

Family Team Conferencing

Introduction

Families have a long history of dealing with crises and solving problems by convening their own network of members and supports to help address both routine family issues and emergencies. These natural networks, usually informally organized, occur in all cultures as a means of adding problem-solving expertise and informal supports.

Commonly in our culture, natural family teams deal with problems such as financial pressures, employment needs, domestic conflicts, child rearing, child management issues and health needs. The greater the complexity of the problem, the larger and more diverse these teams become as families try to add new expertise and contributors to problem solving efforts. Prior to the development of formal social service helping systems, families often had only their own kin, friends, neighbors and religious/cultural institutions to rely on.

As the extended family structure began to erode and as increased mobility, economic pressures and economic opportunity caused family members to relocate long distances from home communities and other family members, many families lost access to traditional family supports. Increasing numbers of individuals found themselves isolated in new communities with few allies to call on when problems arose. Even in communities where extended family networks remain intact, many people today are less likely to depend on family supports than in past generations and more likely to turn to professional services when they need help. It is not uncommon for families most challenged by their circumstances to become alienated from their extended families and communities by offending family or community values or by engaging in criminal behavior or substance abuse, for example. This “burning bridges” route to isolation is probably as common as geographic isolation.

For families experiencing the most intense pressures, such as extreme poverty, child abuse, mental illness, domestic violence or substance abuse, isolation from natural helping networks can have a devastating effect. And in the case of families where a parent has abused or neglected a child, even voluntary social service supports are not without risk; mandatory child abuse reporting requirements make it difficult to ask for help without risking possible severe sanctions. The existence of legal consequences and the stigma associated with child maltreatment only reinforce the isolation of many families at greatest risk.

The formal social services systems of today have attempted, with mixed success, to replace some of those supports that family and community networks can offer with

formal social service structures. “Professionalized” service systems often presume to know better than families what they need and attempt to substitute a categorical array of services for many of the informal supports a family might choose for itself. Plans for families may become prescriptive and coercive, failing to incorporate the family’s strengths, needs, knowledge and resources in goal setting, decision making or selection of services. As a result, many families commonly react to the experience of being forced to change, as we all are likely to do, initially resisting the intervention and ultimately complying, sometimes only in appearance. These are often the families who stay in our systems for years and the parents whose children still may not be safe.

What is a Family Team Conference?

A Family Team Conference is a gathering of family members, friends, members of the family’s faith community and professionals who join together to jointly develop individualized plans to strengthen family capacity, to assure safety, stability and permanency and to build natural supports that will sustain the family over time. Family conferencing evolved from the way that families form their own natural helping system to meet needs and solve problems. The Family Team Conference is often the forum in which the child and family team comes together to help the family craft, implement or change the individualized child and family plan.

Families in which children need protection also require a supportive circle of allies that includes extended family, friends, neighbors, other members of the family’s informal support system and community resources like churches and civic organizations, as well as professional supports from a variety of community agencies. Sometimes families in crisis can, themselves, mobilize part of the support system. However, they often need assistance in structuring this process and developing a full array of members for the team. Partners who see their role as helping the family in the change process can make a more effective contribution if a team facilitator is responsible for bringing the team together. The team should be brought together in a Family Team Conference at a time and place accessible to the family, focusing on safety and permanency, engaging team members, assessing needs, facilitating the development of a plan, recording specific responsibilities of team members, coordinating actions, ensuring that steps are accomplished and monitoring progress towards change. Team members are critical to identifying strengths, identifying options for accomplishment of goals, contributing their skills and resources as family supports, holding others accountable for their commitments, identifying critical decisions and providing feedback about progress. Whether the family is functioning well enough to organize its own team or needs help with facilitation, it is vital that the family feels that they are central and influential participants in the team and not just the passive object of the team’s efforts. Bringing a team together contributes a variety of constructive benefits including:

- Preventing abuse and neglect and speeding permanency
- Preventing removal and placement disruptions

- Strengthening engagement with families and older youth
- Improving the quality of assessments about strengths and needs
- Increasing the likelihood of matching the appropriate service to needs
- Identifying kinship placement opportunities
- Increasing the variety of options for solutions
- Increasing the capacity to overcome barriers
- Creating a system of supports that will sustain the family over time and provide a safety net after agency involvement ends

Family Team Conferencing is a solution-focused method that draws on the family's past success in solving problems, determines circumstances when the family is currently able to solve the problem (even if only for a brief period) and develops the family's vision for a preferred future. Family Team Conferencing can work to strengthen families in a way that they can find immediate solutions to needs and provide long-term solutions for issues related to safety, permanence and well-being.

Family Team Conferencing is based on a number of family centered beliefs and practice values. Following are some of the most important principles that make family conferencing work:

- Genuineness, respect and empathy are the three core helping conditions of successful engagement with families. **Genuineness** is communicating with the family with honesty and congruence between what we say and do. It involves openness and clarity about critical concerns and timeframes. **Respect** is demonstrating the belief in the value and potential in every human being, including the value contributed by their unique culture. **Empathy** is the ability to express an understanding of and compassion for the other person's experience. If we can communicate respect for the family and empathy for its struggles in a genuine way, real partnerships are possible in addressing the family's needs.
- The focus should be on needs rather than symptoms. Unless the underlying conditions producing the behavior are addressed, symptoms will only be suppressed, to reappear later.
- People are capable of change and most people are able to find the solutions within themselves, especially when they are helped in a caring way to identify that solution.
- All people and families have strengths. Strengths are discovered and confirmed when people are affirmed, listened to, acknowledged and encouraged.

Recognizing strengths in families builds a foundation for a trusting relationship and a functional platform for change.

- A family is more invested in a plan in which the family members believe that they are full partners in the decision making process.
- When extended family members and friends become part of a team, they frequently identify solutions that no formal system would be able to generate.
- Family and friends can provide long-term care, vigilance and commitment in a way that no formal helping system can. That support during a Family Team Conference helps a family take supported risks toward change. Kinship and informal supports also provide a level of accountability that is unique to their relationship with the family.

How Did Family Team Conferencing Evolve?

Family Team Conferencing evolved during implementation of the R. C. class action child welfare settlement in Alabama in the early 1990's from a variety of approaches employing active involvement of families and children in the service planning and decision-making process. The R.C. settlement agreement was based on a set of best practice principles from the field of child welfare, education, developmental disabilities and children's mental health. Prominent among those principles were the following:

- Children should be protected from abuse and neglect
- Children should have stability and permanence in their lives
- Services provided should be based on an individualized, needs-based plan, crafted by the family team and driven by the child and family's unique strengths and needs
- The child and family have a meaningful role in designing and implementing the plan
- Assessment of needs should be based on the child and family's underlying needs and conditions, not merely symptoms
- Services provided should be delivered in a coordinated and therapeutic manner
- Children and families should have access to a comprehensive array of services
- If services are not available to meet individualized needs, they should be created
- Children should be placed in the least restrictive most normalized living arrangements and educational settings appropriate to their needs

So the question arose, "How can these principles be implemented most effectively at the case level?" Using best practice knowledge from child welfare, children's mental health (especially wraparound practice and the use of the child and family team), special education (regarding the focus on individualized education plans) and developmental disabilities (related to client and family participation in planning), through a process of trial and error, the use of family teams as a planning and decision-making forum evolved. National experts in these fields were retained to help the State shape its new approach to practice.

Each child was entitled to an individualized service plan developed with the participation of parents and other family, the child (unless the child was too young to understand and participate), the family's informal helping system, formal service providers and others at regular and frequent service planning conferences – with the timing of team meetings based on changing circumstances, rather than fixed intervals. Use of these conferences became a universal practice within the system. ISP (Individualized Service Planning) meetings, as they were called at the time, began with the system's first contact with the family at CPS intake and continued throughout the family's involvement with the system. Because the family meetings were routine and frequent, it was not possible to employ enough expert facilitators to facilitate all of the meetings, so as a part of a comprehensive retraining of all system staff, line staff and supervisors were trained in the facilitation process once they had completed a new competency training curriculum.

In the mid-1990's, a number of the principal architects of the system's reform left the Alabama system and formed The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, a private, nonprofit technical assistance organization. This organization was created to advance the lessons learned in the Alabama reform about the power and effectiveness of child and family involvement, the success of strengths and needs based individualized practice and the necessity of focusing on frontline practice.

The Child Welfare Group was invited to assist the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Initiative, Community Partnerships for the Protection of Children, now sponsored by The Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare, in implementing a new practice approach in the Initiative. That approach, The Individualized Course of Action, drew heavily on the model of family involvement and individualized, needs based practice developed in Alabama. Other experts involved in the Initiative helped expand the original ISP conferencing model to respond more fully to domestic violence concerns, to strengthen the use of informal and community supports and to employ the conferencing approach in more preventive settings.

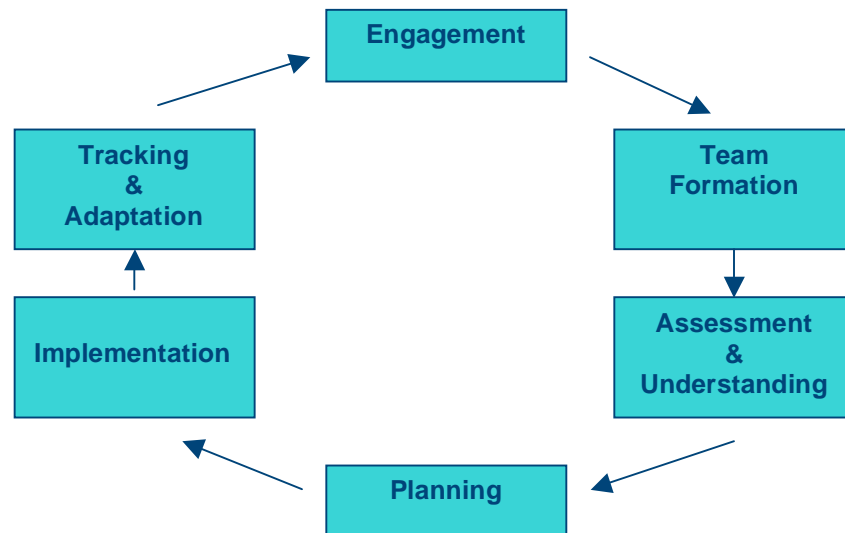
A primary goal of the Initiative is to strengthen families and help them achieve safety and independence, so the Individualized Course of Action (ICA) approach that was adopted stresses the use of a team of family supports that will support families over time. As a result, the participants in the planning and decision making conferences with the family became known as The Family Team and the meetings were defined as Family Team Conferences.

Characteristics of Family Team Conferencing

Family Team Conferencing shares many similarities with other approaches to family meetings, such as involvement of the family and informal supports. While the following list of characteristics is not necessarily exclusive to Family Team Conferencing, these collective qualities do reflect a unique approach that is based on a larger systemic focus on frontline practice. Those characteristics are as follows:

- ❑ Family Team Conferencing is an essential practice tool within a larger systemic focus on frontline practice development
- ❑ The overarching framework of practice in which Family Team Conferencing is most effective includes intensive skills development among frontline staff in the areas of:
 - engaging and building trusting relationships with families
 - developing capable teams around the child and family
 - using the team to assess strengths and needs, especially the underlying needs that have produced the circumstances and behaviors requiring system attention
 - developing individualized plans with strong child and family involvement that employ child and family strengths in the plan/course of action to resolve critical needs
 - implementing plans in timely and effective ways
 - tracking and adapting plans, based on results, in order to develop safety and sustainability beyond formal system involvement

Those elements of the model of practice are best understood not as separate events, but as a process, as illustrated below.



- ❑ Family Team Conferences are employed from the first system interaction with the family (including the initial CPS intervention) until the family no longer is involved with child welfare
- ❑ Central to the work of the family team is establishment of the primacy of safety, permanency and sustainable family independence as goals for the family
- ❑ Advance preparation of families new to the process for their first meetings is essential to their success

- Family Team Conferences are needs driven (when a plan is needed or requires modification), not event driven (only at predetermined points in the casework process or tied only to placement decisions)
- A major focus of the Family Team Conference is the development of a sustainable family team that evolves and continues beyond formal system involvement
- Family Team Conferencing assumes that in many circumstances the worker with whom the child and family has the most trusting relationship, even if it is the primary caseworker, can facilitate the Conference if they have been well-trained and have developed the practice skills referenced previously. This recognizes the inevitable necessity of front-line workers having substantive practice skills and helps to avoid layers of facilitators and the disruption of existing team responsibility and functioning to make particular decisions like those involving placement or permanency
- A specific facilitation process that structures the Conferencing process (described in *The Child Welfare Group's Handbook for Family Team Conferencing*), beginning with development within the Family Team of a working agreement about the nature of the issues and problems faced by the family, is important to success
- Flexible dollars should be available to the Family Team to insure that services can be individualized based on needs

Decision Making

The movement toward consumer-driven services in the human services field, also described as family-driven, self-directed and person-centered, is growing. The approach is foundational in the developmental disabilities field and in the Wraparound movement. Family-driven approaches are also promoted in special education, services to the mentally ill and in child welfare. Inevitably, however, practitioners will ask what course should be taken when the family or youth promotes a path that compromises safety or impedes permanency. The question is often framed as, "Who decides?"

This tension between family empowerment and perceived agency obligations is sometimes raised in the implementation of family team conferencing, especially related to child safety issues. Child welfare practitioners might ask, for example, if they would be expected to accede to a parents wish for reunification when parental capacity is insufficient to assure child safety. Obviously, the answer to that question is no. In such a circumstance, however, the team could provide an environment where the parent could exercise choices about steps, services and supports through which a safe alternative to removal could be implemented or parental capacity could be most effectively strengthened.

When considering this issue it is important to remember that the Family Team Conference is foremost a planning process. Decision-making is a part of that process, but it is expected that a child and family will have a lasting team with which they develop a trusting relationship lasting throughout their encounter with the system. Many major decisions arise after the team has formed and partnership relationships have been formed. Even in circumstances when the team is newly formed, for example following an emergency removal, the family focused team conference is designed to enlist the family as partners in protecting their children.

Experience has shown that the, “Who decides?” choice rarely occurs when a well-functioning team is operating. A key to avoiding differences and confrontations about decisions is the facilitation process itself. Early in the first meetings with families the team reaches a working agreement with the family about the nature of the challenge or problem facing the family and what success will look like. Any non-negotiables like prior court orders and child safety and permanency are clearly identified and become part of the working agreement. Inevitably there will be some circumstances where regardless of family commitment to the plan or decision – or lack of it, circumstances necessitate that the team must conclude with a plan that resolves safety concerns.

One of reasons that Family Team Conferences are effective is that they recognize the family’s strengths and potential capacity, a value that underlies all of the team’s functioning. If the approach to teaming begins with an assertion of control by the professionals, the team conference has turned into a conventional staffing. As practitioners begin to experience the benefits of the teaming process and greater success in actual cases, fears of the potential negative consequences of meaningful family empowerment begin to subside.

Conclusion

Increasing numbers of systems are adopting the Family Team Conferencing process. The process is being implemented in eleven different states. What these states are learning is that while new rules, policies, technology and accountability measures are important supports for better outcomes, procedural changes alone will not change the lives of the nation’s at-risk children and families. Ultimately, it is the nature and quality of practice, that one-on-one relationship and interaction between a worker or community helper and a family, which is the agent for change – that opens the door for effective teaming and community involvement capable of producing and sustaining critical outcomes.

While Family Team Conferencing alone is not a reform, this process may be the most powerful single initiative a system can undertake. Used as an entry point for broad practice improvement, it reveals opportunities to join with families as allies in a shared vision of safety, permanency, well-being and adequate family functioning.

Attachment

A GUIDE TO THE STEPS OF A FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE

WELCOME...Introduce yourself; let the group know how you feel about being in this meeting; welcome the group making sure to recognize that this is the family's team and that everyone around the table has been identified by the parent as one who cares about the family and who wants to see the family do well. Ask each team member to introduce him or herself and to tell how they are connected to the family.

RECORD...Briefly summarize the family and team's decisions on a flip chart throughout the Conference.

PURPOSE...Discuss the most important issues facing the child and family today (usually this is something like..."We need to find permanency/safety for the children"; or the child and caregiver need help in managing his behavior"). Gain agreement from the team about the purpose of the conference.

DESIRED OUTCOMES...Ask the parent what he and/or she wants as the outcome of the conference. Sometimes parents may say..."To understand what needs to happen for my children to be returned" or "To get help in dealing with my substance abuse". Be sure to use their own words in recording their statement of desired outcome.

NON NEGOTIABLES...Make sure the team understands the non-negotiables in the case, such as the primacy of safety and permanency in the planning and decision making process, court orders or limitations of entitlement programs.

CONFIDENTIALITY...must be discussed. Make sure the team understands that if anyone learns of abuse or neglect to any child, a report will be made and some team members who are not present may get copies of the summary of the meeting. Information is shared only as a "need to know" in order to accomplish those things the family wants.

GROUND RULES...let the group begin by creating their own rules. Allow the family member to start the list. Some frequent rules are: team members should address each other respectfully give everyone a chance to speak, for example.

FAMILY STORY...is the most powerful part of family team conference. Ask the parent or youth to describe how the family got involved with the agency and how the family is doing now ("What is it that you think is important for the team to know about you and your family?") Frequently families tell us that this is the first time they have had the opportunity to tell their perspective of the family situation.

STRENGTHS... Ask the family members what they believe their strengths are. Preparation of the family in advance of their first conference will permit them to think about this question before their team meets. In addition, ask family members to identify strengths of their partner and children. Make sure to ask each the team member to contribute to listing the family strengths so the family sees the team's recognition of their capabilities. Make sure to ask for a strength that will help the family attain their identified outcomes, called functional strengths, not just a listing of compliments.

IDENTIFICATION OF INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY NEEDS...This includes what the family and team believe they need in order to reach the outcomes and goals previously identified. Make sure the family starts the list with others being allowed to add their thoughts about what they see is needed. If team members identify needs not listed by the family, get consensus from the family. Make sure to clarify the difference between needs and services when needed. For example, counseling/parenting classes are services, so you would need to ask what needs counseling/parenting classes would be expected to respond to.

SELECT TWO TO THREE NEEDS TO WORK ON TODAY...Allow the family identify its most pressing needs to begin the process. At times the needs list becomes too long for total resolution during the meeting, so by permitting the parent to identify 2-3 most important needs the team has begun the process of prioritizing. The team may need to add their own ideas for priorities, especially if needed to emphasize issues of safety and permanency not initially prominent.

BRAINSTORM IDEAS OF WAYS TO MEET THE HIGH PRIORITY NEEDS...The team should brainstorm ideas for meeting the most important needs, identifying steps, services and supports that respond appropriately.

AGREE ON WHO WILL DO WHAT, WHEN...Secure agreement on assignments within the team.

ASK THE TEAM "WHAT COULD GO WRONG"...Identify the things that might go wrong with the plan and map out steps and responses to address such contingencies. Some systems refer to this process as crisis planning.

CLOSURE...Thank the group for their work; determine when this team will meet again; who will be responsible for calling the meeting; who is responsible for follow-up (usually the case manager) and who will get copies of the plan to everyone. Let parents know that they can call their own team together if/when they feel it is needed.