

Family Group Conferencing

Tier 3

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Family Group Conferencing is one of several types of restorative practices that have received widespread attention and use in the United States. Restorative practices are related to the “restorative justice” movement growing out of community efforts to improve 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.” (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001, p. 1)

Restorative justice is now being adapted for use in schools, and is often referred to as “restorative practices” when used in schools (See Strategy Brief on Restorative Practices). One of the primary practices involved in implementing a restorative justice practices philosophy the whether in the community or in the schools is “family group conferencing.”

What Is Family Group Conferencing?

Family Group Conferencing is a procedure to bring the people together who are negatively affected by a behavior, and to address the behavior and the person who acted inappropriately:

“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.” (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001, p. 5)

When adapted to schools this conference would focus on the expectations identified for the school environment, and the problems created by violations of those expectations. It might bring together teachers, administrators, psychologists or counselors, representatives of the student body, parents, the “victim” student or students, and the “offending” student to discuss and teach appropriate behavior and consider appropriate consequences. This is intended as a way to “repair” the “harm” which occurred in the school as a result of the behavior.

What is the origin of Family Group Conferencing?

Family group conferencing is based on a long-standing traditional form of dispute resolution of the Maori people of New Zealand, which subsequently has been incorporated into the laws

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 (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001).

These family group conferences have been used to address crimes as diverse as: 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 (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001). In the United States 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. The goal of family group conferencing is to ensure that offenders face community disapproval, understand how their actions harmed the community, and make a written agreement to repair the damage. Community members then help to reintegrate the offender back into the community once the offender has made amends (Bazemore, 2009). Now this form of conferencing is being used in Canada, and numerous states in the United States including Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Illinois (Bazemore, 2009). (See the strategy briefs on Restitution and Youth Courts for other programs with this goal).

Use in Schools

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 community agencies, residential treatment programs, and other arenas where mediation between a student, and the persons in his environment affected by this



student’s behavior might be useful. It is now becoming more widely used in schools to address serious behavior problems, disruption and aggression. Thus the family group conference becomes a disciplinary diversion, an alternative to long term suspension or expulsion.

How does Family Group Conferencing Work?

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. When a problem arises, the trained staff member invites those involved to attend a restorative conference. The participants then: 1) discuss the incident in a calm manner, 2) identify who was harmed and how they felt, as well ways to amend the harm done, possibly including an apology, 3) formulate a written agreement on the actions that will be taken, and 4) provide support for the implementation of the plan. In developing this plan, the group may discuss the reasons the inappropriate behavior occurred, as well as alternative more appropriate behaviors and methods to avoid the same problems in the future. Most importantly, there is a commit-

ment of all to monitor and support the successful implementation of the plan.

The family group conference relies on the presence of family, friends, service providers, and others as the support system that will assist the youth in actually implementing the restorative agreement reached at the meeting. Implementation of the agreement is the responsibility of the youth, but the conference members also monitor and provide support for implementation of the components in the agreement. In this way, it has some similarities to wraparound (See strategy brief on Wraparound) 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).

What Do We Know About Family Group Conferencing?

Due to its origin, much of the research on Family Group Conferencing comes from the justice or juvenile justice system. 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).

In another study (Umbreit, Vos & Coates, 2006), family group conferencing had satisfaction rates ranging from 73% to 98% and two recent studies have reported satisfaction rates with the agreements developed at the conferencing sessions ranging from 90% to 100%. The same study found that 83% of juvenile offenders would recommend conferencing and that 89% of the juvenile offenders that attended conferencing thought the agreement was fair. Well over half of the victims received apologies (although the facilitator does not require them). In four different studies, reported by Umbreit et al. (2006), the completion rate of the agreements reached in conferences ranged from 85% to 95%. In a school-based study he reported, 70% of the conferences were done in place of school suspension. Another study that found that students who expressed remorse had one third fewer repeat offenses than those who did not express remorse. There may be other positive outcomes of family group conferencing. In 2001, Bazemore & Umbreit stated:

“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).

More recently studies of the use of Family Group Conferencing in schools have begun to be available. One very significant study conducted in Minneapolis Public Schools examined Family Group Conferencing conducted with 83 students that were recommended for expulsion over a more than two year period to see if the Family Group Conference would make a difference in improving student behavior, maintaining family and student relationships with school, and keeping the students in school after the intervention. The study is significant in that over half of the students had committed assaults. Many had brought weapons to school, and other behaviors included drugs, treat/intimidation, vandalism and harassment. All of these would

likely be considered relatively severe behavior incidents. The study was also significant in that about 55% of the participants were African American, and another 15% multiracial and 12% American Indian. All three of these groups were significantly over represented compared to their proportions in the student population in the district. As a result the study reflected the over representation of these groups common in most reports of discipline.

The study used pre and post survey of parents and student, and an examination of student's academic and behavioral records before, during and after the intervention to evaluate the use of a Restorative Conference Program. There was not control group comparison.

After a disciplinary incident which there are grounds for expulsion, the student was referred to the Restorative Conferencing Program. While the student served a required out-of-school suspension, district social works work with student and family to identify an alternative school placement. When in the initial suspension was completed, a restorative conference was held concurrent with starting the new school. The conference includes the district social work with training in restorative conferencing, representatives of the student, family or guardians, and anyone else identified as important to helping the student get back on track. The conference is facilitated by a neutral trained facilitator from the Legal Rights Center, a community agency that implements restorative practices. Victims were usually not included, but plans to repair harm were included.

"During the conference, all present help the family and student identify their strengths. The incident that led to the recommendation for expulsion is discussed in full, in addition to related issues at school or home. All present (including staff from the new school and the school district) are called upon to reflect on the accountability for the incident and for providing support for the student to better succeed at school. After these steps the facilitator guides the participants through the creation of a detailed accountability plan for successful

placement at the new school, and targets that may enable the student to safely return to their original school, if they so choose, with their good standing restored (after a minimum of 45 days and usually at a logical break, i.e., after the completion of a quarter or semester of study). The conference plan often includes referrals to therapeutic or social services."(McMorris, et. al., 2013, p11)

Significant improvements occurred in several areas that were measured. McMorris et al. (2013) found that Family Group Conferencing effectively increases parent and student engagement in school, students and parents considered participation in the conference a positive experience, there was increased communication between the school and the parents and students, there were decreases in problem behaviors including fighting, and there were increases in attendance. There were also statistically significant increases in academic performance and in credit accumulation. There were also increases in the students' perceived ability to succeed in school, to make better decisions and to communicate with their parents.. McMorris concluded that conferencing "appears to interrupt the dis-engagement and drop-out trajectories that may result from punitive and exclusionary disciplinary approaches" (McMorris, 2013, p. 40). Although further research is needed, this study appears to provide strong support for the restorative conference to provide a non-exclusionary Tier 3 (tertiary) intervention for serious behaviors which otherwise result in expulsion.



Making Family Group Conferencing Work

Goals of family group conferencing according to Bazemore & 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 (p. 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. Family group conferencing works better when the victim willingly participates, but an unwilling victim should not be pressured to attend, as a primary consideration of a conference is safety for all involved (Wearmouth, McKinney, & Glynn, 2007). Before the conference begins it is important to "identify the appropriate community of care around the young person on whom the conference will focus" (Wearmouth, McKinney, & Glynn, 2007, p. 44). In addition to the victim, offender, and their family members, a conference might involve



teachers, principal or assistant principal, other relatives, peers, special adult friends, and community resource people. Unlike wraparound, family group conferencing typically occurs in one session (or in the case of the Minneapolis study two sessions) that 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 (Umbreit & Stacy, 1996).

Bazemore & 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 people at the conference are reminded that, "the problem is the problem, the person is not the problem" (p. 5).

The conference typically begins with the offender, or student, 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 (Wearmouth, McKinney & Glynn, 2007). “The session ends with participants signing an agreement that outlines their expectations and commitments” (Umbreit & Stacy, 1996, 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. When using conferencing in schools, the principal should attempt to control or manage the process of conferencing because he or she would not be the facilitator. However, it is recommended that the principal be the person in charge of proposing or recommending a conference (Wearmouth, McKinney, & Glynn, 2007).

Implementing Family Group Conferencing in Schools

To introduce any restorative practices in a school requires planning, negotiation, and deliberation (Wearmouth, McKinney, & Glynn, 2007). The following list contains issues that administrators need to think about when deciding to implement a restorative practice, especially conferencing:

- Having support of staff and the community of the school are essential so consultation should be sought before beginning a conferencing program
- Schools need to determine that conferencing fits into the current culture of the school
- It is recommended that an outside community support person assist in conducting conferences as this tends to enhance participation of all groups
- Principals should be trained in referring students for conferencing

- Schools need to decide what types of behavior will be appropriately addressed by conferences (Restorative Practices Development Team, 2003)

As can be seen by the study conducted in Minneapolis a well-trained facilitator who can provide objective point of view may be an important component of effectiveness in school discipline disputes.

Conclusion

The family group conference model is a useful tool for bringing together members of a family, a school, and a community to create a plan and offer support for students with chronic behavioral or mental health needs, as well as students who might otherwise be suspended or expelled for a variety of behavior serious incidents. It is an effective restorative practice for teaching offenders about the harm they caused (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001). In the school setting, conferencing helps to address the power imbalances between school officials and the student and community. In the conference, everyone must listen respectfully, not interrupt, and adhere to the agreement made in the conference. Such conferencing can be used in place of suspensions and expulsions while still repairing the harm or hurt that has been caused (Wearmouth, McKinney, & Glynn, 2007). Although there has been limited research on the use of this procedure in schools, on disignificant study has provided strong support for the potential value of this intervention. As a result family group conferencing should be considered a promising Tier 3 intervention for students with serious problematic behaviors which violate school codes of conduct.



Notes: This fact sheet draws heavily from the OJJDP Bulletin NCJ 184738 on Restorative Conferencing Models by C. Bazemore & M. Umbreit (2001). However, any errors in this fact sheet are ours.

See related *Strategy Briefs on Restorative Practices, Restitution, Youth Courts*, and the *Resource Brief, Resources on Restorative Practices*. All are available from the Student Engagement Project, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 202 Barkley Center. at <http://k12engagement.unl.edu>

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