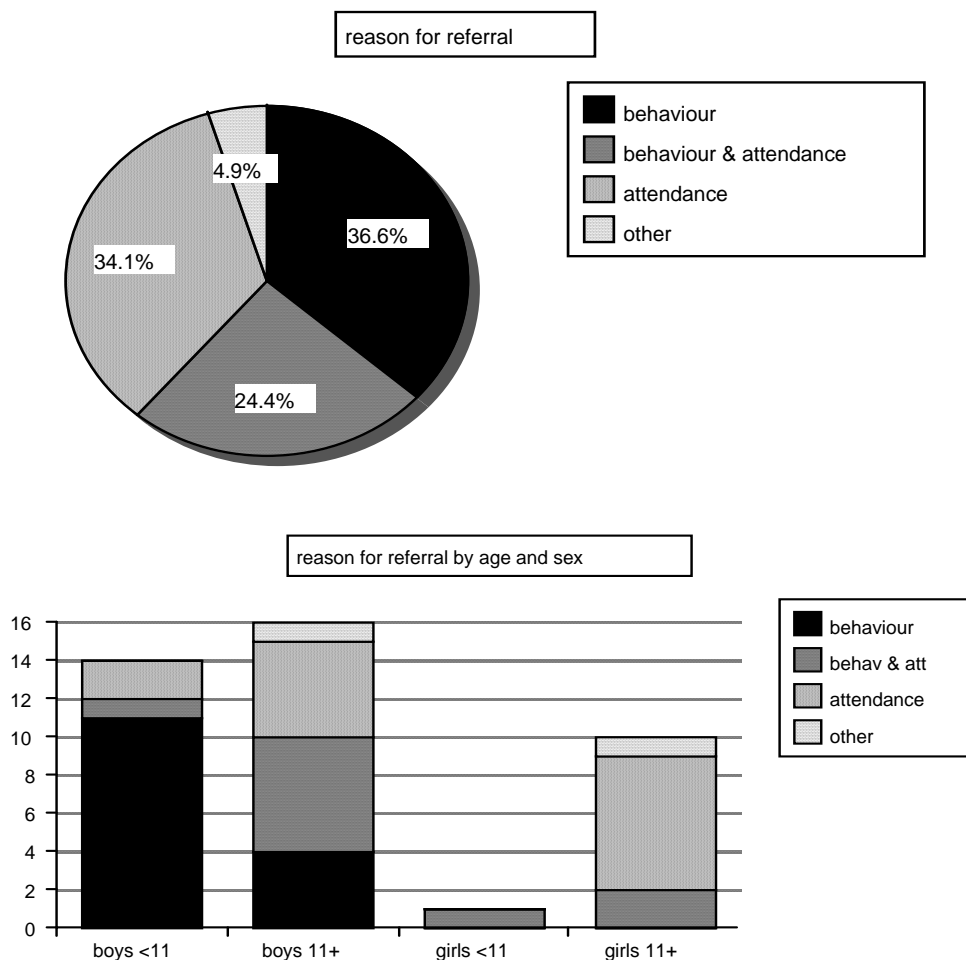
The project did not specify reason for referral criteria, and the 41 children who were the subject of the FGCs had the range of difficulties.

However, for the purpose of this study, the referrals were categorised into three distinct groups of children:

- those for whom behaviour problems were the cause for concern
- those for whom non-attendance was the cause for concern
- those whose referral was for difficulties with both behaviour and attendance.

In addition, there was a category of referral for other reasons - in this sample two children with poor social skills and peer relationship difficulties.

The following diagrams show the proportion of referrals in each category, and the reason for referral by sex and by age group, with the sample being divided into those under eleven and those eleven and over.



There is a clear pattern of referrals across the age range. Nearly all the young boys were referred because of behavioural problems in school, whereas the older boys were referred with the range of problems. The concerns relating to the girls were predominantly around attendance.

### ***Severity of problems***

Of the 25 children referred for a consideration of their behaviour problems, at least 16 (64%) had had one or more fixed-term exclusions in the previous year, and two had been permanently excluded from previous schools. A further two children were attending a restricted school day and three were said to be likely to be excluded. For one child the concerns were related to attention seeking and depressive behaviours rather than confrontational or aggressive behaviour.

Of those referred for a consideration of their attendance problems, six were not attending school at all, six were attending less than half the expected time and none was attending more than three quarters of the school term. Exact information is missing on six children who are just described as poor attenders. For many of these children, attendance had been a long-standing problem, with three having been out of school for a year or more.

The data available on the extent of the children's problems prior to the FGC indicates that the model is being used to address some of the most serious difficulties identified within the school system.

### ***Referral patterns***

When the distribution of the referrals over time is looked at it appears that the referral pattern has changed. In the first eight months only two of the referrals stated that non-attendance was the prime concern, whereas in the later eight months eleven referrals concerned attendance. It appears that as the project became established, schools or EWOs began referring more children for whom attendance was the sole concern in addition to those where behaviour was the main or considerable part of the problem. This may be due to the realisation that chronic attendance problems could be addressed through the FGC process.

### ***Family factors***

The coordinators were asked to provide information on the families they were working with, where this was known. They were not expected to ask the families for this information and therefore the information is not complete; however, the coordinators could clearly identify some significant factors.

	%		
	yes	no	don't know
were the parents separated?	73	24	3
was it a single parent household?	59	38	3
was the household dependent on benefits?	30	30	40
was the household affected by disability?	19	68	14
had other family members had sig. ed. probs?	46	24	30

The coordinators report that 73% of the children had experienced their parents separating and well over a half were living in a single parent family at the time of the FGC, with around a third of households depending on state benefits.

A significant minority (19%) of households were affected by issues of disability or chronic health conditions, for instance the mothers of three children were known to have significant mental health problems. In addition one child had been bereaved of his mother and one family was known to have experienced domestic violence.

Although the information is incomplete, these figures indicate that the coordinators involvement identified children as a relatively high risk group, experiencing a number of disadvantaging factors. This information enabled relevant issues to be brought to the FGC for consideration alongside the educational concerns.

## **The FGC process**

On average the coordinator took 7 weeks to convene the meeting, with a range of 4 to 12. This is longer than has been found in other FGC projects. Several FGCs referred over the summer holidays were difficult and slow to convene, and these were also more likely to founder. One referral, whose FGC was not held within the timeframe of this report, took over four months to convene, while another, also outside the timeframe of this report, took only two weeks in response to an urgent referral. While it is important that the coordinator has time to negotiate and prepare participants for the meeting, it seems that if the process is too drawn out the meeting is less likely to occur. The project now avoids taking referrals at the end of the summer term for this reason.

The coordinators recorded the time they spent in contact with the potential participants, and also the time spent on other activities such as letter writing. On average, a coordinator spends 14.5 hours with family members and others, and over 10 on other tasks; this average total time of 25 hours per conference is slightly above, but similar to, findings from other FGC projects.

For FGCs in education, as compared to child welfare FGCs, the timing of the conference may be more difficult to arrange to suit all parties. As teachers have a timetabled working day, conferences held during the day would require

classroom cover which may increase the cost to the school and lead to pressure to have the conference outside school hours. On the other hand, teachers are less able to work flexibly or to take time off in lieu if they work outside normal working hours and so may be less willing to work in the evenings or weekends.

The majority of the FGCs were in fact held after school (41% of FGCs) or on a weekday evening (30%) although a quarter were held within school hours. Two conferences were held at the weekend, one on a Saturday afternoon and one on a Sunday. The ratio of meetings held during 9-5 working hours to those held outside working hours indicates that school staff were willing and able to be flexible to the family's needs. The ratio for these FGCs in education is very similar to that found in child welfare FGCs.

Some significant effort was put into making sure that venues were acceptable and convenient to the family.

Family Group Conferences have no set length - the family has as long as they want to listen to the information and discuss it in the private family time. This means that the length of the meeting is very variable and cannot be predicted. In the sample studied, the overall meeting time ranged from one and a half hours to four and a half hours, with the average being 2.5 hours.

Within the meeting the private family time can also vary considerably. In one meeting the separated parents felt they could not meet alone, and so there was no private time at all, and in another central family members left the meeting and family time was therefore abandoned. In the remaining FGCs, the family did spend time alone but often it was only a short time, with the average being under one hour (53 minutes).

### ***Family members attending***

On average between seven and eight family group members were invited to each conference, with six attending. The range of family group size was very great - the smallest group invited was 2 and the largest was 21, with the actual size of the group attending ranging from 2 to 18.

In all but one case the main parent figure attended the conference and in that one case, the meeting was reconvened a short while later at which the mother was present. For one child whose mother had died the main carer was the father, but in all others the mother attended.

In over half of the conferences there was a father figure present, the majority (49%) having the natural father there despite the fact that in two thirds of these cases the parents were separated, and in four there was also a step-father or cohabitee attending. In eight cases the natural father was out of contact with the family, or the contact information was refused, and in another two the father was

excluded by the coordinator - although in one of these the father turned up at the meeting and was allowed to stay and contribute.

Other family members included grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbours and family friends. A number of the older children had peers attending with them and in several meetings the family's childminder or babysitter had been asked to attend as family members.

In all but two conferences the children concerned were present; one 12 year old boy did not turn up at the last minute, and in another meeting the 14 year old girl did not attend but her younger brother, also the subject of the meeting, did.

### ***Professionals attending***

On average between three and four professionals were invited to attend each meeting, with three on average attending.

Overall there were a range of professionals invited, the most frequent being education staff such as head teachers, teachers, Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) and special needs staff. In addition, invitations went to educational psychologists (EPs), health visitors (HVs), child and adolescent mental health workers (CAMHs), social workers (SSD), youth justice workers (YOT and the police) and others including disability carers, voluntary organisations, GPs, and therapists such as speech therapists.

Numbers invited and attended by profession:

prof	HT	T	EWO	SEN	EP	HV	CAMH	SSD	YOT/pol	other
inv	18	37	30	12	6	4	8	8	3	12
att	17	31	27	11	4	4	5	4	1	10

Most FGCs had a representative of the school present - sometimes this was the headteacher, sometimes the form teacher or tutor, or both - and usually the Education Welfare Officer. Six FGCs did not have any teacher representative from the school i.e. a headteacher or a class teacher, year head etc. Eleven did not have the EWO present, and one conference had neither teachers nor EWO. This raises the question of how a meeting called to consider difficulties experienced within the school system can make and agree plans based on good information about the difficulties and the resources available without the presence of significant education staff.

### ***Advocates***

In 19 of the FGCs studied, the coordinators named people who had been chosen to be advocates for the young people concerned. The advocates ranged from parents, aunts and godparents to taxi escorts, childminders, special needs support teachers and peers. In four cases, the coordinator commented that the advocate had not really played a significant part in the conference, in one this

was because the person (the young person's sister's boyfriend) did not turn up. In five other cases comment was made about the value of the advocate in supporting the young person and presenting their views. The relationship of the advocate to the young person did not seem to be a significant variable here - in one instance an uncle or a peer might be very useful, in another not.

The range in use and roles of advocates, and their effectiveness in undertaking this role suggests that there may be varied emphasis put upon this by different coordinators, and that varying amounts of preparation for the role are given, or needed, for it to be useful in the FGC.

There is further discussion of this point later in the report, when considering the young people's views on who had helped them in the meeting.

## **Participants' views**

The views of 86 family members from 28 families were gathered by means of a short questionnaire at the end of the Conference. These views broadly reflect those found in other studies of FGCs (see for example Marsh and Crow, 1998). Nearly all participants valued the Conference, and felt it was unlike other meetings they had been at (*"it was more dignified"*, *"it was more open"*). They nearly always felt the right people were there, and were satisfied with the process. While being nervous of private family time they usually valued this, and they nearly universally felt they had been able to say what they wanted during the meetings. About a quarter were dissatisfied with the plans made, with those who felt less listened to the most dissatisfied. Three quarters felt the model was a good idea, with many of these being very enthusiastic, and nearly 90% would recommend the model to others.

### ***Professionals' views***

Views of 71 of the 96 professionals attending were gathered by a questionnaire asking them about process and immediate outcomes. Over 90% of the staff thought the meeting was very good, good, or OK, and nearly 70% were satisfied or very satisfied with the plans made. Within the professional views health visitors and educational psychologists were most satisfied and headteachers the least (although even for them over half were satisfied with the plan). The professionals also saw the meetings as different from others, and felt that the right people were there, and over 90% would refer another family for a FGC.

### ***Young people's views***

The views of the young people were canvassed in two ways - they were asked to fill in a questionnaire on their experience immediately after the conference, and then where possible were contacted in person and interviewed a few weeks later. The interviews enabled information to be obtained about changes since the FGC both at school and at home. Feedback was obtained from 30 young people out of the 41 who were subject to the FGC; this is 73% of the sample. All but four gave more detailed information via an interview.

The opinions gathered represented the sample across the age range, from the youngest at 6 and 7 years to the eldest at 14 years and also included both sexes - 8 girls and 22 boys - in proportion to the cohort studied. It included all types of referrals, again reflecting the make up of the group studied:

*How did you feel about the meeting overall?*

Over half of the young people felt the meeting was good or very good, and a further 37% thought it was OK. Two of the 30 young people felt it had been mixed good and bad, and one felt it was terrible.

The young people were also asked if they had been surprised by anything at the meeting. Three quarters of them said yes. Most (59%) named things to do with the interaction between the participants, such as the way people talked and laughed and the way they were treated.

*"I was surprised how people talked and what they said"*

*"they hardly speak directly to me at school, they did much more at meeting"*

A small number said they were surprised by the practicalities such as the food and the way things were written on a flip chart. A quarter of the children said they were not surprised by anything at the meeting.

*What did the young people think about the way the meeting was set up?*

Questions were asked of the young people about their understanding of the meeting beforehand, and whether they had been worried by the thought of it. They were also asked if the right people had come to the meeting. A third of the young people had not really understood what the meeting would be like, and many reported being worried beforehand. Their worries centred round the fear that they would be put on the spot - for instance that the meeting would ask them difficult questions or that they would feel got at. It is, of course, difficult for the coordinators to convey the nature of the meeting to the young people concerned.

Although most of the young people said the right people were there, some named family members who had been asked but did not or could not attend; in two cases the absentees were particularly significant to the young people and therefore badly missed. On the other hand, four young people had been unhappy about the presence of a particular professional at the meeting, presumably because although they were invited as important information givers, the delivery of the information had been unwelcome.

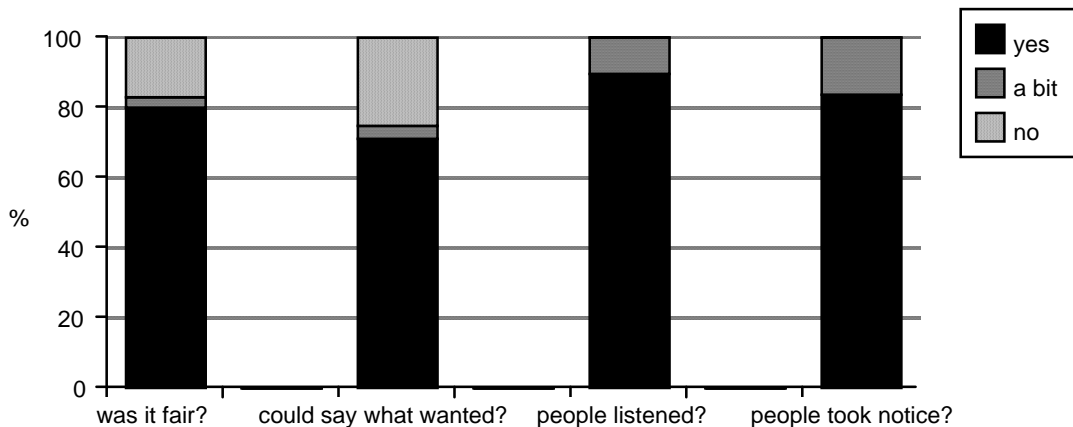
*Did young people feel their voice was heard and who helped them with this?*

The young people were asked a series of questions on how they had been treated. The feedback indicates that for most of the young people the meeting

was fair (80% thought this) and provided an opportunity for them to be listened to. Most were able to say what they wanted, and a number of them commented on this:

*“children are listened to more this way, at home my brothers both have more to say and my views don't usually get heard, it felt really nice that they considered what I said”*

*“I could speak to people and not just sit in a corner, I felt part of it”*



However, a quarter of them had not felt able to say what they wanted:

*“I said some things but sometimes they didn't answer. They don't listen at home much because they are busy”*

*“I didn't feel able to discuss some difficulties at home”*

*“It was difficult to get my say because the adults were nattering on”*

*“I got bored because everybody was talking about me and not with me”*

This raises the question of whether an advocate had been identified for the young people, and if so whether they had been able to help them put their point of view at the meeting. Information was obtained from the coordinators on identified advocates, and the young people were asked who had helped them to say what they wanted.

*Who helped you say what you wanted?*

In all 21 of the young people (70%) named someone who had helped them to participate and say what they wanted. Nine of these young people named someone outside the family, and 12 named a family member. Seven (23%) said that no-one had helped them. Two did not respond to the question.

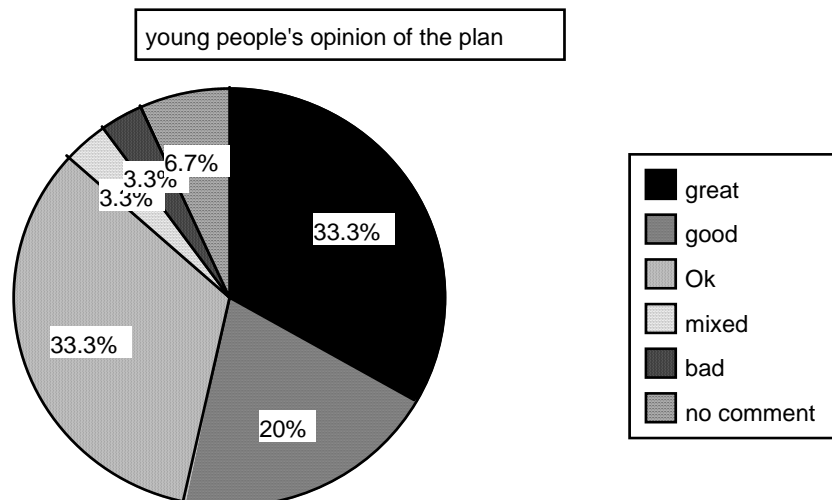


Where a young person could name a helper, this did not necessarily mean that they reported that they felt able to say what they wanted. Conversely the absence of a helper or advocate did not mean that the young person was unable to express themselves as they wanted. However, some of the young people did clearly appreciate the role being taken by family members and others in supporting them and one young person who did not have this support said she wished she had had someone to help represent her views.

The identification, preparation and role of a helper for the young person is an issue that has been raised and discussed within the project, but is clearly one that is complex. The fact that some young people found the meeting fair and willing to listen, but were unable to express their views, and that a quarter overall felt unable to say what they wanted suggests that the helper role needs continuing thought.

*What did the young people think of the plan?*

The young people were asked what they thought of the plan and what they had liked or not liked about it. Two of the younger ones were unable to comment - one just said that it was boring, and another said they could not read it; other children of similar ages were able to make constructive comments.



In all, 16 of the young people (53%) thought the plan was good or great - some were very enthusiastic, calling it “brilliant” or “excellent”. A further 33% thought it was OK, but one child, a 12 year old boy, thought the plan had been bad.

*What did they like, and what did they not like about the plan?*

Quite a few of the young people did not respond to these questions. This may have been because they did not remember the detail of the plan, or perhaps

because they were uncertain of the question - of those that did reply, a number gave their opinions of the meeting as a whole rather than the plan itself. Of those commenting more specifically about the content of the plan, nine mentioned things they liked, such as including their dad or getting rewards, and four said there were suggestions they did not like, for one this was counselling, another it was not specified and for two sisters it was the plan that they get up early in the morning (at 6.30). Thirteen young people (almost half) said there was nothing they did not like about the plan.

Those interpreting the question as being about the meeting as a whole also provided useful information. A quarter, seven, mentioned things about the process they liked - the laughter, the way they were treated as an adult and listened to, the things people said about them and the way their ideas were used. Similarly, when asked what they did not like, four mentioned things about the process - the waiting, the negative talk, the expectation that they would speak, the big space, and for one child the fact that they were not allowed to hold the baby.

*What had changed for the young person since the meeting?*

Questions were asked at interview about changes at school and at home, and about changes in their feelings about school. The four children whose feedback was only via questionnaire did not contribute to these questions.

*At school*

The young people were asked if anything had changed at school since the FGC and how they felt about school now.

Over three quarters of the children reported that things had changed for the better at school. For some this was an improvement in their relationship with the school staff, and for others it was an improvement in their peer relationships, or both as follows:

relationships with staff improved	39%
relationships with peers improved	35%
practicalities such as tutor group, special help different	15%

The young people responding made comments such as *"the teacher understands me more"* *"I can talk to the teacher more easily"* and *"the headteacher does not shout at me so much"*. Relating to their peers they said *"the children don't fight me so much"* *"I avoid trouble"* and *"I've stopped mixing with people who are a bad influence"*. Some also reported more practical changes in the way their school life was organised. These changes had enabled many of the young people to feel better about school.

Where the more positive feelings about school are explained, they indicate the young people feel more confident, happier, enjoying school more.

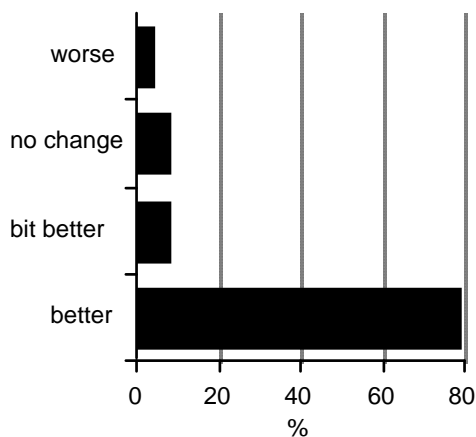
*"I feel more active and independent at school and have calmed down"*

*"since the meeting every thing's changed . It has helped me get my act together"*

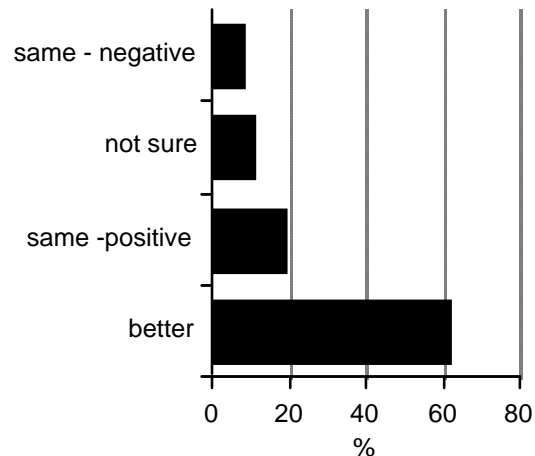
*"Everyone in the class was nice to me after my meeting - they've stopped fighting me now"*

A small number of children reported no change in their negative feelings about school - one said *"I still don't want to go, but I have to go"* which suggests that perhaps his feeling had changed to one of resignation about attending.

reports of changes at school since the FGC



feelings about school since the FGC



#### *At home*

The young people were asked whether things had changed at home as a result of the FGC. Two of those interviewed did not answer, leaving 24 responses.

Fourteen children reported that things had improved at home. Generally this was because they were able to talk to their parents better, or felt they were listened to more.

*"Mum asks about my feelings more and I'm getting on better with Dad"*

Some of those who said things had not changed made it clear that there were still negative interactions at home, such as shouting, and fighting between siblings.

*What do the young people think about the model afterwards?*

Those who were interviewed were asked if it felt good to have had the FGC. Twenty one of the 26 (81%) said that it did. Three were more mixed about it and one said a clear no.

However, when asked if the model was a good way of sorting out problems at school the young people showed they could distinguish between their experiences of the meeting and the principle of the meeting. All but one - 96%, even those more doubtful about their own meeting - said it was a good method. The one child who was not sure was the one who had really not felt good about having the meeting for himself.

Commenting on the model, children made it clear that it could be difficult or hard work, but that generally they had appreciated it as a way of moving things forward:

*"It's good because you all gather in one place so you can talk to each other about what ever it is"*

*"it gets you together and comes up with ideas which might help and might get you somewhere"*

*"it was good they all came to talk about me, it is helping to solve the problem"*

*"people had good ideas about how to help with my behaviour"*

Some of the family members were worried that the young people were under too much pressure, or felt it inappropriate that they should be present. The young people themselves did sometimes comment on this, but seemed to have an appreciation of the situation:

*"I had to work hard to explain things, it felt a bit pressurised. Everyone has ideas but they don't always get together, but here they did"*

*"It helped a little bit the things family said. Difficult things had to be said, but the way she [the teacher] said them sounded as if she was annoyed"*

### ***Comparison between the different participants views***

The data already presented from the three groups of participants can be compared to see which group is most satisfied with their experience of the FGC and what they think of the model generally.

The professionals were overall the most satisfied with the FGC they had attended, with the young people being slightly less satisfied. The professionals were, however, more likely to be dissatisfied with the plan.

In contrast, the young people were more positive about the FGC as a way of trying to resolve problems occurring in school, almost universally approving the model.

*Do the family members and the professionals agree about their meeting?*

The data were examined to see if there was agreement between the different groups of participants about each meeting. Most often the views of the family about any one FGC were similar overall to the views of the professionals, although there was often a range of views. What was most notable was that disagreement was greater between members of the family group than between the family group and the professionals.

*Do young people tend to agree with the adults?*

The young people generally agreed with the other participants in their views of the FGC, but there was evidence that they formed their own opinions. Sometimes they were more in agreement with the professionals, others with the family group, and there was no trend to being more negative or more positive than the adults.

## **Immediate outcomes – the process**

The FGC process is complex, and may give rise to a number of changes that do not relate directly to the problem being addressed, but which nevertheless are seen as benefiting the participants in a number of ways. Thus the process may be seen as worth the time and effort despite 'failing' in absolute terms. In addition, satisfaction with the process and empowering the less powerful to participate may in themselves be seen as measures of success. For this reason, information on the process outcomes will be summarised here again to ensure that these aspects are not forgotten.

Young peoples' views are heard and taken into account when planning

- all of the young people concerned were expected to attend, 95% did attend
- 90% of the young people felt people had listened to them
- 71% felt they were able to say what they wanted
- many spoke about very positively about the way they were treated and heard

The wider family is involved in the decision making

- average family group size was six
- a wide range of relatives and family friends were involved
- fathers were involved in half the conferences
- separated parents were brought together in over a quarter of conferences
- 76% of family members felt able to say what they wanted
- 82% of family members felt they were listened to

- 80% of the professionals see it as a different kind of meeting, with the family taking a more central role and responsibility, sharing and discussing information openly

There is an increased understanding between family and school

- half of the family members were surprised at the school's commitment
- a quarter of the professionals were surprised at the family's commitment
- a third of the professionals were surprised by the quality of the plan
- at six month follow-up half of the (teacher) respondents said the FGC had changed their view of the young person concerned by providing a better insight into the context of the problem and an understanding of the young persons difficulties

Participants are satisfied with the process and the model

- 53% of the young people thought their meeting was good or very good
- 81% of the young people felt good about having had the meeting
- 62% of family members thought their meeting was good or very good
- 77% of family members liked the model
- 91% of family members would ask for an FGC again
- 70% of the professionals thought their meeting was good or very good
- 90% of professionals would refer families again for an FGC

Participants are satisfied with the plans made

- 53% of young people thought the plan was good or great
- 66% of the professionals were satisfied or very satisfied with the plan
- 60% of the family members were satisfied or very satisfied with the plan
- dissatisfaction with the plans is low

Young people report changes (at least in the short-term) at home and school

- 77% report improved relationships and/or support in school
- 62% report feeling more positive about school
- 58% report positive changes at home

These process outcomes are significant in themselves, and need to be taken into account in any assessment of the benefits of using the FGC model.

## **Immediate outcomes – the plans**

A plan was agreed by the participants in 95% of the FGCs - all but two of the 37 conferences studied. In one no agreement was reached because the young person and her mother left the meeting. In this case, the EWO informed the meeting that the family would be prosecuted for non-attendance at school, and this was in effect the agreed plan. In the second case, the referrer, the EWO, did not stay to the end of the meeting and had therefore not been able to agree the plan. Although the plan had then been sent to the EWO, their response was not prompt, and so full agreement to the plan was delayed. The contents of this plan have, however, been included in the following discussion. The high percentage of

FGCs reaching agreement on a plan is in accord with data from other FGC projects.

### *Contents of plan*

#### Family involvement:

All of the plans involved elements of help and support for the young people from the family group. For all but four of the young people concerned, the parent or parents agreed to take some action to help address the problem.

Families also sometimes agreed specific strategies to help the young person at home, such as changing their approach to homework, changing the bedtime routines or acknowledging the family members' needs for space.

In 14 families (39%), the wider family group (aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbours and family friends) also offered help. In eight of these plans, the relatives offered to look after the child or children, either for days out, overnight or for a holiday.

The young person's peers were named as part of the plan in seven cases. This was usually to meet with the young person, walk to school with them and support them in school, but some were also to play a part in supporting the young person with their homework. Siblings had a specified role in four plans, usually supporting homework tasks.

In addition to taking support roles in the plan, in 15 FGCs family members took on the role of monitoring the implementation of the plan. This was usually a member of the wider family network, but in two cases it was a parent.

### *The young person's involvement*

In half of the plans, the young person is recorded as agreeing to change their behaviour. These included plans to attend school, to try harder, to get up on time, to listen to what they were being told, to co-operate, to stop swearing, to make new friends and to ignore other children teasing. This aspect of the plans is notably different from plans made in child welfare FGCs, and suggests that the problem is to some extent seen as inherent in the child, and therefore the solution lies with the child.

Although the young people may be sincere in their agreement to change their behaviour, it seems unlikely that this will be enacted and sustained unless other changes are also put into action by other significant participants. If the plan relies on the young person changing, therefore, it may be more liable to failure. This possibility will be considered in more detail in the final outcomes report.

### *Home-school links*

Twenty one of the plans (58%) made specific mention of building home-school links. In half of these (10) this was an exchange of information, such as contact

addresses for the school or information about special needs provision for the family. In seven plans, a parent was to contact the school regularly to liaise over the care of the child, sometimes including staying in school for part of the day, and in a further three a shared strategy was agreed in the plan. In one plan it was agreed that the young person could link home and school by ringing home from school each day at lunchtime.

#### *School involvement*

In 12 of the plans, there was no element of action to be taken by the school, other than in some cases to refer the child on to another external agency.

This evaluation took place in the early years of the project, and school attendance was lower than in the current more mature stage. As such it is not surprising that in the 24 that did include action or support from the school, the relevant elements of the plans were categorised and counted as follows:

support by talking/listening/organising a mentor	9
strategies for the child to calm down/have time out	6
special needs help/extra help/teaching strategies	6
report or rewards systems	5
change of staff/tutor group/lessons attended	4
encourage wider interaction/more friends	4
offer clubs or hobbies in school	4
offer to fund reward/activities	3
arrange to coordinate/disseminate information in school	3
agree to 'look into' bullying issues	2
agree to discuss/inform about other schools	4

#### *Other agencies*

In most of the plans - 31 - other agencies offered support, or were named as sources of support. The agency most frequently involved, not surprisingly as they were often the referrer, was the Education Welfare service. EWOs offered help to 20 families, ranging from providing information, to visiting regularly, finding activities, liaising with the schools and offering transport. The next agencies most frequently mentioned in plans were the child and adolescent mental health services. These were either already involved, or were to be asked to become involved, in 12 cases.

The family's GP was one route to get a referral to the CAMHs, but the GP was also mentioned as a source of information or referral for other health needs - visits to the GP were planned in seven of the plans.

Other agencies involved included the social services, offering help in four plans, the school nurse service, involved in three plans, and the youth offending services, involved in two plans. In addition, actions were specified in single plans involving a range of other agencies - health visitor, young carers, Homestart,



alcohol services, drug advisory services, occupational therapy, mediation, family centre. In one plan it was the FGC coordinator who offered to find information for the family, and so was part of the plan.

#### *Range of issues addressed*

As can be seen from the above, the FGC plans addressed a wide range of issues both within families and schools. This indicates that the meeting did provide an opportunity to consider information from the family and the school, putting the child's needs in context. Social and emotional issues that affect children such as parental separation and contact arrangements, parental disability and mental health problems, and difficult family relationships were identified, sometimes for the first time.

Thus although these FGCs were convened to address educational problems, wider social needs were considered and taken into account in the plans.

### **Short-term outcomes – behavioural changes**

Referrers are asked to provide information on the referred children at one month, six months and one year after the FGC. At one month information is gathered on changes in the young person's attendance and behaviour in school while at six months more detailed information is gathered on the implementation of the plan, the child's academic status and the value of the FGC overall, as well as information on the referred problem.

The data at one year relates only to exclusions, attendance and special needs provision and will not be considered here as insufficient data are available.

Due to the timescale of the research to date, and the spread of the referrals over the past 18 months, there is follow-up data as follows:

at one month post FGC on 36 children - 88% of the children  
at six months post FGC on 24 children - 59% of the children

This section of the report will therefore not be able to provide information on the outcomes of all of the FGCs studied. The next section on longer term outcomes includes an analysis of the information to identify any correlations between the outcomes and FGC factors.

#### *All referrals*

Putting the follow-up information available together, comparisons can be made by age and problem for the children referred for attendance and behavioural difficulties:

(note that children referred for both behaviour and attendance difficulties have been rated twice, once for changes in behaviour at school and once for changes in attendance)

		at 1 month n=36		at 6 months n=24	
		behaviour n=24	attendance n=17	behaviour n=19	attendance n=11
<11	better	9	3	4	3
	same	2	1	3	1
	worse	1			
11+	better	4	6	1	3
	same	3	4	5	1
	worse	5	3	6	3
all	better	54%	53%	26%	55%
	same	21%	29%	42%	18%
	worse	25%	18%	32%	27%

At one month, a significant number of the young people (around a half) were reported to be better in respect of their attendance and behavioural problems.

At six months, overall just under half of the young people followed up were reported to be showing some improvement. However, as discussed below, there was a difference between the two main aspects of behaviour considered. The data suggests that medium term positive outcomes could be expected for between a third and a half of the children subject to an FGC.

#### *Children referred with behavioural problems alone*

For this group of children, the outcomes for the younger children appear to be better than for the older children. In the short-term, the behaviour of the younger ones had generally improved, with 8 of the 11 reported to be showing some improvement in their social relationships in school at one month, and three maintaining this at six months to avoid further exclusions.

Although there are only four children of secondary school age in this referral category, they had not fared so well, with all of them experiencing subsequent exclusions and one being permanently excluded shortly after the FGC.

Behavioural improvements seem to be difficult to gain and to maintain. Dramatic changes were rare, with slight improvements in attitude and social relationships being more commonly reported. Around a quarter of the children were said to be worse after the FGC - this was generally a continuation of the deteriorating behaviour that lead to the referral in the first place, rather than as a result of the FGC process. In one case a short-term deterioration was blamed on the meeting, this was followed by improvement.

#### *Children referred with attendance and behavioural problems*

In this group of referrals, outcomes were very varied across the age range. The two younger children both showed considerable improvement in their attendance, with one improving in behaviour, and one still causing concern in this respect.

Of the older aged children, some showed an improvement in attendance and behaviour at one month but by six months the behavioural improvements had gone and the attendance improvements only maintained by three of the young people.

From this data it seems that the FGC was more successful in changing attendance patterns than changing behaviour patterns - none of the children improved in behaviour but not attendance, and overall five were reported to have improved their attendance at six months.

#### *Children referred with attendance problems alone*

Again with this group of children, the outcomes were varied across the age range. Two children successfully increased their attendance significantly, one from 0% at school to 90% at a pupil referral unit, and another child improved a bit, reliant on her father taking her to school. However, three children continued to be out of school altogether and one had lower attendance rates after the FGC.

In this group there appears to be little difference between the progress at one month and that at six months. That is, it may be that if attendance is improved early on after the meeting, this is maintained, but if improvement is not established quickly, it is unlikely to occur.

#### *Other referrals*

The two children who were referred for other reasons also fared differently. One, disorganised and with poor social skills, improved and seemed to be managing school better, although there were concerns at six months that this would not be maintained. The other was reported to be slightly worse in some respects and a review meeting four months post FGC planned to arrange a change of school.

The pattern of outcomes obtained so far indicates that there is variation across the sample, within and between the age groups and the different referral groups. In general terms, no predictions could be made regarding the success or otherwise of any one referral because of this variation. However, although the data are incomplete, there are some indications of the directions of change and the relative success of the FGCs.

1. Changes at one month are not all maintained but a significant number of children - perhaps between a third and a half - continue to show benefits at six months.
2. A higher proportion of the younger children show positive changes following the FGC - i.e. the model seems to have more impact on children under the age of 11.

3. Younger children are more likely to maintain their initial improvements in the six months after FGC compared to the older children.
4. Older children are more likely to improve their attendance than their behaviour - very little behavioural change was reported in this group at six months.
5. While behavioural changes are generally slow and incremental, changes in attendance patterns can be dramatic.

### **III. OUTCOMES**

The final study sample for outcomes from six months to one year from the conference was those children referred to the project between its inception in 1998 to the end of 1999, and having an FGC held before the end of the academic year 2000. During this time 56 FGCs were held. Two of this number have not been included as in one case a plan was not formulated, and so the FGC was not successful and in another case there was no follow-up data available at all. In addition, although in ten FGCs more than one child was named as the cause for concern, in six of these only one child, the main focus of the concern, was followed up. This means that there is some follow-up information on 58 young people who were the subject of 54 FGCs.

The purpose of this section is to look at objective measures of change in the behaviours causing concern, and the more subjective longer term changes to relationships and attitudes.

Follow-up information has been gathered on the young people concerned to see what the outcomes were and therefore whether the Family Group Conference model is useful, and for whom. There are, however, a number of difficulties in evaluating the information, which should be born in mind.

#### **Judging the value of the outcomes**

It is sometimes difficult to decide what is a good outcome or a poor outcome of an FGC.

Take, for example a hypothetical referral for a behaviour problem. Following an agreement in the FGC plan, the family takes their child to a specialist and the child is diagnosed as having ADHD, is put on Ritalin and consequently his behaviour improves. Is this to be seen as a success, in that his behaviour improves, or not, in that he is on long-term psychotropic drugs? And should this outcome be seen to be as a result of the FGC, because the motivation to attend the specialist came from that meeting, or should we not attribute any improvement to the FGC, because the family might have attended the specialist anyway, and the prescription for Ritalin is quite separate from the meeting?

Success in addressing attendance problems is perhaps even more difficult to judge. Where complete non-attenders have become consistent attenders, this should be a clear success story - but if the change was due to a placement at a pupil referral unit, rather than a continuation in mainstream, the LEA and the school may view it differently.

There is also the question of the value of an increase in attendance. Take, for example a young person who increased their attendance from 18% to 54%.

While this is an encouraging change, 54% is still a very poor attendance rate, so is this a positive result to be celebrated or is it a negative result because the young person is still accessing only part of the curriculum? In an alternative scenario, if attendance has increased from 60% to 68%, should this increase be seen as significant or not?

These are difficult questions, and need to be borne in mind in reading this report. Here we have taken a relatively blunt view of the data. Young people referred for behaviour problems are deemed to have improved if their behaviour has led to a lower number of exclusions. For those referred for attendance problems, change is recorded if there is a difference of more than 10% in the reported attendance figures.

### ***Interpreting outcomes***

Even if agreement can be reached on whether to categorise an outcome as positive, negative or neutral, it is even more difficult to know the causal factors that lead to that outcome, and so how far it can be attributed to the FGC.

By the very nature of the difficulties being addressed, the children who are the subject of the FGC are likely to be experiencing a range of problems at home and/or at school. The FGC will attempt to address at least some of these difficulties, by acknowledging their existence and where possible planning change or at least planning support for the young person. The range of social upheavals that the young people were coping with over the time of the research include:

- a mother coming out of hospital after a period of severe depression
- a young person moving away to live with their father, then moving back again
- a young person's parents splitting up, and then getting back together again
- problems with neighbours necessitating the family's move out of the area
- a young person's father dying
- a young person's mother and sibling moving away, with the young person staying in the area with grandmother

In addition, the young people were subject to the 'normal' changes of their school year - changes of teacher, headteacher, transitions from infants to juniors and from juniors to secondary school.

Some these changes, both unplanned and more routine, may impact on the young person's behaviour, so that changes attributed to the FGC may be due to other factors entirely. Comments from some of the participating schools indicate that changes within the school unrelated to the meeting can have a marked positive effect:

*“C is now in a class which is very structured and discipline is excellent. This has enabled him to avoid confrontations”*

*“D has a new class teacher who is fair and consistent”*

*“Headteacher has changed - R had strong anti-authority feelings towards the previous head”*

While it is acknowledged that behavioural change is multifactorial, it is beyond the scope of this research to investigate the weight of different causal factors. As such factors may have a positive or negative effect, it is assumed that across the sample population the effect of the FGC can be measured.

### ***Comparative value of the outcomes***

There is a final problem that needs to be acknowledged in interpreting the data: there is a lack of comparable information on young people who have not had an FGC. That is, while this information may exist, we do not currently have access to data on the ‘normal’ trajectory of young people who experience temporary exclusions or who have low attendance records. For instance, how many young people go on to be permanently excluded after having ten or more days temporary exclusions? How many re-engage with education after a period of non-attendance? Without this information it is difficult to judge the absolute success of the FGC.

Overall, in this report we indicate the extent of improvements or deteriorations in the presenting problems, as measured in ways that seem reasonable, and then leave it for the reader to decide whether in their experience this suggests that the model has value.

### ***Follow-up process and timescales***

To obtain follow-up data, schools were asked to provide information on the young peoples’ progress at one month, six months and one year after the FGC, using data collection forms designed in collaboration with the project steering group. The data was gathered by the project staff, particularly the administrator, through sending out and chasing up the relevant forms with the relevant schools. This is a laborious process, as children routinely move between infant, junior and secondary schools through their school career, and others change schools and addresses. While every effort was made to trace and obtain information on the young people in the sample, there are inevitably gaps in the data.

#### ***How long were the young people followed up for?***

The FGCs studied were held up to and including July 2000. There was therefore the potential for six month follow-up on all 58 young people at January 2000 and one year follow-up on 24 of these whose FGC was held before February 2000. (Note that for some children the six month time span will actually only cover just over one term at school because of the length of the school holidays.)

### *Sample size*

The possible follow-up data, and the actual obtained is as follows:

	1 year possible	1 year actual	6 months possible	6 months actual
all	24	21(88%)	34	27(79%)

Maximum follow-up was therefore obtained on 83% of the sample. Where the maximum follow-ups were not obtained, the previous follow-up time was available except in one case where the young person had moved away from the area and could not be traced. Thus for two of the three not followed up at one year we have information at six months, and for the remaining eight young people we have information at one month.

The final follow-up data available on the 58 young people is as follows:

at one year	at 6 months	at one month
21	29	8

This report concentrates on the outcomes for the 50 young people followed up at one year or six months.

## **Information on the young people**

The initial analysis of the data divided the sample into four reasons for referral:

- behaviour problems
- behaviour problems and attendance problems
- attendance problems
- 'other' - difficulties being experienced by the young people due to their poor social skills or other particular circumstances

To simplify the analysis at this later point, those in the 'other' category have been assigned to the most appropriate main category - three to the 'behaviour', where the difficulties were causing disruption and/or defiance, and one to 'attendance' where the difficulties were causing school reluctance.

The follow-up data available are not evenly spread across the reasons for referral, because the pattern of referrals changed over the first year of the project. The early referrals were predominantly for behaviour problems, and many more of the later ones were concerned with attendance problems.

This means that there are very few young people with purely attendance problems who we have been able to follow-up at one year.



### ***Age and sex of the young people followed up***

The young people experiencing FGCs were from across the infant, junior and early secondary school age range, but there was a male: female ratio of 2:1.

Most of the younger children were boys, with the girls over represented in the older age groups.

When the sample is considered in relation to the reason for referral, a clear pattern emerges. Boys were almost exclusively referred for behaviour problems alone, and both boys and girls were referred for attendance problems, with or without behaviour problems. In addition, referrals for attendance problems were much more likely to be from the older age groups in school.

### **Outcomes: presenting problems**

The overall outcomes for the young people followed up after the FGC will be considered first and then the outcomes for the different problem types will be looked at in more detail.

#### **Overall outcomes**

To look at the outcomes for the whole group of young people the changes in presenting behaviours have been considered for the three reason-for-referral groups. Each young person has been assigned to one of three categories, improved, same or worse.

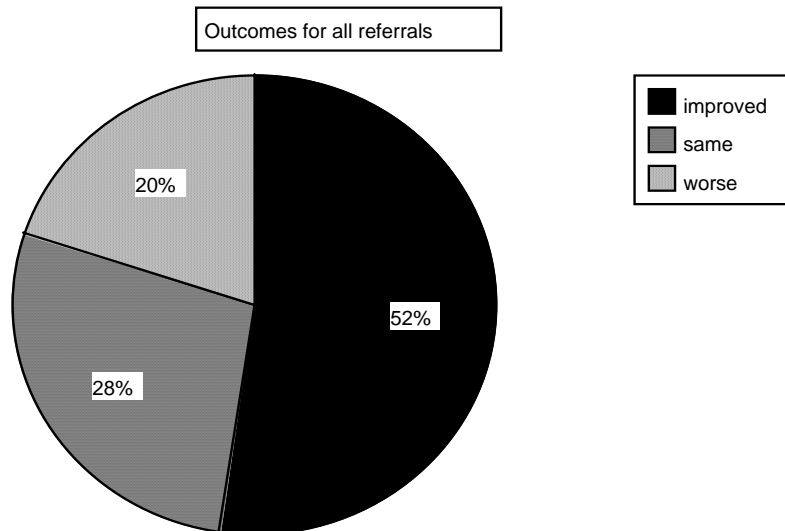
The criteria for assigning the young people to the improved or worse categories were:

- for attendance referrals, a change of more than 10% in attendance rate
- for behaviour referrals, a change in the number of days the young person was excluded in the preceding months
- for attendance *and* behaviour referrals, a young person was rated as improved if one or more aspect of the problem had changed, as above. Most had either improved or worsened on both counts or remained the same on one and changed on the other. One young person had improved on one count and deteriorated on the other - for the purposes of this analysis, this has been counted as a neutral outcome i.e. in the 'same' category.

The outcomes were as follows:

	improved	same	worse
behaviour	15	5	4
Behaviour and attendance	7	4	3
attendance	4	5	3
all	26	14	10
all as %	52	28	20

The overall number improving is higher than that expected by chance. That is, taking the sample of young people as a whole, the FGC has a significantly positive effect on the outcomes.



There is no significant difference between the outcomes for each of the three reason-for-referral groups, although there seems to be a trend towards the referrals for behaviour problem alone showing improvement more often. The outcomes for behaviour problems and attendance problems are now considered separately.

### ***Referrals for behaviour problems***

A total of 27 young people were referred for behavioural problems alone and 14 for behaviour and attendance problems. These have been grouped together to consider the outcomes for this type of problem.

Of the 41 young people in this referral group, 24 had had temporary fixed-term exclusions in the previous six months, ranging from one exclusion of one day, to many exclusions totalling 45 days in all.

### ***Is there a difference between outcomes at six months and at one year?***

When the data were considered in August 2000 there were indications that some young people were improving their behaviour in the very short-term after the FGC, but the change was not always sustained, so that the outcomes at six months were not as positive as at one month.

The six month and one year data has been studied to see if the same pattern emerges, that is to see if the young people were showing more improvement at six months than at one year:

	improved (reduced exclusions)	same (still no exclusions)	worse (increased exclusions)
at one year	6	8	5
at six months	11	4	3
all	17	12	8

Although superficially it looks as though this might be the case, the difference between these relatively small groups of young people is not significant. This is perhaps illustrated out by the fact that two of the permanent exclusions occurred within the first three months after the FGC. Thus whatever ‘honeymoon period’ there may have been it does not tend to last for six months and the outcomes at six months can be taken as a good indicator of the probable outcomes at one year. This is important for the interpretation of this research, as it validates the grouping of the six month and one year data together to provide a larger sample size.

Twice as many young people with behavioural problems improved following the FGC as deteriorated. This is not, however, a significant effect.

Overall, young people who had not had exclusions prior to the FGC almost all remained free of exclusions. Although the FGC appears to have been neutral in these cases, we cannot know how far the meeting had a positive effect in preventing deterioration in these young people.

Given the wide range of outcomes. It would have been difficult to predict which young people would increase and which would decrease their number of exclusions. The young person with the highest number of exclusions beforehand had no subsequent exclusions, while one of those with the lower number of exclusions initially was later excluded permanently.

It is clear that for a number of young people, the six or twelve months after the FGC was more stable than the period before it. In particular, nine of those with prior exclusions had none reported at follow-up, and the number of young people experiencing more than ten days exclusions had halved. This is counterbalanced by the four young people being excluded permanently, and two others experiencing increasing exclusions, leading to a lack of statistically significant positive effect.

### ***Outcomes for attendance problems***

Seventeen young people were referred for consideration of their poor attendance alone, and a further 14 for attendance problems alongside behaviour problems. As noted before, many of the referrals for attendance problems came to the project towards the end of the study period, and so we only have longer term (six

month and one year) follow-up on 26 young people. We have attendance figures for 25 of these 26 young people - data are missing on one young person.

***Is there a difference between outcomes at six months and two years?***

Unlike the behaviour referrals, when looked at in August 2000 the attendance group did not show any difference between the one month and six month outcomes - there did not seem to be a 'honeymoon' effect on these referrals. When the six month and one year outcomes were compared, there was again no significant difference between the outcomes. These two groups have therefore been considered together.

A similar pattern to the behaviour problem group emerges, with almost twice as many pupils improving their attendance rate as decreasing their attendance rate. However, a larger proportion showed no change in their behaviour following the FGC. Although the outcomes for this group are generally positive, the results are not sufficient to say that the FGC has a significantly positive outcome.

Some young people showed dramatic changes in their attendance patterns, while for the majority, attendance remained around the same level and for five (a quarter), attendance dropped considerably.

The young people were divided into those who attended less than half time and those who attended half time or more before and after the FGC, and the frequencies compared. The figures are as follows:

	<50	>50
before	16	9
after	9	16

Overall the FGC significantly increased attendance, on the modest criteria of attending school half time or more.

***Are outcomes better for behaviour problems or for attendance problems?***

At August 2000, the outcomes seemed to be better for attendance problems than for behaviour problems. With larger group of children to study, two groups can be compared with greater confidence:

Outcomes at follow-up:

	improved	same	worse
behaviour all	17	12	8
attendance all	11	10	4

The figures indicate no difference between the two groups - that is the outcomes are as good for one type of problem as for another.

### ***Outcomes for special educational needs***

Schools were asked to provide information about the young peoples' special needs status, and any changes in special needs provision in the year following the FGC.

Most children were at the same special needs stage at follow-up as at FGC, although there are some indications of reduction of concerns.

#### ***Special needs support***

At one year, schools were asked whether special needs support had increased for the young person since the FGC. Of those who responded, 12 said no, and 7 said yes - this is excluding those who had transferred to special school. This suggests that the schools were continuing to need to support the young people - the data does not indicate whether this support increased due to the focus brought about by the FGC or not.

### **Outcomes related to satisfaction, plan content, age and gender**

We analysed the data to see if positive outcomes related to any satisfaction measures or to plan content. There was no discernable link between these factors, nor to age or gender of child

#### ***Review Conferences***

One of the ways in which the plans are monitored is to convene a review FGC. The review meeting can check the implementation and success of previous plans, and make new plans in the light of new information.

In this project, most families were offered a review FGC and 65% held one or more review meetings. Of those that did not hold a review, most included the intent to have one in their family plan, or at least designated someone to ask for a review if it was wanted; one said in their plan that they did not want to hold a review. Only three families that did not have a review did not include reference to one in their plan.

Reasons for not holding a review varied - in some instances the young person was excluded and so events overtook the family, in others family tensions meant the review was not wanted, and in others it appears that the total lack of progress meant that a review was thought to be unproductive. In at least one case the coordinator reported that the school's attitude affected the situation:

*“review didn't take place - lack of school engaging in the process and [the young person] feeling that it made him more than ever ‘a problem’”*

The plans from the review meetings and the follow-up information from schools at six months give some indication of the extent to which the plans were implemented by the school, other agencies and the family members.

#### *School component*

Most of the schools reported that they had carried out their part of the plan. Where parts of the plan had not been carried out this was more often the peripheral but positive elements such as helping the young person to access after school activities, or sports teams. The small number of plans involved make it difficult to generalise but two points arise for consideration.

Firstly it indicates that schools do not always fulfil their part of the plan. Monitoring the implementation of plans by both professionals and family has been an issue in many FGC projects, and it seems that this is no less of an issue in education.

Secondly it suggests that schools may be better at carrying out the more classroom based plans such as using report cards, allowing time out, or reducing the timetable than the more activity based plans. This may be because the school sees activities as a reward and is less committed to this aspect of the plan - some people take the attitude that young people should not be rewarded for presenting with difficulties - or that this type of action is more difficult to fulfil, perhaps because the person or people responsible for carrying out this part of the plan were not present at the meeting.

#### *Other agency component*

The professionals attending the FGCs were largely from the education services and coordinators sometimes reported having difficulties in enlisting the attendance of social services and the health services (particularly Child and Family Therapy/Child Guidance). Both these services tend to be over subscribed and unable or reluctant to respond to such requests. Nevertheless, referrals to child and family services were often part of the family plan, as was referral to social services on occasion. There is evidence that such referrals were made and accepted, and that the families were being supported to attend their appointments. In three cases this contact was for ADHD, and the prescribing and monitoring of Ritalin. In one other it was to support the statementing process:

*“Dr G could see how important it was for the medical reports to be submitted as soon as possible... this helped”*

Sometimes, of course, action from other agencies was slow arriving, or did not happen:

*“the family is still awaiting any action from social services”*

Reports from schools on the extent to which other agencies involved enacted their part of the plan are therefore mostly positive, but the lack of detailed information makes it difficult to quantify.

#### *Family component*

Generally, schools were very positive about the family's commitment to the plan and to doing what they said they would do:

*"Mum is now receiving counselling as family put this in their plan and Mum didn't think she needed it before"*

*"the strategies agreed (with the family) had been adhered to - it more than met my expectations"*

However, a number of the schools reported that they did not know if the family had carried out their plan - 'school is not aware of home action' - and others said that nothing had happened on the family's part:

*"no family involvement has happened and so therefore no part of the family plan has been put into place"*

*"Father agreed in plan to have more contact with H - not done, to anger and disappointment in H"*

The issue of plan enactment highlights the factor that most respondents raised as the most important factor in the success of the FGC - commitment to the process and to the young person.

#### **Commitment**

The FGC is convened as a partnership between the school, the family and other agencies to address the difficulties the young person is experiencing. Commitment to partnership in the process is seen to be as necessary as a commitment to the plan produced. It is therefore important to consider what role commitment plays in the success or otherwise of the FGC, even if this cannot be quantified.

Many of the school respondents commented that FGCs are worthwhile only if the family is committed to change:

*"the family must be prepared to be honest and listen to others and be prepared to make changes"*

However, it is clear from this project, and others, that professionals are not always good at identifying beforehand the family's willingness or ability to engage with the FGC process. When asked shortly after the FGC, a quarter of the

professionals said they had been surprised by the family's commitment or effort in attending the meeting and addressing the problems.

Some family members commented on the commitment or otherwise of their own family group:

*"The mother was wanting it all her own way ... no consideration what her children wants"*

The family's commitment to the young person and to making necessary changes is clearly an important part of success. The message from research is that you cannot predict which families will engage with this and which will not. On the other side of the coin, the commitment of the professionals may be equally important.

In terms of the schools, many of the family members (around 50%) reported being surprised by the commitment they showed. Some recorded this in their feedback:

*"I was very agreeably surprised by the genuine interest and kindness extended by [the headteacher]. He was also very responsive to suggestions put forward by family members"*

However they sometimes felt that school staff were not engaged with the process in a positive way:

*"The head should have looked up at us as we were speaking"*

There were also comments indicating that other professionals were not always engaged in the partnership process of the FGC:

*"I feel K's social worker might as well not have been there - lack of support for family"*

*"professionals talked across to each other and didn't give us eye contact and speak to us"*

Although we cannot measure it, if the participants go into an FGC expecting failure or with a negative view of the process, and if family members do not feel included or respected by professionals, it is likely to have some effect on the process and outcomes.

It seems that even with the FGC process, engaging families and professionals in the task of working together to address concerns about young people is difficult. The coordinators work hard to focus on the needs of the young person and the positive resources of those attending, and to get adults working in partnership.



Sometimes the participants work together with commitment, even against the expectations of those attending, and sometimes there are difficulties in people working together with an open mind in a spirit of partnership.

There was evidence that in some cases the FGC had engaged the commitment of the family in a way that made a considerable difference to the young person. A number also reported that the process had changed the school's relationship with the family so that everyone was working together. Where a partnership is established, it makes a difference:

*"It took us from the brink of permanent exclusion to a more stable cooperative relationship with the family"*

The qualitative changes in relationships brought about by the FGC are considered next.

### **Outcomes: changes in attitude and relationships**

Whilst data on the behavioural changes over time following the FGC are important as a measure of success, we were also interested in finding out about the more human side of the outcomes - the changes in attitude and in working together - that resulted from the FGC. This is more difficult information to gather by questionnaire, particularly where the emphasis is on factual information. The data here therefore consist of comments made by the schools, which are generally brief rather than discursive.

As the research was not able to include follow-up with the families, their views on the effect of the FGC in changing attitudes and relationships over time are missing from this section.

In all, half of the schools made positive comments about the FGC's effect on the young person, on home-school relationships and/or on their own understanding of the situation.

#### ***Effect on the young person***

In a number of cases (20%) the schools commented on changes in the young person's attitude:

*"he wants to succeed more"*

*"it helped H a little in that he realised that people cared about him and his behaviour"*

The comments indicate that at least in some cases, the meeting has increased the young person's engagement in school and suggest that this was due to the gathering together of people showing interest and concern.

### **Home-school relationships**

The FGC was reported to have an impact on some home-school relationships in around a quarter of the cases overall. This was both because of the contact between the two parties at the meeting, and the inclusion of elements of the plan detailing how the school and home would communicate.

Shortly after the FGC seven schools reported home-school relationships were 'much better', and a further four 'a bit better'. Some reported very regular contact following the FGC:

*"the head of year speaks to the young person on a virtually daily basis. The parent brings the young person to school each day, and the EWO is in constant contact with home"*

*"Mrs M has met regularly with the SENCO and talks to the class teacher daily"*

### **Greater understanding**

At six months, when asked to comment on the value of the FGC, many schools referred to the benefits of meeting and sharing concerns with the young person and their family, and the greater understanding this gave to the situation of concern:

*"Mum can now be honest with school and admit when things are difficult for her"*

*"we have more respect for mother and her coping strategies"*

*"it has given us an even clearer understanding of the background turmoil P is subjected to"*

*"we have approached things differently since realising many of B's problems stem from his home situation and the frustrations of his carers role"*

The meeting did not, however, always lead to better relationships:

*" [family member] has been harassing and intimidating my staff. [They] think we should use corporal punishment. Home school relationships are very poor"*

### **Professional liaison**

Most often the professionals at the FGC were from the education services. Some schools felt that there could have been more involvement, and when there was good involvement it could be seen as valuable in its own right:

*“if measured by outcome no (it was not worth it) but for liaison and future work it was needed. It may have a long term effect and pull together a co-ordinated multi agency approach”*

### **Inter-school liaison**

Liaison between schools was identified as a problem for seven (14%) of the young people. Where young people had transferred schools, either as a natural progression through school or to special provision, the new placement often had no knowledge of the FGC or its plan:

*“We were not informed of the FGC until 6 days ago (two months after transfer)”*

In these cases the benefits of the FGC will have been affected by the lack of inter-school liaison, and the opportunities for partnership lost.

### **Changes in the family**

When the young people concerned reported their views on the FGC three or four weeks after the meeting, over half said that things had improved for them at home. At six months after the FGC, some of the school staff reported changes they had observed within the families:

*“it was a real opportunity for the children to be able to have their concerns/unhappiness/distress discussed by the people they love. ...it resulted in the parents talking respectfully with each other in order to improve life for the children”*

### **Value of the FGC**

We have seen that overall 52% of the young people could be categorised as having improved, and that schools report a range of changes in the young people. We asked if the FGC had been worth the time and effort, whatever the outcomes had been. We found that the FGC was valued by 80% of the respondents; some commented on this:

*“it was worth the time and effort to resolve A’s difficulties regardless of the lack of improvement (in attendance)”*

*“I was perhaps a little naive and also optimistic about the outcome! it was useful to do and would have been great in year 7 or earlier. Despite what has happened since we did make some progress with K at school following the FGC”*

An even higher percentage of schools - 90% - said that they would recommend the model to other schools. This is strong support for the use of the FGC model to address serious problems in the education system.

## Summary of main points

- The Family Group Conference had a significantly positive effect as the presenting problem had improved in more than half of the young people studied, even in particularly serious cases.
- There was no significant difference between outcomes for behavioural problems and for attendance problems.
- Permanent exclusion was prevented for some people - nine with previous fixed-term exclusions had none in the follow-up period, and seven had a reduced number of exclusions.
- The FGC may have had a role in preventing deterioration in behaviour as almost all of the young people who had not had exclusions prior to the FGC remained exclusion free at follow-up.
- 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.
- Many young people with low attendance remained relatively low attenders.
- A fifth of the schools reported positive changes in the young person's confidence and attitude to school.
- A quarter of schools reported improvements in home-school relationships, and many commented on the value of having a greater insight into the home situation.
- Commitment to the process, to partnership working and to the young person were felt to be vital for the success of the model but partnership working was sometimes difficult for both family members and professionals.
- Schools noted that families were often able to engage and work to address the young person's problems.
- Family members were sometimes critical of the professionals, feeling that they were not being respectful or supportive.

- Where other agencies had been engaged in the FGC, the meeting had often increased liaison and joint working.
- Liaison between schools regarding the FGC plan and process was often lacking when a young person transferred from one placement to another.
- 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.

## **Issues raised by the research**

- The work of the coordinator is vital in bringing family members and professionals together in partnership. There are instances of difficulties on both sides, but ensuring the professionals engage in an open and committed way would seem to be a particularly important issue to address.
- The FGC is an opportunity for all involved to share information, but it is sometimes difficult to engage agencies in the process, leaving the schools feeling isolated in dealing with the presenting problems. This aspect of the coordinators' role should remain a high priority.
- The project has a good record of offering and holding review FGCs which play an important part in monitoring the plan. This helps ensure that all the agreed actions are undertaken and supports ongoing partnership work. The project may need to guard against cost cutting, to maintain a policy of offering reviews to all families.
- The FGC often led to greater understanding of problems, and better communication between the participants but when young people experienced moves, information and involvement in the FGC process for the new provision was lacking. This needs further consideration.
- The outcomes are positive in relation to both the referred behaviours and home-school relationships and there is clear support for continuation of the project. Further funding has been agreed to take the work forward, but continuation and expansion may remain an issue.

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The following research findings on FGCs are available at [www.shef.ac.uk/~fwpg](http://www.shef.ac.uk/~fwpg)

- Family Partners – A Study of Family Group Conferences
- Family Group Conferences in Haringey
- Family Group Conferences in Youth Justice

A 'Summary of Findings' from this report is available 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)