



Family Group Conferencing

Resources:

- **Center for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking**, University of Minnesota School of Social Work, 105 Peters Hall, 1404 Gortner Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108–6160; 612–624–4923, fax 612–625–3744, rjp@tclmail.che.umn.edu; www.che.umn.edu/
- **Nebraska Court Improvement Project**, UNL Center of Children, Families and the Law, 121 South 13th St., Suite 302, Lincoln, NE 68588; 402-472-9814.
- **Restorative Conferencing: A Series of Guides for Parents, Pupils & Teachers**. The Anti-Bullying Support Team, Sandfield Centre, Sandfield Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 1QH; Tel. 0115 9150940; <http://www.inclusive-solutions.com/>
- **Restorative Justice Online** (www.restorativejustice.org) is a comprehensive, non-partisan website devoted to restorative justice principles, practice, programs and theory. Includes the largest annotated bibliography of restorative justice articles in the world. Restorative Justice Online is a service of the PFI Centre for Justice and Reconciliation (<http://www.pfijr.org/>). More information on PFI can be found on the Prison Fellowship International website at <http://www.pfi.org/>
- **Transforming Conflict** is an organization that offers training, consultancy and support in educational settings for people seeking to enhance their skills in building a sense of community, fostering a spirit of inclusion and dealing creatively with challenging situations. It is guided by the philosophy of Restorative Justice, which stresses the importance of relationships above rules and the value of dialogue in healing the damage done to relationships by inappropriate behavior. http://transformingconflict.org/restorative_conferencing.htm
- **Victim Offender Mediation Association** (VOMA), 143 Canal Street, New Smyrna Beach, FL 32168, 904–424–1591; fax 904–423–8099, voma@voma.org; www.voma.org.

Family Group Conferencing is one of several types of *Restorative Conferencing* that has begun to get widespread attention and use in the U.S. over the past few years. Restorative conferences are related to the “restorative justice” movement growing out of efforts at community policing and alternative sentencing for juvenile offenders. “Restorative justice is a framework for juvenile justice reform that seeks to engage victims, offenders and their families, other citizens, and community groups both as clients of juvenile justice services and as resources in an effective response to youth crime” (Brazemore & Umbreit, 2001, p.1).

What Is Family Group Conferencing?

“Family group conferencing involves the community of people most affected by the crime—the victim, the offender, and the family, friends, and key supporters of both—in deciding the resolution of a criminal or delinquent incident. The affected parties are brought together by a trained facilitator to discuss how they and others have been harmed by the offense and how that harm might be repaired” (Brazemore & Umbreit, 2001, p.5). It is based on a long-standing traditional form of dispute resolution of the Maori of New Zealand, which subsequently has been incorporated into the law there. The model has become widespread in Australia as well, and is based on the police initiated diversion approach known as the “Wagga Wagga model” where school officials and police officers set up and facilitate conference meetings (Brazemore & Umbreit, 2001). Now this form of conferencing is being used in numerous states in the U.S. and in Canada.

The conferences have been used for crimes which include arson, assaults, drug offenses, theft, vandalism, and in some states, child maltreatment. In New Zealand, this type of conferencing is used in the disposition of all but the most violent and serious delinquency cases (Brazemore & Umbreit, 2001). In the U.S. it is being employed as a diversionary option for many of these crimes under the authority of the local or juvenile courts, and is being experimented with as an intervention for child maltreatment cases (Nebraska Court Improvement Project, 2002), but can also be used after adjudication and disposition to address unresolved issues or determine specific terms of restitution.

While originally devised for juvenile delinquency, the same approach has also been adapted by the schools for use with school-related behavior problems, as well as adapted to support children and families with mental health needs. This process has already been implemented in schools, community agencies, residential treatment programs, and other arenas where mediation between a child and the persons in his environment affected by his behavior might be useful.

The family group conference relies on the presence of family, friends, service providers, and others as the support system that will support the youth in actually implementing the restorative agreement reached at the meeting. In this way, it has some similarities to wraparound (See fact sheet on that topic) in that it empowers the family, friends, and community to create a plan related to youth behavior, and provide the necessary supports to effectively guide youth behavior. It is different from the wraparound process in that it is short-term and involves typically just one meeting. In family group conferencing the plan focuses more on the immediate problematic behavior and the restitution related to that. It has less of a focus on service coordination and on resource development for long term care than wraparound (although those could be included).

Schools in Nottingham, England employ what is there called “Restorative Conferencing” in addressing bullying, name-calling, assault, harassment, and truancy in school. Each school involved has staff trained in Restorative Conferencing. In dealing with a dispute the usual procedure is for the trained staff member to offer those involved in the conflict the chance to attend a Restorative Conference which brings together all those affected by a particular incident in the school, discusses the incident in a calm manner, looks at ways to put right the harm the incident has caused, writes an agreement

on the actions that will be taken, and provides support to the implementation of the plan. This use of family group conferencing may parallel functional behavior analysis team planning (See Fact Sheet on that topic) in the U.S., but with a wider array of family and community involvement.

What Do We Know About Family Group Conferencing?

As reported by Brazemore & Umbreit (2001), "To date, two studies have been conducted to assess the impact of family group conferencing with young offenders. One study (Maxwell & Morris, 1993) assessed the impact of New Zealand's law mandating the widespread use of conferencing. It found that families of offenders in conferencing programs are more frequently and actively involved in the justice process than are families of offenders whose cases are handled by standard procedures. It also found that offenders, victims, and their families described the conference process as helpful. Preliminary evaluations of conferencing programs in the United States also indicate high levels of victim satisfaction with the conference process and high rates of offender compliance with agreements reached during conferences (Fercello & Umbreit, 1999; McCold & Wachtel, 1998)" (p.6).

Brazemore & Umbreit (2001) state that "Practitioners involved in family group conferencing programs observe a reduction in fear for many victims. When used as a diversion from court, conferencing can provide a much speedier and more satisfying resolution of incidents than would otherwise be the case. Family group conferencing also builds community skills in conflict resolution and participatory decision making"(p.6). No studies could be identified which evaluated the impact on school behavior problems or school violence of a family group conferencing initiative.

Making Family Group Conferencing Work

Goals of family group conferencing according to Brazemore & Umbreit (2001) include the following:

- "Providing an opportunity for the victim to be directly involved in the discussion of the offense and in decisions regarding appropriate sanctions to be placed on the offender.
- Increasing the offender's awareness of the human impact of his or her behavior and providing the offender an opportunity to take full responsibility for it.
- Engaging the collective responsibility of the offender's support system for making amends and shaping the offender's future behavior.
- Allowing both offender and victim to reconnect to key community support systems"(pp. 5-6).

After completing a training course, either volunteers or paid employees can serve as conference facilitators. Participation by all involved in these conferences is voluntary. In addition to the victim, offender, and their family members, a conference might involve teachers, other relatives, peers, special adult friends, and community resource people. Unlike wraparound, family group conferencing typically occurs in one session which may last for an extended period of time (all day if necessary). A workable plan and commitment to implement it must be in place before the end of the meeting.

Brazemore & Umbreit (2001) explain the process: "The conference facilitator contacts the victim and offender to explain the process and invite them to the conference. The facilitator also asks the victim and offender to identify key members of their support systems, who also will be invited to participate. The conference typically begins with the offender describing the incident. The other participants then describe the impact of the incident on their lives. Some argue that it is preferable to allow the victim to start the discussion, if he or she wishes to do so (Umbreit & Stacy, 1996). Through these narrations, the offender is faced with the impact of his or her behavior on the victim, on those close to the victim, and on the offender's own family and friends, and the victim has the opportunity to express feelings and ask questions about the incident. After a thorough discussion of impacts, the victim is asked to identify desired outcomes from the conference; in this way, the victim can help to shape the obligations that will be placed on the offender. All participants contribute to the problem-solving process of determining how the offender might best repair the harm he or she has caused. The session ends with participants signing an agreement that outlines their expectations and commitments"(p.5). Those in attendance at the meeting also commit themselves to supporting and monitoring implementation of the plan to make sure it is carried out.

Conclusion

The Family Group Conference or other Restorative Justice Conferencing models offer a useful tool for organizing a family, school, and community plan and support network for students with chronic behavioral needs, youth who are delinquent, or youth who are aggressive or violent. While maintaining the goals and process, the details can be modified to different situations, including use in schools, and may be compatible with other school programs such as wraparound or functional assessment and behavior plan teams.

Reece L. Peterson, June 3003

Note: *This fact sheet draws heavily from the OJJDP Bulletin NCJ 184738 on Restorative Conferencing Models by C. Brazemore & M. Umbreit (full reference below). However any errors in this fact sheet are ours.*

References

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About the Safe and Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing prevention-based approaches to school safety, discipline reform and behavior improvement in schools.

Websites: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/> or <http://www.unl.edu/srs/> Or Contact:

Russell Skiba, Indiana Education Policy Ctr., 170 Smith Ctr., 2805 E. 10th Street, Bloomington, IN 47408; 812-855-1240; skiba@indiana.edu, or

Reece L. Peterson, 202A Barkley Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68583-0732; 402-472-5480; rpeterson1@unl.edu ©2003 Skiba & Peterson