

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

FAMILY GROUP DECISION MAKING IN PENNSYLVANIA: A CROSS SYSTEMS OPTION FOR STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Family Engagement recognizes the role and tradition that families have in the understanding and care-taking of its members. Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is a family engagement practice model which better enables families and family networks to develop and implement plans to ensure the emotional and physical safety and well being of children through creative use and integration of available resources and services. The practice was initiated in New Zealand in response to the Maori people's concern that their children were over-represented in both the juvenile justice and child protection systems. The Maori also believed that their family group which includes the nuclear family, clan and tribe should be involved in the planning for their children. A further concern was that once Maori children entered the juvenile justice and child protection systems, that they were often "lost" from the Maori kinship system, with children frequently being placed in "Pakeha" (Caucasian) homes and the family having little meaningful connection with the child.

Family Group Decision Making is rooted in a strengths-based, child-centered, and family-focused philosophy. "While the child's needs are at the center of the decision making process, the service is focused on building the family's capacity to care for and protect the child" (American Humane Association, 1996). With this philosophical construct, professionals recognize that families have expertise about themselves and their functioning. Family members know their strengths, weaknesses and unspoken secrets—knowledge that can be helpful in formulating plans that better protect children.

A Family Group Conference is at the center of this approach. Family members and service providers are invited to the conference. The conference itself is made up of three discrete stages. First, service providers provide a concise and non-judgmental description of the risks that exist for the child and outline strengths observed in the family. In order to insure that the family has an understanding of the risks to the child, the families' questions and concerns are discussed. Secondly, the family is given time to develop their own plan to address the safety and well-being of the child. Finally the plan is reviewed by the child welfare agency and, provided it does not compromise the child's safety, physical and emotional well-being, the plan is accepted.

FGDM, as a method of Family Engagement, has received the leadership and support of the Office of Children, Youth and Families in the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. Through this initiative, the Department recognizes the essential role of families in caring for family members while assisting the state and its counties to meet their goals related to the safety, permanency and well-being of children and families as defined in the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). The initiative is being implemented as a cross-systems approach because protecting children is not only the responsibility of the county Children and Youth agencies, but includes other governmental agencies such as drug and alcohol and juvenile justice providers, schools, local non-profit organizations, citizen groups and the family. The cross-systems approach is firmly rooted in Pennsylvania's strong commitment to broad-based collaboration on the state and local level as evidenced in the Commonwealth's Family Service System Reform

and Systems of Care initiatives and its Family Centers. It draws upon lessons learned through programs that have preceded it.

By focusing on the strengths of the family and empowering them to set both short and long term goals, a collaborative atmosphere between professionals and those individuals most closely connected to the children is created. The hope is that this cross-systems approach project will improve the quality of service delivered, preserve the family unit whenever possible and help the Department meet its safety, permanency and well-being goals.

The Department and a Statewide Implementation Team have provided support to counties implementing Family Group Decision Making. Many Pennsylvania counties have received training, technical assistance and a variety of tools designed to assist them to implement the model successfully. The counties actively implemented in this family engagement practice includes the following: Adams, Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Bucks, Centre, Crawford, Cumberland, Dauphin, Erie, Huntington, Lehigh, Lycoming, Northumberland, Snyder, Venango, Washington and York.