

EVALUATION OF FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE PRACTICE & OUTCOMES



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Scoping Phase – Commissioned by
Child, Youth and Family Services

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PREFACE

He moana pukepuke, e ekengia

A choppy sea, can be navigated

The power of persistence and the metaphor of responding to difficult experiences are summed up in the whakatauki (proverb) presented above. Many young people, for many different reasons, experience turbulence in their lives, and they require professional support to assist them in navigating choppy waters that they regularly have to encounter. In introducing this report about evaluating family group conference practice and outcomes we acknowledge that a rights-based foundation underscores the critical consciousness of the range of identities and experiences of children and youth that are at the centre of this service. The Evaluation objectives are about effectiveness of facilitation, best practice implementation, agentic notions of bringing about change in the lives of young people, and drawing from the findings to influence policy. The researchers have collaborated to be discerning of the data so as to draw together their ideas into a research-based report that explores how the FGC process can be integrated and maintained, with dignity and robustness, within government organisations that are the guardians of the kaupapa (philosophy).

An additional feature of this report is the respect for diversity, and in particular the tangata whenua. The chronicle of disenfranchisement of Māori is well documented, but this report has a focus on hope and not despair. It is not, however, a prescription. Important segments of the report discuss the notion of culturally relevant approaches to conferencing and the inherent conceptions of care and support are central concerns in some of the restorative ideologies that underpin the social interactions.

Kia manawanui

Professor Angus Hikairo MacFarlane and Jim Anglem

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We are very grateful to Child, Youth and Family staff at the five scoping sites who shared their knowledge of practice effectiveness from their considerable experience of FGCs. We would also like to thank the Office of the Chief Social Worker and national office staff who we consulted with and provided us with documentation and statistical data.

To the Child, Youth and Family Māori Leadership Group and the Pacific Advisory Group for Action on Violence within Families, your reflections on FGCs and evaluation design and cultural advice was much appreciated.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child, Youth and Family have partnered with Te Awatea Violence Research Centre (VRC) at the University of Canterbury to provide independent evaluation of Family Group Conference (FGCs) practices and outcomes. Evaluation input is across a number of priority areas and initiatives from the Children's Action Plan and Child, Youth and Family's (CYF) strategic plan 2012–2015, Mā Mātou Mā Tātou, that impact on outcomes for vulnerable children including:

- Introduce a new set of Family Group Conference practice standards and an enriched training curriculum for social workers, coordinators and other agencies.
- Working together with other Government agencies and NGOs to be collectively responsible for giving children or young people the same chance in life as all other Kiwi kids.
- Sharing the Responsibility which is a shift to cross-agency joint accountability for outcomes for vulnerable children.

The evaluation approach reflects the priorities outlined in Mā Mātou Mā Tātou in regards to seeking the views of children and young people and being child focused; working together with Māori; focusing on practice improvement and measuring outcomes for children and young people; and connecting with communities.

This study was intended as a scoping phase to provide a foundation for future phases of evaluation and describes preliminary findings which cannot be extrapolated without further stages of evaluation. The scoping phase focused on care and protection FGCs as relatively recent evaluations have been conducted in the youth justice area.

Evaluation objectives:

1. To identify the effectiveness of the FGC process for facilitating positive outcomes for children and young people and their whānau.
2. To identify best practice for implementing FGCs.
3. To identify culturally appropriate practices for implementing FGCs.
4. To further develop the theoretical underpinnings of how the FGC process effects change for children/young people and their whānau.
5. To provide timely and regular evaluation findings to inform practice development.

The evaluation was conducted in early 2013 and we gathered information from the following sources:

- Review of local and international studies of FGCs
- Review of CYF statistical data
- Consideration of findings from CYF internal review of FGCs
- Consultation and interviews at five CYF sites where we interviewed:
 - 9 children and young people and 16 of their whānau/caregivers
 - This related to 14 cases(10 Māori; 2 Pakeha; 2 Pacifica) involving a total of 18 children/young people
 - 15 CYF staff including managers, FGC coordinators, practice leaders, and social workers

The key themes from the interviews with whānau and staff at the scoping sites aligned with many of the findings from Child, Youth and Family's internal review of FGCs. There is substantial support and agreement that the FGC is an important and valuable decision making process for children and their whānau if implemented well. The experiences of the small sample of children, young people and their whānau/caregivers interviewed for this study highlighted the importance of good practice and how this can support whānau to achieve good outcomes. Conversely, if there is a lack of preparation, communication and follow-through, and the sense that decisions have already been made by CYF then whānau felt disempowered and did not find any benefit from going through the FGC process. We have grouped findings under the following areas:

Quality of practice

The literature on care and protection FGCs generally agrees on what is good practice for implementing FGCs and these practices were also identified in our findings. However, we found variability in CYF practice which highlighted that implementing and sustaining good practice within an institutional framework is a challenge, and requires more attention to maintaining quality and providing an organizational environment that supports good practice. Such an environment includes: the legal and policy framework; leadership and management structure; resourcing; professional development and supervision; cultural supervision and support; and an organizational focus on community engagement and interagency collaboration.

Cultural competency and responsiveness

Responsiveness to Māori is particularly important given the origins of FGCs arose from major concerns about the outcomes for Māori children and young people involved with the care and protection system which was documented in the seminal report Puao Te Ata Tu (1986). This culminated in the development of FGCs on restorative principles, based on traditional Māori principles of reparation and healing that allowed the care and protection system to resource and facilitate iwi, hapū and whānau to be involved and participate in decision-making (Connolly & MacKenzie, 1999; Connolly, 2006).

Our findings some twenty-three years after FGCs were first implemented found the cultural competency and support of staff to work with Māori whānau needed to be more consistent. There were good examples of the use of Māori tikanga at FGCs, cultural support and supervision for staff, and conducting whakapapa searches to engage with whānau and hapū. Having a Hui-a-Whānau or whānau hui prior to the FGC was thought to work well with Māori as it gives whānau more time to discuss issues and come up with solutions for the FGC plan. There were also good examples of strong relationships with local hapū/Iwi resulting in good working relationships with the community. However this was not the case everywhere and while some sites/regions had strong leadership in this regard, at other sites it was left more to individual staff to promote tikanga and provide cultural support to their colleagues.

Māori consulted for the CYF internal review identified the need for better engagement with whānau and hapū which is starting to be addressed by CYF. They also thought that FGC practice appears to be a CYF-led decision-making process rather than whānau-led and “practice needs to reflect a spirit of partnership between state and families”. Feedback from participants in our study also identified issues with FGC practice moving away from the spirit of the legislation and becoming more a CYF-led process rather than family-led decision-making process.

Staff who required cultural support working with Pacifica and other ethnicities either sought support from colleagues and/or accessed interpreters’ services if required. Only several interviews were done with Pacifica families during the scoping phase which showed very diverse experiences in terms of preparation, consideration of cultural

perspectives, social worker support and follow through. Similar to findings from other interviewees this indicates the need for consistency of good practice.

Children and young people's voices

Most young people were satisfied that they had an opportunity to tell Child, Youth and Family staff or their lawyer (Counsel for Child) how they felt and what they would like to happen at the FGC, and that their views were made clear to FGC participants. For some, it provided a valuable opportunity to tell their whānau things they had not felt able to talk about before, however not all children felt they had been listened to.

Empowerment of children, young people and their families/whānau

There were mixed findings with some very positive experiences of the FGC process where whānau felt supported to develop and implement plans to care for their tamariki. Other families did not feel empowered by the FGC process and felt that Child, Youth and Family had taken over the decision making and they had no say in what happened.

Factors that made children, young people and their family/whānau/carers feel the FGC was worthwhile and empowered them to resolve issues were:

- Preparation and clear communication prior to the FGC so that they were fully informed to make decisions and create plans.
- FGC coordinator and social worker having a good understanding of whānau dynamics and inviting whānau who have something to offer.
- The FGC plan is the key mechanism for achieving outcomes and we sought feedback about how the plan was being implemented. There were mixed findings with some saying the plan was working well and had made a big difference. Some of the other families interviewed thought the FGC and the plan had made no difference. A few wanted more support from CYF to connect with services and were disappointed in the lack of follow-up and contact with their social workers. This was particularly worrying for some when FGC plan objectives fell through.

Outcomes for children and young people

Most had positive feedback about immediate outcomes for children and young people after the FGC in terms of safety, health, behavior and education. Further information is

required to assess longer term outcomes which would include outcomes for the family/whānau as a whole due to the purpose of strengthening family functioning as a corollary to safety for children and young people.

Plans and consequent outcomes did not always reflect what children and young people would like to happen. About a third were not in a permanent placement and they would have preferred to be living with a parent which was not currently possible for safety or situational reasons.

How the FGC plan is implemented, resourced and monitored needs more systematic examination, for example how family networks are utilized and supported to do this? How do other agencies contribute to the plan and what is their accountability? What is CYF follow-up and decision-making processes when elements of the plan fall through? How do social workers and FGC coordinators decide that the objectives of the plan have been met? How are outcomes for children and young people defined?

A review of CYF data nationally found there was a lack of information about collective outcomes for children and young people due to the way data is collected. Outcomes for individuals can be accessed via their case files but this is not aggregated to generally inform how children and young people are faring post their care and protection FGC either in the short or longer term. The outcomes framework for vulnerable children should go some way to identifying outcomes across a range of agencies including CYF, Health, Education, Police and Justice.

Overall feedback from children, young people and their whānau/caregivers

A strong theme to emerge was the importance of the relationship with social workers and their follow-through and communication with children, young people and whānau/caregivers after the FGC. A few cases illustrated how a consistent relationship with a social worker who communicated well, and followed through, made a big difference to a family's experience of the FGC and implementation of the plan. Conversely, others experienced constant changes in social workers, lack of communication, delays, errors, missed opportunities and frustration.

Conclusion

Since our evaluation took place in early 2013 CYF have continued to instigate a number of local and national initiatives to reinvigorate FGCs and improve practice standards. They are also focused on engaging and working more closely with whānau/hapū/iwi, community organisations and other government agencies. It will be important to evaluate these initiatives to assess their effectiveness at improving practice and outcomes for children and young people and their families and whānau.

Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989 (Reprinted as at 12.12.12) – General Principles

5 Principles to be applied in exercise of powers conferred by this Act

Subject to section 6, any court which, or person who, exercises any power conferred by or under this Act shall be guided by the following principles:

- (a) the principle that, wherever possible, a child's or young person's family, whānau, hapū, iwi, and family group should participate in the making of decisions affecting that child or young person, and accordingly that, wherever possible, regard should be had to the views of that family, whānau, hapū, iwi, and family group:
- (b) the principle that, wherever possible, the relationship between a child or young person and his or her family, whānau, hapū, iwi, and family group should be maintained and strengthened:
- (c) the principle that consideration must always be given to how a decision affecting a child or young person will affect—
 - (i) the welfare of that child or young person; and
 - (ii) the stability of that child's or young person's family, whānau, hapū, iwi, and family group:
- (d) the principle that consideration should be given to the wishes of the child or young person, so far as those wishes can reasonably be ascertained, and that those wishes should be given such weight as is appropriate in the circumstances, having regard to the age, maturity, and culture of the child or young person:
- (e) the principle that endeavours should be made to obtain the support of—
 - (i) the parents or guardians or other persons having the care of a child or young person; and
 - (ii) the child or young person himself or herself—to the exercise or proposed exercise, in relation to that child or young person, of any power conferred by or under this Act:
- (f) the principle that decisions affecting a child or young person should, wherever practicable, be made and implemented within a time-frame appropriate to the child's or young person's sense of time.

6 Welfare and interests of child or young person paramount

In all matters relating to the administration or application of this Act (other than Parts 4 and 5 and sections 351 to 360), the welfare and interests of the child or young person shall be the first and paramount consideration, having regard to the principles set out in sections 5 and 13.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Child, Youth and Family have partnered with Te Awatea Violence Research Centre (VRC) at the University of Canterbury to evaluate Family Group Conference (FGC) practices and outcomes. Evaluation input will be across a number of priority areas and initiatives from the Children's Action Plan (2012) and Child, Youth and Family's (CYF) strategic plan 2012–2015, Mā Mātou Mā Tātou, that impact on FGC practice and outcomes for vulnerable children including:

- Introduce a new set of Family Group Conference practice standards and an enriched training curriculum for social workers, coordinator and other agencies.
- Working together with other Government agencies and NGOs to be collectively responsible for giving children or young people the same chance in life as all other Kiwi kids.
- Sharing the Responsibility which is a shift to cross-agency joint accountability for outcomes for vulnerable children.

The evaluation approach reflects the priorities outlined in Mā Mātou Mā Tātou in regards to seeking the views of children and young people and being child focused; working together with Māori; focusing on practice improvement and measuring outcomes for children and young people; and connecting with communities.

1.2 Background

Family group conferencing emerged out of major concern in the 1980s in Aotearoa about the outcomes for Māori children and young people involved with the care and protection system during much of the 20th century. The Pua Te Ata Tu Report commissioned by then Minister of Social Welfare the Hon Ann Hercus by the Labour government in 1985 involved extensive consultation with iwi throughout New Zealand (Pua te Ata Tu, 1986). Among its key conclusions were to recommend addressing institutional racism in the then Department of Social Welfare by:

- Requiring consultation with iwi and hapū prior to making decisions affecting Māori children and young people

- Establishing a form of participatory decision-making in order to achieve the above
- Upskilling social work capacity with knowledge in tikanga Māori and a requirement to respect Māori cultural traditions in practice

The report stated that the socio-economic disparity between Māori and Pacifica, and the Pakeha population in New Zealand was untenable, infringed indigenous rights and could be addressed by strengthening marae capacity and resourcing communities to take care of their own.

Family group conferencing was developed on restorative principles, based on traditional Māori principles of reparation and healing that allowed the care and protection system to resource and facilitate iwi, hapū and whānau to be involved and participate in decision-making (Connolly & MacKenzie, 1999; Connolly, 2006).

The Children Young Persons and their Families Act passed in 1989, enshrined the requirement of the New Zealand care and protection system to implement the above participatory and culturally responsive principles. Initially, the Department of Social Welfare expanded the capacity of the matua whangai programme in order to resource iwi to manage and co-ordinate family group conferences and youth justice conferences in line with the principles of the 1989 Act.

The matua whangai programme was disestablished by the National government in 1992 alongside significant re-structuring in the Department of Social Welfare and from this point in time decisions concerning Māori children and young people were 'mainstreamed' into the new Children Young Persons and their Families service (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/63298656/Maatua-Whangai-A-History>). The Murphy Stewarts in their 2006 report which reviewed the history of matua whangai have claimed that with its demise, there were consequences for ongoing empowerment of Māori whānau and communities (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/63298656/Maatua-Whangai-A-History>).

CYF conducted an internal review of FGCs in 2012 where they consulted widely with their staff and stakeholders including original drafters of the 1989 legislation, the Principal Family and Youth Court Judges, both government and non-government partners,

coordinators, Iwi groups and M ōri leaders, and a limited number of children, young people and family members. (Child, Youth and Family 2012)

There was overwhelming support for FGCs as a key decision making process for children, young people and their families. When the FGC is well managed and whānau and professionals are well prepared and engaged in the process then good outcomes can be achieved. However, the review identified areas where legislation, management and practice could be strengthened.

Practice issues included insufficient preparation of whānau and professionals prior to an FGC. The process was regarded as overly bureaucratic and was often held at the convenience of agency rather than reflecting needs of family. For example FGCs were typically held within work and school hours at CYF offices. FGCs plans were seen as 'too often lacking clarity, with families not understanding what they need to do after the conference. In addition plans to monitor and review FGCs were seen as weak.'

M ōri who were consulted for the review identified better engagement with whānau and hapū was required and suggested more whakapapa searches to ensure there is whānau/hapū support at the conference. FGC practice appears to be a CYF led decision making process rather than whānau led and 'practice needs to reflect a spirit of partnership between state and families'. Practice should be strengthened to more strongly reflect Māori values and traditions.

A review of the legislation concluded that while it enables delivery of quality practice it does not ensure it. Of concern to CYF was some interpretations of the Act regarded FGCs as primarily the business of CYF and families which limited the commitment and involvement of other agencies. An interagency approach was seen as vital to address the complex issues many children, young people and their whānau presented with. There was concern that because FGC coordinators were employed by CYF they were not independent overseers of the FGC process. Some suggested that coordinators be based in the community and that more 'power-sharing' with Iwi and the NGO sector would enhance FGC practice.

Other concerns included the apparent decrease in resources to administer the Act particularly in the light of increased workload.

1.3 Key findings from the literature

The evaluation team updated a literature review (see appendix 1) completed by CYF in 2012. The New Zealand literature identified issues with FGC practice moving away from the spirit of the legislation and becoming more a CYF led process rather than family led decision making process. Despite a high level of support for FGCs, from both professionals and families, there is very little evidence to support long-term efficacy.

International research primarily includes small-scale projects that focus on participant satisfaction. These have reported considerable support for the FGC process amongst those involved. There have also been a number of studies comparing FGCs with traditional child protection practices examining short to medium term outcomes, key findings include:

- FGCs may be more effective in reducing rates of child abuse & neglect and intimate partner violence (IPV) in the short term;
- increases in family cohesiveness and support following FGC;
- the conference should not be viewed as an end in itself i.e. families need to be supported after the conference;
- some concerns have been raised around issues of power imbalances in FGCs i.e. possibility for those involved in the administration of the FGC to manipulate the result of the conference.

The literature on care and protection FGCs generally agrees on what is good practice for implementing FGCs. What is required is more information on outcomes for larger samples of children and young people in the long term.

1.4 Evaluation objectives and methodology

The evaluation objectives are:

1. To identify the effectiveness of the FGC process for facilitating positive outcomes for children and young people and their whānau.
2. To identify best practice for implementing FGCs.

3. To identify culturally appropriate practices for implementing FGCs.
4. To further develop the theoretical underpinnings of how the FGC process effects change for children/young people and their whānau.
5. To provide timely and regular evaluation findings to inform practice development.

This evaluation represents an initial scoping phase and subsequent process and outcome evaluation phases with a larger sample would be required to provide more conclusive evidence. The scoping phase focused on care and protection FGCs as relatively recent evaluations have been conducted in the youth justice area. (Maxwell et al. 2004). This scoping report provides:

- Preliminary feedback from children and whānau/caregivers about their experiences of FGCs.
- Latest evidence on FGC practice and outcomes from a literature review.
- Synthesis of available information on processes and outcomes for care and protection FGCs.
- Identifies what needs to be examined in future evaluation phases.

To develop the evaluation methodology consultations were conducted with Child, Youth and Family, including Office of the Chief Social Worker, Te Potae Kohatu Māori (formerly known as Māori Leadership Group) and CYF data experts. The Pacific Advisory Group (PAG) for Action on Violence within Families were consulted for methodological advice in relation to Pacifica. The evaluation received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury's Human Ethics Committee and approval from Child, Youth and Family Research Access Committee.

The evaluation design is based on a mixed methods approach where qualitative and quantitative data are collected from a variety of sources and then triangulated to verify findings. The following data sources and methods were used:

- Updated literature review
- Review of CYF statistical data
- Consideration of findings from CYF internal review of FGCs
- Consultation and interviews at five scoping sites throughout New Zealand.
- interviews with 15 CYF managers, FGC coordinators, practice leaders

- 9 children and young people and 16 of their whānau/caregivers
- This related to 14 cases(10 Māori; 2 Pakeha; 2 Pacifica) involving a total of 18 children/young people

The majority of the cases were identified by CYF FGC Coordinators and in some cases social workers, who made the initial approach to participants to request their permission for the evaluators to contact them and invite them to take part in an interview. This recruitment process may have led to some selection bias in our small sample, however we believe the candid feedback we received demonstrates that we were not just provided with cases where we would only receive positive feedback. We also recruited several families through a 'snowball method' of social networks.

1.5 Outline of report

Section 2 provides an overview of what CYF statistical data is available in relation to care and protection FGCs and what further data would be ideal to collect to measure outcomes for children and young people.

Section 3 summarises feedback from a small sample of children, young people and their family/whānau/caregivers about their experiences of FGCs.

Section 4 provides the key findings from the interviews with CYF staff at the scoping sites and outlines some of the innovative practices happening at those sites.

The findings are brought together in Section 5 to identify current knowledge about the effectiveness of care and protection FGCs and identify areas of focus for the next phase of the evaluation.

A literature review of studies conducted on FGCs both locally and internationally is appended to this report.

2 OVERVIEW OF CYF DATA FOR CARE AND PROTECTION FGCS

2.1 Introduction

This section provides information about care and protection FGCS over a six year period from 2007 to 2012. The volume of FGCS, type of FGCS, demographic information about FGC clients and some limited information on outcomes. The internal review conducted by CYF identified the limited outcome measurements available which limited their ability to assess the effectiveness of FGCS. Stakeholders consulted for the CYF review identified a number of outcome measurements and the need to develop better data collection processes. CYF have since developed a new outcomes framework, Tuituia, which was rolled out in September 2013. The framework encompasses outcomes from the child's perspective, family/whānau/hapū/iwi and the resources available to that whānau.

Outcome areas relate to:

- safety of children
- belonging
- health
- achieving
- participation

This concurs with much of the literature that identifies a number of outcome indicators from FGCS that can be grouped under: safety; child well-being measured by child development indicators; placement suitability and stability; and family functioning and connectedness.

Satisfaction with the FGC process needs to be measured more systematically as while there are some examples of whānau and professionals being sent evaluation forms it does not appear to be collected regularly, or standardized throughout the country. In regards to monitoring and review of FGC plans, CYF identified they needed to improve how they measured the monitoring of plans and whether service goals were met.

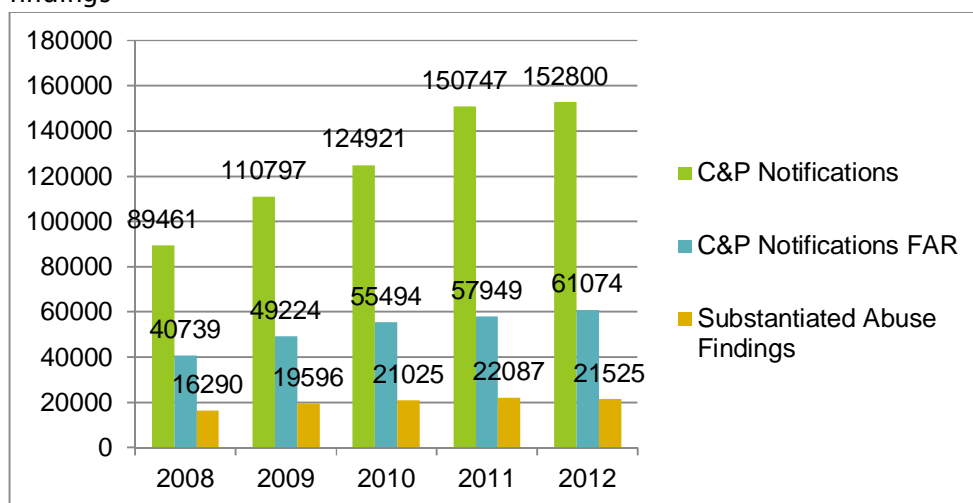
2.2 CYF data for Care and Protection FGCs 2007 – 2012

2.2.1 Notifications and findings

There has been a sharp rise in care and protection notifications to Child, Youth and Family (CYF) between 2007/08 and 2011/12. This may be attributed to multiple reasons including: increased public awareness; increase in Police Family Violence referrals due to the Family Violence Interagency Response System (FVIARS); introduction of the Differential Response Model¹ (CYF) resulting in changes to social work practice, and also changes to business processes including national reporting systems.

Notifications where further action is required (FAR) have increased from 2007/08 to 2011/12 although the increases have been getting smaller each year. The number of FAR where abuse was substantiated after an investigation increased from 2007/08 to 2010/11 and slightly decreased in 2011/12.

Graph 1: Care and Protection Notifications, further action required (FAR), and substantiated abuse findings



Source: Analysed from Child, Youth and Family data drawn from CEI data 2013

¹ The differential response model was introduced by CYF in 2009 and is a model for deciding on responses to notifications of concern about children. It provides flexibility to allow CYF to refer children and their families to NGO providers during the initial responses to notifications, particularly at an early intervention stage. Assessment and investigations of serious abuse or violence cases continue to be completed by CYF and Police.

2.2.2 Care and protection FGCs

There has been an increase in care and protection FGCs from 2007 to 2012 with the largest increases being new FGCs. From 2007 to 2012 the proportion of new FGCs is approximately 70%; FGCs for review purposes is approximately 20%; and reconvened FGCs approximately 10%.

The number of distinct clients with care and protection FGCs from 2007 – 2012 shows an upward trend with 28% (1,378) more clients in 2012 compared with 2007.

Table 1: Type of Care and Protection FGC for financial years 2007–2012

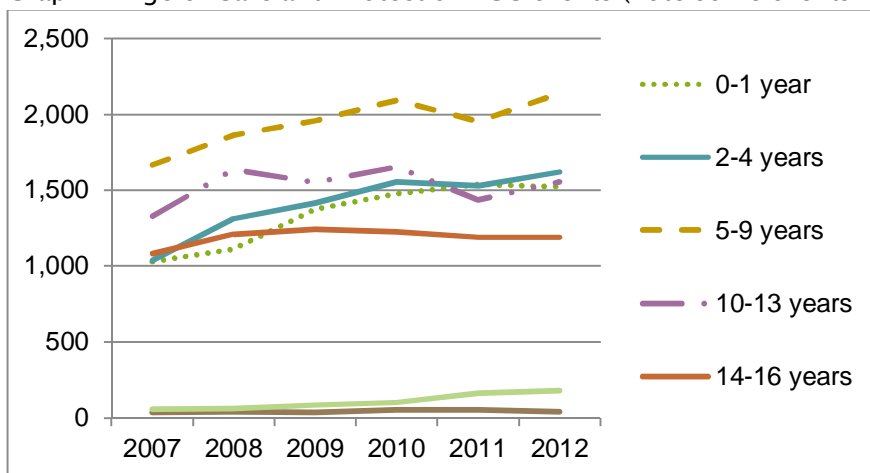
FGC Types	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
New	4,425	4,866	5,481	5,885	5,667	5,851
Review	1,110	1,552	1,333	1,479	1,580	1,668
Reconvened	702	824	853	796	623	727
Total	6,237	7,242	7,667	8,160	7,870	8,246
Distinct clients with C&P FGCs	4,882	5,451	5,810	6,226	5,933	6,260

Source: Child, Youth and Family data drawn from CEI data 2013

2.2.3 Demographics of clients

Age: there have been increases in the number of care and protection FGCs held across all age groups between 2007 and 2012. Children aged 5–9 years form the largest group of clients. The largest increases were for the very young aged 0 – 4 years which aligns with CYF focus on vulnerable infants.

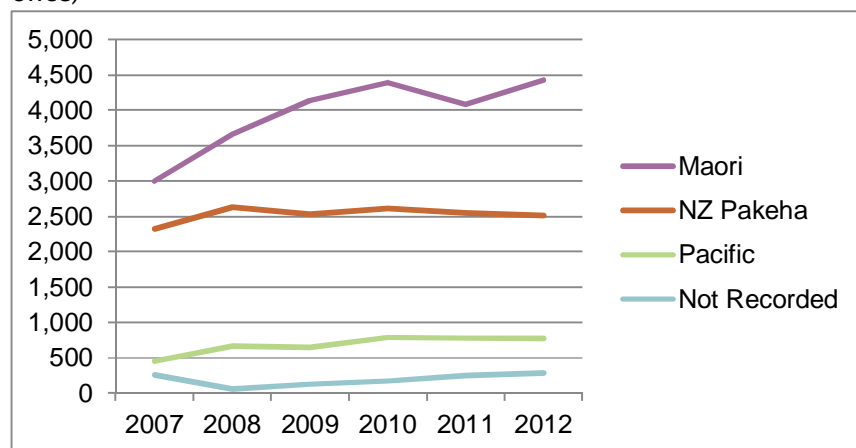
Graph 2: Age of Care and Protection FGC clients (note some clients will be counted more than once)



Source: Analysed from Child, Youth and Family data drawn from CEI data 2013

Ethnicity: In 2012 over half (54%) the care and protection FGCs held were with Māori clients; nearly a third (30%) were with Pakeha clients; and 9% were with Pacifica clients. Very small proportions were made up of Asian, European and other ethnicities, or ethnicity not recorded. There have been increases in the number of FGCs held across most ethnic groups between 2007 and 2012 and the largest increase in the number FGCs held has been among Māori clients. While the numbers are considerably smaller, there has also been an increase in FGCs for Pacifica. Population changes do not wholly explain these changes and further investigation would need to be done as to why they have increased among these population groups.

Graph 3: Ethnicity of Care and Protection FGC clients (note some clients will be counted more than once)



Source: Analysed from Child, Youth and Family data drawn from CEI data 2013

Gender: there are consistently slightly more boys than girls who are clients of care and protection FGCs.

2.2.4 Outcomes of FGCs

Agreement/non-agreement: the number and proportion of new care and protection FGCs that result in agreement and non-agreement each year from 2007 to 2012 remained fairly constant with between 81 – 84% reaching agreement and 15.6–19% resulting in non-agreement. Reconvened FGCs fluctuated between 14 – 23% that resulted in non-agreement, and review FGCs between 11–16% resulting in non-agreement.

Review: the proportion of FGCs that are reviewed on time has increased since 2007 with nearly 100% reviewed on time.

FGC objectives met: CYF record this either as 'yes' or 'no' which does not reveal what actually is being assessed or how it is being assessed. This category is tied to staff key performance indicators (KPIs) so there is an incentive to be positive (the results show in the last three years over 90% of FGC plans were completed with objectives met). More explicit information on the outcomes of FGCs is required to assess whether objectives were met.

2.3 Data gaps

Our examination of CYF data found the collective outcomes for children and young people are unknown due to the way data is collected. Outcomes for individuals can be accessed via their case files but this is not aggregated to generally inform how children and young people are faring post their care and protection FGC either in the short or longer term. Monitoring data is lacking and a planned initiative to assess children/young people at regular intervals throughout a case could provide a more consistent and rigorous form of monitoring and outcome data. It will be important to be able to aggregate this data across cases to more easily identify outcomes generally for CYF clients and inform where practice standards and plan implementation are working well and areas that require improvement.

The category of 'FGC objectives met' does not provide any meaningful indication of outcomes for children and young people and is compromised by being tied to staff KPIs.

Aggregated data on repeat notifications and substantiated findings of abuse post FGC would provide one indicator for safety however this information is not available. Other outcome indicators in regards to safety, wellbeing, stability, family functioning and so on are not systematically collated or easily accessible and would require an examination of Child, Youth and Family individual case files.

The outcomes framework for vulnerable children should go some way to identifying outcomes across a range of agencies including CYF, Health, Education, and Justice. It would be very useful if data from these agencies can be identified for children and young people who have had FGCs to build a fuller picture of their short and long term outcomes.

3 FEEDBACK FROM CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILY/WHĀNAU/CAREGIVERS

3.1 Introduction

This section focuses on children, young people and family/whānau/caregivers views and experiences of the FGC process. We suggest that any future evaluation take a case study approach and examine case notes and the perspectives of social workers, FGC coordinators and other professionals to provide a more in-depth understanding of each case. The aim of testing a small sample was to provide preliminary feedback and develop appropriate recruitment processes and interview tools.

Description of family/ whānau interview sample:

- 14 cases: 10 Māori whānau; 2 Pakeha; 2 Pacifica.
- 25 people were interviewed involving a total of 18 children/young people:
 - 9 children/young people aged 10– 16 years were interviewed
 - 9 children were not able to be interviewed including 3 babies and 6 children aged 2 to 13 years.
 - 16 adults were interviewed including 5 mothers, 1 father, 3 grandmothers, 1 set of grandparents, 1 Aunty, and 4 caregivers who were not related.

Most cases included two FGCs which had been held as recently as one week prior to interview to two years before interview. Most were in the previous 6 months.

Three of the mothers interviewed had had FGCs when they were children and were able to provide some reflections on their experiences.

3.2 The FGC process

3.2.1 Appropriateness of holding an FGC

Two themes emerged which questioned whether it was appropriate to hold an FGC. In two cases whānau thought that an FGC was not necessary as their child was not at risk. In another two cases whānau queried the point of having an FGC when CYF had already decided to remove their children. The following examples illustrate these situations:

A mother approached CYF for support with their teenager who had behavioural issues. She wanted to be connected to counselling and respite care. The mother felt that the social worker 'pushed' for a care and protection FGC, however she did not think her teenager had care and protection issues. Prior to the FGC the mother had arranged counselling and got things in place herself so she could not see the point of the FGC.

In two cases where babies were removed from at birth, the mothers and whānau members questioned the appropriateness of having an FGC when the decision had already been made by CYF to remove the baby. In one case the mother had accepted that her baby would be taken from her but having the FGC raised her hopes as during the time the family is given to formulate a plan, the family and supporters made a plan of how she could keep her baby. A family member said it was a "done deal" as CYF already decided the baby would be removed so the FGC was "a waste of time". "It was awful as [mother] fell apart. They should be more upfront instead of going through that process."

In another case, the parents did not agree that the baby was in need of care and protection which resulted in several court ordered FGCs that ended in non-agreement and went back to Court. The mother said "if you agree that the child is in need of care and protection it gives them the right to uplift them. But if you don't it is harder for them". This mother's experience was the FGC was used to make it "easier" for CYF to take the child rather than for the family to create a plan about what was best for the baby.

A caregiver interviewed thought that the purpose of FGCs had been "flipped" in many cases and instead of whānau-led decision making, it was now CYF who controlled the FGC.

*When it [FGC] was first touted it was supposed to be the gatekeeper to CYFs – it was to gate keep the processes and policies of the state. What has happened now is the CYFs are now the gate keepers of the FGC – flipped around – whānau don't make decisions, there are some.
(Caregiver)*

3.2.2 Preparation for FGC

Children and young people

Nearly all the children and young people interviewed were clear why the FGC was being held and had been asked what their views were and what they wanted the outcomes to be. Several said they would have liked more information to prepare them as they were not really clear about why the FGC was happening.

There was a variety of professionals involved in talking to children and young people about aspects of the FGC. For example, three said the FGC process was explained to them by the FGC Coordinator who also asked them who they wanted to be there. One young person said her lawyer asked her what she wanted the FGC outcome to be. She said her social worker did no preparation with her and did not ask what she wanted to happen.

Four young people said their social worker talked to them about the FGC and asked them what they wanted, one mentioned the use of the three houses tool. A young person said,

They just asked me if I wanted, what I wanted to say and if I'm all right with them talking on my behalf and [caregiver] talking – like I tell them what to say and they say it for me so I'm not nervous. (Young person)

One caregiver said every effort was made to get the young person's views as they had a very good social worker who was very experienced and had a relationship with the whānau and young person, "the social worker was amazing... so [young person] went into the FGC in a much better frame of mind".

However several of those interviewed did not remember the FGC being explained to them or being asked about what they wanted to happen. For example, one young person said he did not feel well prepared to go to his FGC. His caregiver said in her experience of FGCs,

The engagement with the young person needs to be strengthened so they understand what is happening. There is so much going on for them at the time someone might have tried to inform them but might not have been seen as important, can forget. I think the whole process could be done a lot better especially for young people and children. (Caregiver)

Family/whānau/caregivers

Nearly all whānau interviewed understood why the FGC was happening although, as discussed above, some did not agree it was necessary. Many spoke about the FGC Coordinator being very good at communicating with them and explaining about the FGC and providing them with enough information to prepare for it. One caregiver said she observed the Coordinator was very good explaining things to children and following up with information,

The coordinator does a good job of keeping all informed, rings kids and lets them know what is happening about their FGC. She is also good at following through with kids afterwards. ...
(Caregiver)

However several participants felt like CYF were not listening to what they wanted, a young mother said 'Basically you have to listen to CYF and when it is us they just turn off'.

In several cases care and protection concerns and solutions were raised during the information sharing phase of the FGC that whānau had not heard before and thought the social worker should have discussed these with them prior to the FGC. For example, a social worker raised 'home for life²' during the FGC where the children would be placed with another family. This solution had not been discussed with the mother and her family prior to the FGC and it was the first they had heard of it.

A young person attended the FGC with the hope of living with her mother, however her mother and other whānau told her at the FGC they could not take her.

Among our scoping sites there seemed limited use of Hui-a-Whānau prior to the FGC with the exception of several sites who reported they used Hui-a-Whānau prior to most FGCs. CYF distinguishes between 'Hui-a-Whānau', as meetings CYF facilitates and participates in compared with 'whānau hui', which are private whānau meetings.

² 'Home for Life' refers to Child, Youth and Family's Permanent Care and Home for Life policy for children and young people in the custody of the Chief Executive. The policy outlines the critical requirements when returning children and young people to the care of their parents and when creating a home for life for those unable to return home.

3.2.3 FGC Participants

Most of those interviewed thought the right whānau and professionals were at the FGC. In a few cases some key family members did not come, which disappointed young people. In one case whānau from the paternal side would have liked to have been involved but were not contacted. There were barriers to some invitees attending because they had to work in the daytime.

A grandmother was pleased so many whānau came to the first FGC as ‘no one else in the family knew what we were suffering... Brought it out in the open’. Consequently, she felt she now has emotional backup when she needs it.

But the first step was done and because it brought everything out in the open it pretty much got things going the way it needed to be going so the ones that came the first time they really didn't need to but we know they are there as back up if we need it. (Grandmother)

Several cases illustrated the importance of inviting whānau that could make a positive contribution. For example one mother felt very exposed and vulnerable with whānau present who were critical of her and had previously shown no interest in supporting them. The mother said “it felt like your whole rib cage was open for them to explore”. This mother and her child said they did not feel as vulnerable at the second FGC as their whānau were not there. They found the second FGC better and more productive as the whānau at the first FGC were not helpful and did not feel like they could assist. Another whānau had a completely different experience where they identified who should and should not attend and the grandfather did a lot of work to ensure the right whānau members attended the FGC.

A caregiver observed that it was important for CYF to do the preparation work so they knew they were inviting whānau who can provide support and are appropriate,

The preparation thing about who comes needs to be, they really need to know what they are doing, they need to be talking to them and find out why they want to come and also are they appropriate for having the baby, should the baby be with them. (Caregiver)

She also noted that the resourcing for getting whānau to FGC had decreased and a lot was done by telephone which she did not think was as effective as face-to-face and also allowing time for whānau to meet outside of the FGC; particularly if there were issues they needed to sort.

If you call a granddad who hasn't spoken to family for long time, there is no healing, there is no room to sort out things, like they are not brought into town two days before so you can sort of sort some of that. He gets on the telephone, he is so full of resentment about what she hasn't done for the last X years that his grandchildren are not even in the mix. (Caregiver)

Another interviewee who works with whānau also emphasized the preparation work needed to invite the right whānau members to an FGC,

More time finding out about background – when did you last see so and so, what kind of a relationship did you have with them... You have already then got a background of where that person sits, is that person going to be supportive or whether that person is going to be disruptive and defeat the whole purpose. Because some of them do go there with their own agendas so it ends up being stopped because they can't let go of the anger and hurt that has happened in the past and they can't actually focus on the children. (Caregiver)

An example of this was where one of the FGCs gathered whānau together who could provide no care or support for the young person. Their caregiver said:

The sad part about that FGC is we have a whole lot of whānau there with nothing to offer. We gathered a whole lot of people, must of cost a fortune to get them here and not one of them got something to offer. So should we be doing that, bringing all those people when not one of them are going to offer to put up their hand for the kid... they are some of the questions they [CYF] need to start asking. The FGC in the act are just treasures but is there a better way of doing it. (Caregiver)

Children and young people

Several young people said they felt nervous about going to their FGC. One young person said they also felt sad to hear what their mother would say.

I felt a wee bit sad to see what Mum was going to say and a bit ... just quite nervous. (Young person)

A young person said they felt like they did not have any choice about which whānau members came and suggested CYF “need to let you have a say in who comes”. Another young person said they felt “half and half” about it and would have preferred if more of their family, especially their mother could have been there.

3.2.4 Venue location and environment

Interviewees were asked where the FGC was held and whether they felt comfortable at that venue. There has been concern expressed in previous studies and by CYF staff that holding FGCs at CYF sites can add to the impression that this is a CYF led process.

Most of the participants said their FGCs were not held in CYF offices and nearly all were happy with the community venues where they were held. Several mentioned the convenience of getting to the location as a positive factor. A few were held at CYF offices so that video conference equipment could be used and for safety reasons. One young person said he did not feel comfortable at the CYF office and would have preferred a place he was familiar with.

3.2.5 Cultural considerations

Participants were asked if there was any consideration of their culture during the FGC meeting and if there was anything they thought CYF could improve on in this regard. Most were happy with the way the FGC meetings were conducted, for example, participants said:

Yes, my husband is Māori and my daughter identifies as Māori. Started with karakia, they considered everyone's culture. (Grandmother)

CYF great here as they always give the invitation and ask each whānau how they would like to open this if they would like a karakia at the beginning and end – every FGC I've been at this has happened. (Caregiver)

Only several interviews were conducted with Pacifica families who had very diverse experiences in terms of preparation, consideration of cultural perspectives, social worker support and follow through. Similar to the other interviewees this indicates the need for consistency of good practice. One family felt very well supported and they appreciated the FGC starting with a prayer.

The Coordinator asked at the FGC if we wanted to open with a prayer, and if everyone felt comfortable with that. Although all attendees were not regular churchgoers like us, we were all happy and comfortable with that start. This definitely affected the meeting, which proceeded peacefully after that opening. (Pacifica parents)

While in another case the mother, whose second language was English, found some of the FGC difficult to understand and would have appreciated some cultural support at the meeting. She also found the legal discourse used by professionals confusing as no one explained to her what the various section numbers (references to sections of legal acts) referred to.

*I don't know what they are talking about section whatever - when they say that number they knew what they meant but I didn't know, nobody explained to me what those numbers were.
(Mother)*

Interestingly, two young Māori mothers said they were not concerned about the cultural aspects, both participants were not keen on the FGC and did not consider their children were at risk. One mother said they got straight into it, there was no karakia which she was fine with as she did not want to have the FGC and she certainly did not want it to be blessed. The other mother said there was a karakia at the start and end of the meeting, “but I wasn't too fussed about it. I just wanted to get [FGC] over and done with”.

Iwi involvement

Several participants talked about whakapapa and Iwi support. One young person said he did not know his whānau. His caregiver thought this was an area that CYF could improve,

That's not good, if there is a weakness in CYF that is it, whakapapa - who is this young person connected to, that is number one because their identity that is who they are. Ensuring they understand that and feel that. . . .It is not just who is your Iwi and what is your ethnicity and tick the box and put a name in it is about what does that mean for you, and can we actually strengthen that side of your life is essential. (Caregiver)

The caregiver also thought it was important that Iwi were aware when one of their rangatahi and whānau needed support,

*Often the chiefs want to know where their people are, if one of their young people are in CYF needing help. There is that reciprocation of support because they would want to know that is their responsibility... at least given the option of knowing one of theirs is needing support.
(Caregiver)*

3.2.6 FGC proceedings

The care and protection question

A caregiver who had worked with many families found the care and protection question an obstacle to further discussion with the whānau, because if they did not agree then the FGC stopped. She thought there must be a better way of addressing this question in cases where whānau did not agree that children and young people were at risk.

*I just think CYFs need to say they are the ones that believe the child is in need of care and protection because that is why we are here, because the state believes we can't care for this baby, but we believe that we can. So you shouldn't part ways there, there should be a way around that question..... if we have obvious abuse like sexual abuse or physical abuse, or neglect it is not hard to get the whānau to agree. But there are other times why go to an FGC – the Judge ordered them to an FGC twice, for what reason, CYF had already made their call.
(Caregiver)*

This caregiver identified two pathways,

There is the FGC road which is about the whānau plans for their baby and then the state's pathway which is to the court and affidavits to the court. I think that CYFs need to be a lot more honest if they are going to affidavit, just do it and don't go through FGC. Let the whānau go to a lawyer and let them do their own case. FGC is not going to sort anything in there; it is not going to happen.

As stated, one mother said they were never going to agree that their baby was in need of care and protection as this only made it easier for CYF to uplift their baby.

Information sharing

Nearly all of the young people interviewed thought their views had been put across at the FGC whether they expressed it themselves or someone spoke on their behalf. Two related young people thought it was clear to everyone at their conference what had happened in their case by the way the coordinator expressed it during information sharing, “she was going through it really briefly and parts at a time, I thought it was pretty out there”.

One young person said he was not comfortable speaking in front of the conference and felt they were just talking about him and there was nothing much he could say. He “did not like the conference itself full stop, it wasn't my decision, it was happening to me, they were making decisions for you”.

Several whānau members were unhappy with the information sharing phase of the FGC either because concerns or solutions were raised that had not been discussed prior to FGC

Well with the first one I was quite angry with what CYF had come up with about what happened during information sharing, especially when those concerns were never raised before. Then the second FGC it was all different – because it was another lady doing it, because the social worker was away and different concerns came out.’ (Mother)

In another case a mother felt her partner was unfairly targeted as an abuser without offering the opportunity for him to step-up and say something.

One family member interviewed said they “felt like trickery was happening” as the situation had been the same for two years and CYF had not deemed it bad enough to do anything about it but then suddenly it was and they were proposing ‘home for life’ during the FGC.

Family time and creating a plan

Several young people chose not to be present during family time. One young person said she did not want to be there as “a male member of family was acting out”. She was able to tell FGC participants prior to family time what she wanted to happen. Several cases highlighted how the dynamics within and between whānau could take the focus of the FGC away from the child/young person and needed to be managed. Generally whānau are left alone during family time to create a plan, however in one case that nearly ended in a ‘fight’, so it was suggested they required a mediator.

For nearly all of the children and young people interviewed their views were considered during the FGC and about half the young people interviewed had most of their hopes and concerns reflected in the plan and actions of whānau. For example, one mother said the FGC provided them with the opportunity to hear her son’s concerns as he wanted them to stop drinking and fighting, and as a result they are now an alcohol free house and the mother pays much more attention to the son.

However four young people who wanted to live with their mothers were with caregivers as their whānau were unable to care for them. Some of their plans included conditions for parents to enable a young person’s return to home. The most common barriers to

whānau caring for their children and young people included alcohol and other drug addictions, mental health problems, and family violence (cf. Hamlin et al. 2003 cited in Manion & Renwick).

There was a variety of feedback from the adults interviewed. Some found the gathering of whānau very positive as it provided additional support and enabled them to address issues. As previously stated, one mother and child found their whānau could not assist and they had been quite critical which made them feel vulnerable.

Some thought that they really had no say in the plan and that it had already been decided by CYF. For example a mother said: “they were more or less telling us what is going to be happening to son and that was it. Decision already made. Just feel we just come along just for the book. The meetings been done, tick it.” Another mother had created a plan to keep her baby, however the plan was rejected by CYF who had already decided to remove it.

3.3 FGC outcomes

This scoping study relied on self-reported outcomes from interviews with children, young people, whānau/caregivers and has not been triangulated with a comprehensive review of the cases or the use of any assessment tools to measure safety or child development indicators. We recommend that future evaluation could take this more comprehensive approach with a larger sample.

Multiple factors ultimately contribute to outcomes for children and young people and an evaluation of FGCs would need to determine what can be directly attributed to the FGC process.

3.3.1 Self-reported outcomes

Safety

There were no safety concerns raised in the interviews and children/young people reported they were safe. This result would have been affected by selection bias as we asked CYF to only approach children/young people and their whānau/caregivers who were in a stable enough space both mentally and physically and ‘up to’ an interview.

For some, the FGC plan had provided access to services that promoted safe behaviour, for example, stopping violence services, parenting skills, and counselling services. Several talked about emergency support plans where they could call on family members for support if required. The FGC process had also enabled some children and young people to get their safety concerns across to their parents/caregivers which had changed their behavior. For example a mother reported her son was much safer as they had banned alcohol in their house.

He is way safer, one thing he did ask for, ah my baby, is no alcohol in the house, no drinking around and there hasn't been, has there my babe [son: yep]. ... Alcohol was a big thing in my house and it has been alcohol free since the FGC. (Mother)

Placement suitability and stability

There were a variety of placement situations with about half the sample being with a parent or grandparent and the other half being placed outside the whānau in care. Only a few of those in care were in more permanent placements under 'home for life'. The others were in CYF care and were uncertain about their future placement.

In one case a child had over ten placements and opportunities were missed for more permanent placement. When the child was moved from foster care into whānau care the foster parents strongly indicated that they would like to take the child back if the family placement broke down. Unfortunately they were not contacted when it did breakdown and the child went to three more placements. Whānau who had contacted CYF about caring for the child were never followed up so this was another opportunity that was never examined.

The child recounted how they felt when they were told to move,

She (Social worker) said you are going and I said what, why am I moving I want to stay here ... I wasn't really happy to move because it was like what's going on I don't want to move I want to stay here. I knew [foster parents] was the best place to be but [social worker] just came and said sorry you have to pack up because another person wants to care for you. I said which person, is this person going to be nice to me, is this person going to be mean and get angry. But I didn't ask those questions I just had to pack up. I didn't ask those questions because I

was just shocked to hear I had to go but I didn't want to.... I had to because I probably wasn't allowed to stay there any longer. (Child)

This child remembered another occasion when they had to move, waiting at the CYF office, and how they felt being told there was someone who would care for them,

Again with the questions is this a nice person, is this a good home, does this person have any children that are mean or teasey [sic]... like at one house one of the boys was naughty and mean and likes doing things to me all the time and I don't like it. (Child)

Child well-being

There was some feedback from whānau and caregivers that children and young people were doing really well in terms of health, behavior and education. However this would have to be explored more systematically to provide evaluation results.

Family functioning and connectedness

Several participants thought the FGC had enabled their family/whānau to resolve problems and brought the family closer together. For example a mother said, "If it wasn't for them I wouldn't know what the hell my son is going through and now that I do I've done what I needed to help my son." (Mother)

A grandmother thought the FGC was very positive and said "wouldn't stop the conferences not ever please... Best thing for me too was that it brought family out of the woodwork that I wouldn't have met and really that was good".

Another grandmother said what she liked "quite a bit about the FGC was it helped the whānau motivate our daughter to get off alcohol and drugs.... All helped us".

3.3.2 Implementation of the FGC plan

The FGC plan is the key mechanism for achieving outcomes and we sought some feedback about how the plan was being implemented. There were mixed findings with some saying the plan was working well and had made a big difference, for example, a couple said the plan was working well as it had given them access to the skills and knowledge they needed and tools to use in difficult situations. They said their "challenge is always in the application of our learnings in these simple tools". A key to the implementation of their plan was the support provided by their social worker.

We felt like the social worker was on our side; she was impressed with what she saw us put on the table for the child's safety; she checked the child's safety at her aunt's home, and at our home and explained these to us. She also gave us good tips on how to prepare for the child's return. (Parents)

Other families thought the FGC and the plan had made no difference. Some families wanted more support from CYF to connect with services and were disappointed in the lack of follow-up and contact with their social workers. This was particularly worrying for some of them when FGC plan objectives fell through. The following are examples:

1. A grandmother said all the programmes her daughter had to go to fell on her to organize and take her, which was 'too much'. The CYF social worker did not contact the grandmother to find out how it was going and relied on her totally to support her daughter and grandchild. The grandmother thought the FGC had come to nothing as her daughter was already involved with about six different agencies which was 'ridiculous' and should have been streamlined. The FGC plan included respite care of the grandchild and when the grandmother informed the social worker that this had fallen through the social worker was fine with this. The grandmother said the social worker did not follow up on how her daughter was going. However two years later her daughter, who now had two children, had them both removed from her care and placed in a home for life outside of the family. The grandmother thought her daughter would have benefited more from intensive home visiting to show her routines to care for her child rather than the short visits to different programmes.
2. A child was enrolled in a programme a week after the FGC but did not like it and stopped going and they have not heard from CYF in regards to this; nor had the anger management programme for the stepfather been organized. CYF were also committed to monthly visits however after three months the whānau have not seen or spoken to their CYF social worker.
3. A mother said she had FGCs when she was a child and had been in state care and in her experience nothing ever came of FGCs, "nine times out of ten things do not get followed up on". The mother felt follow-up was very important as an "FGC is very major you are very exposed and vulnerable". They were still waiting to be contacted by the social worker six weeks after the FGC to see how they were going.

Several of these cases raised questions about the quality of monitoring plans and how the 'break down' of a plan was defined and how decisions to reconvene an FGC were made. Future evaluation would require the examination of case files and interviews with social workers and supervisors to gain a better understanding of this process and how it could be improved.

Resourcing

There was some positive feedback about the resourcing provided by CYF including funding counselling and school uniforms.

I reckon they did a pretty good job.... helped me get sons school uniform and stuff I'm thankful for that.(Mother)

Several participants talked about the time it took to get funding for when a child came into their care and it could be several months before they received any money. Some of the children and young people came to them with literally nothing so it was quite a cost for relatives and caregivers.

3.4 Strengths and suggestions for improvement

Participants were asked what they thought CYF did well and if they had any suggestions for improvements in regards to FGCs. A strong theme to emerge was the importance of the relationship with social workers, follow through and communication for children, young people and their family/whānau/caregivers. A few cases illustrated how a consistent relationship with a social worker they could relate to, who communicated well, and followed through, made a big difference to a family's experience of the FGC and implementation of the plan. Conversely, others experienced constant changes in social workers, lack of communication and continuity, delays, errors, missed opportunities and frustration.

3.4.1 Feedback from children and young people

A child said that they wanted the social worker to listen to what they wanted and "not let the bosses tell them what to do".

I want children to tell them [social worker] what they want to do, go where they want to go, and stay where they want to stay and be with who they want to be with. (Child aged 10 yrs)

Several young people said that social workers need to come and see them more often, one said “keep in contact with children more often...as feel like don’t know what’s going on”. Another young person suggested social workers talk to the young people more,

Just let them know what is happening with them, I know when a lot of them [young people] are having FGCs they don’t know what’s happening and everyone is just talking about them and making all these decisions and they are all unsure. (Young person)

Another young person suggested that CYF provide money petrol so they could see their mother more often.

There was positive feedback from young people; one said overall CYF was “doing alright”. Another thought that the FGC was “kind of” a good way to deal with family things and that what CYF does really well is “help children, like family”.

Another young person had a different experience and said having CYF around felt “claustrophobic, like they are ganging up on me”. Their mother said “feels like we are very small and they are very big”.

3.4.2 Feedback from whānau/caregivers

A caregiver found the FGC process was empowering for whānau if used in the right way:

The FGC itself is a glorious tool, the fact that we have got it and can still be utilised and it gives you somewhere to go if you are not happy. You can call for a reconvene or review, it does give whānau more power than they have had before because before we had the Act. (Caregiver)

Some whānau felt that CYF needed to listen to whānau more and not predetermine the outcome before the FGC.

Threatening people in FGCs is not right either..... with the other four kids they threatened that if you don’t agree we will take your children that’s why we agreed they were in need of care and protection last time. ...[CYF] like you listen to them but they don’t listen to you I reckon they should listen... (Mother)

Need clearer communication and follow through. Don’t have FGC if already decided outcome. (Grandmother)

A mother thought social workers need to explain the purpose of a FGC is “to empower us to solve our issues; for us to have a voice; and for us to have a voice in who is invited to

the FGC. Other whānau haven't been involved in child's life and most importantly they haven't been interested". The mother also suggested social workers needed to not predetermine outcomes,

Some CYF workers have been in there too long which clouds their judgment. They do not listen to you and they are not able to build a relationship with you because they have already made up their minds.(Mother)

A caregiver who worked with a number of young people emphasized the importance of spending time communicating with children and young people to ensure they understand what is going on:

I think the communication with the young person, just ensure they have a clear understanding of what is happening and what this is about could be done better for example [Young person] didn't have that, they are rushed into a meeting with a whole lot of people. That can be scary for a young person that can be very scary for an adult being the focus of attention and just to ensure the safety of the young person is hard, that being here is ok needs to be paramount with children and young people. To get the best result because they are already tense and nervous and out of their normal whānau situation and there has already been upheaval and I think that could be done better. (Caregiver)

Some whānau thought they could have been better prepared prior to the FGC about what the concerns were.

Follow-through by the social worker was important as one caregiver said they needed to "stick to their words – if they say they are going to do it they need to do it".

A few talked about CYF being understaffed and too busy as they found it difficult to get in touch with their social workers:

If children had appointment with social worker and they didn't show then I give the child the social workers number to leave a message about coming to see them.(Caregiver)

CYF very understaffed – leave 5–6 messages on social workers phones, can't get in touch with them which is very frustrating. (Grandmother)

3.5 Summary

A small sample of children, young people and their whānau/carers were interviewed to get preliminary feedback on their experiences of the FGC process and how this process influenced outcomes for them. The following table summarises the key findings.

Table 2: Key findings from interviews with children, young people and their families/whānau/caregivers

Children and young people's voices

- Most young people were satisfied that their views were being expressed at their FGC. For some it provided a valuable opportunity to tell their whānau how they felt and what they would like to happen.

Empowerment of families/whānau

- Mixed findings with some very positive experiences of the FGC process where whānau felt supported to develop and implement plans to care for their tamariki. Other families did not feel empowered by the FGC process and in these cases there was a tension between family-led decision-making and state-led. Further examination of cases would have to be carried out to determine why decisions were made, however from the perspective of some of these families the FGC was not an appropriate process.
- Issues were raised about holding an FGC when CYF have already decided to remove the child and place them outside the whānau in Home for Life.
- Most FGCs were held in community venues and those held in CYF sites were primarily because of safety concerns or the requirement to use teleconference/video equipment.

Preparation and communication

- The findings from the scoping sample support previous research and feedback from CYF on the importance of preparation and clear communication with families prior to the FGC.
- Information about concerns and possible solutions CYF propose should be shared with whānau prior to the FGC.
- Efforts were made to find out most children and young people's views prior to the conference. Further examination is required to see what are the most effective ways of doing this; particularly with younger children, including how talking to children is coordinated between social worker, counsel for child and coordinator.

FGC Participants

- Importance of coordinator and social worker identifying whānau (whakapapa searches)

and having a good understanding of whānau dynamics and inviting whānau who have something to offer.

Cultural considerations

- General feedback was good in that culture, such as Māori tikanga was observed.
- A few participants would have liked more cultural support as English was a second language to help explain what was happening during the FGC.

Creating a plan

- Mixed feedback, some had a positive experience of this, while others felt not much was achieved from the FGC.

FGC Outcomes

- Most had positive feedback about immediate outcomes for children and young people however further information is required to assess outcomes, particularly in the longer term.
- Plans and consequent outcomes did not always reflect what children and young people would like to happen. About a third were not in a permanent placement and would have preferred to be living with a parent but could not primarily for safety reasons.
- How the FGC plan is implemented, resourced and monitored needs more systematic examination, for example how are family networks utilized and supported to do this? What is the follow-up and decision making processes when elements of the plan fall through? How do social workers decide that the objectives of the plan have been met? How are outcomes for children and young people defined?
- There was some evidence of the benefits of FGC process in enabling whānau to come together to discuss issues and draw on wider networks to support children and young people.

Overall feedback

- A major concern for some was the lack of communication and follow-up by some CYF social workers. There was a view that CYF was understaffed which is why it was difficult to get in touch with some social workers.
- Children, young people and their family/whānau/carers emphasized their relationship with CYF workers and whether they liked them or not which to some extent coloured their experience of the FGC and whether they felt intimidated or empowered.
- Some raised concerns about CYF not listening to whānau and predetermining outcome before the FGC.

4 SCOPING SITES

4.1 Introduction

The five scoping sites were chosen after consultation with Office of the Chief Social Worker, CYF Māori Leadership Group and Pacific Advisory Group (PAG) to the Taskforce for Action on Violence within Families. The criteria considered included demographics (areas with high Māori and Pacifica populations); geography (urban and remote rural); and local initiatives focusing on improving practice with FGCs. Discussions at some sites also focused on regional initiatives and challenges.

Interviews were conducted with fifteen CYF staff including care and protection coordinators, practice leaders, operational and site managers and several social workers/supervisors.

4.2 Key findings

The key themes to emerge from interviews with CYF staff at the scoping sites are summarised below.

Table 3: Key findings from scoping site interviews with CYF staff

Leadership

- Leadership is the key to driving and implementing initiatives and strategies regarding FGCs as part of a response to the Children’s Action Plan.
- A strong emphasis on child focused processes and plans and whānau–led decision-making is required. However there was some recognition this was not always the case as practice drift toward CYF–led process and predetermined plans could influence the process.

Preparation for FGC

- Preparation and engagement with whānau were recognized as essential to the success of the FGC. Coordinators had a strong preference for face–to–face contact with family members; barriers included travel distances and time.
- The informal nature of the Hui–a–Whānau was thought to give whānau time to sort through issues and reach agreement so that they are better informed and prepared for FGCs.

Inviting FGC participants

- Whakapapa search was necessary to ensure whānau/hapū/lwi support at FGC and that whānau with something to contribute were invited.
- Reported generally good relationships with other agencies and NGOs – this area needs much more examination and interviews with other professionals.

Child's voice

- There were differing views on children's attendance at FGC. Some very strong advocates for having them there while others thought whānau and professionals needed to assess whether it was appropriate.
- If children were not there, they were represented with display of their photos, names, drawings to focus FGC participants. The Three Houses model was used the most across sites to obtain children's views and to present information.
- Some advocated for shift of emphasis during information sharing phase from focus solely on risks to include strengths.

FGC Plan

- The FGC plan is contingent on preparation of whānau (e.g. informed, engaged). Several sites promoted Hui-a-Whānau as a way of preparing whānau and giving them time to discuss plans.
- FGC Coordinators provided some guidance prior to family time to focus on their goals and how are they going to achieve them.
- General feedback about plans was that they should not just be list of tasks, rather they should maintain focus on what the outcomes are and some plans framed this as 'A child will feel safe when....'.

Monitoring and review

- Monitoring of plans requires further examination and future evaluation requires focus on this including enablers and barriers for social workers and whānau tasked with monitoring.
- There is a lack of aggregated statistical data available on client outcomes. Internal reviews and analysis being conducted at some sites/regions to evaluate practice and inform development of initiatives.

Cultural responsiveness

- Some sites reported strong relationships with local hapū/lwi resulting in good working relationships with the community.
- Cultural competency of staff was variable and some staff felt supported as they had access to Kaumatua and Kuia and cultural supervision while other sites did not have the same level of relationships and cultural support.
- Staff who required cultural and language assistance with Pacifica and other ethnicities either asked for support from colleagues from that ethnic group and/or accessed interpreters' services.

FGC Coordinators

- The FGC coordinators role required a number of competencies including personal attributes to engage with people respectfully and be non-judgmental and have the knowledge of legislation and CYF processes and be able to skillfully facilitate the FGC where there could be a lot of stress and tension. They also had to have the logistical and administrative skills to bring the FGC together.
- Management and supervision – some thought the management of coordinators by site managers needed to be changed. In regards to supervision some saw a need for external clinical supervision of coordinators; at some sites they had regular supervision meetings with Practice Leaders. Peer supervision was available in larger urban areas across sites.
- Feedback about professional development of coordinators highlighted a few examples of good training courses but there appeared to be lack of a developed training programme.

Independence of coordinators

- Many participants thought FGC coordinators could and should be based in the community rather than at CYF offices. Whānau did not regard them as independent of CYF and the concern was that they could be influenced by CYF. Coordinators interviewed worked hard to act independently, but recognized they may not be viewed as independent by families. Most thought they could be based in the community.

4.3 Site initiatives

Some of the scoping sites had initiated specific practices to improve the delivery of FGCs which are summarised in Table 4. It should be noted that the research was conducted over one year ago in early 2013 and site initiatives may have developed and changed in that time.

Table 4: Summary of scoping site initiatives and practices to improve FGCs

Site/Region	Initiatives/practices
Site 1 (urban centre)	Hui-a-Whānau Facilitator – C&P coordinator facilitates Hui-a-Whānau, mentoring social workers on facilitating these. This initiative aims to improve engagement and preparation with whānau, enhance facilitation of Hui-a-Whānau, and provide timely solutions for children and young people that keep them with their whānau if appropriate.
Site 2 (urban centre)	Large Pacifica population as well as many other ethnicities. C&P Coordinator focused on delivering FGC in culturally appropriate way. Assistance from colleagues when necessary and uses interpreting services.
Site 3 (regional centre)	Collaborative co-location model at site with CYF and Police, partnering with Health with medical unit on site for forensic examinations. Focus on community engagement and preventative model. Case study comparisons within region show one site has a higher proportion of children regarded as high needs in care. This indicates better targeting as lower needs are not going into care and their connections with community and Iwi mean CYF able to facilitate whānau being supported to care for their children. This site also regularly have Hui-a-Whānau pre-FGC and feedback and are similar to Site 1 in that whānau are more prepared and this was thought to contribute to more robust plans.
Site 4 Remote Rural region	Regional strategy focus includes a number of initiatives including: <i>Heart of the FGC: We are returning to the heart of Family Group Conferences as the key decision-making tool for family. We are going to utilise FGC forums at the beginning of our work to allow families to come up with decisions that keep children in their homes, alongside this, FGC forums will take place in the community at a venue that the family choose and at a time that works for family be it the weekend or evenings. We recognise that to fully embrace FGC forums as family decision making led processes we need</i>

	<i>to adjust the way we practice.</i>
Site 5 (urban centre)	<p>Damage to sites from Canterbury earthquakes caused relocation and resulted in approximately 90% of FGCs held off-site.</p> <p>FGC coordinator enhancing capacity of colleagues with Te Reo lessons and how to do wider searches for whānau by accessing Iwi databases etc. Currently doing presentations in the community to engage more with community.</p>

The scoping findings identified a number of initiatives that showed promise and would be well worth examining in future evaluations.

1. Site 1 promotes holding Hui-a-Whānau prior to FGC and they have established the Hui-a-Whānau facilitator role to provide skilled facilitation as well as mentoring social workers to improve their facilitation skills. The Hui-a-Whānau and the specialist role were initiated to address a number of areas including preparation, engagement, and timely solutions with whānau. The manager reports promising findings in the first six months of operation as thirty children have not gone into care because solutions had been found with whānau sooner. Whānau are reportedly more prepared when going to FGC and consequently FGCs are taking a shorter amount of time. CYF have an Auckland-wide initiative to promote Hui-a-Whānau. Given the importance of preparation and engagement with whānau we suggest further evaluation of the effectiveness of this initiative.
2. A major focus of Site 4 is their regional action plan that promotes going back to the 'Heart of the FGC' principles outlined in Pua Te Ata Tu where the FGC is the core family decision making tool. Some of the actions to implement this are regional leadership promoting the FGC as a whānau led decision making process among staff rather than CYF led; enabling flexible working hours so FGCs can be held out of office hours; and holding FGCs in community venues rather than a CYF office. They have held community forums to share the new action plan in regards to going back to the heart of FGC principles with the community. This region is planning to measure how their action plan initiatives are impacting on families and outcomes for children and want to develop a brief questionnaire to get qualitative feedback from families about the FGC process. This presents an opportunity for the evaluation team to work with a

site to get feedback from a large sample of whānau, children and young people. The emphasis on going back to the heart of FGC principles would be a good opportunity to independently evaluate how a region manages this process and the outcomes for children, young people and their whānau/caregivers.

3. Site 3 has implemented a co-location and integrated service model between CYF, Police and Health which had been in place for three years. Police who specialise in child abuse are co-located at the CYF site office where they are able to work with CYF on care and protection cases. There is a suite of facilities onsite including forensic interviewing rooms and medical unit where pediatricians can conduct assessments and doctors can conduct forensic examination for sexual abuse victims. There is a private whānau room where children and whānau can wait without having to go through the CYF office.

Site 3's region has developed a culture of internal evaluation as the Operations Manager said they are constantly reviewing the interagency collaboration to see how they can improve processes and to establish "processes not only value for money but value for investment for both services (CYF and Police)". There are plans to work more closely with Education and to develop the collaborative approach with community providers so there is a better service response to the needs of tamariki, rangatahi and their whānau. The region is focused on bringing the community on board and to engage with whānau in a prevention model.

This region's review of children in care showed very positive results for one site which has reduced the number of tamariki and rangatahi they place into CYF care from 100 to approximately 30 which they have sustained over the last couple of years. Analysis of tamariki and rangatahi with high needs in September 2012 showed this particular site had the highest ratio of high needs tamariki and rangatahi (34%) in care compared to three other sites in the region which had 7 – 12%. Indications are this site are putting children in care who really need to be there and are working with whānau and the community to find other solutions for caring for tamariki and rangatahi who have lower needs.

The site that has reduced its placements into care has been actively developing relationships with local Māori and cultural processes are part of site protocols. They

utilise Hui-a-Whānau prior to FGC to share their care and protection concerns with whānau and explain the FGC and legislative processes to prepare the whānau for the FGC. Similar to site 1 there are positive feedback about Hui-a-Whānau giving whānau more time to discuss options and make decisions which are thought to contribute to more robust plans. There appears to be some differences in confidence in social workers holding Hui-a-Whānau between sites which indicates support is required in terms of facilitation skills and cultural support.

5 CONCLUSION

The key themes from the interviews with whānau and staff at the scoping sites aligned with many of the findings from CYF's internal review of FGCs. There is substantial support and agreement that the FGC is an important and valuable decision making process for whānau if implemented well. The experiences of the small sample of children, young people and their families/whānau/caregivers highlight the importance of good practice and how this can support whānau to achieve good outcomes. Conversely, if there is a lack of preparation, communication, follow-through and the sense that decisions have already been made whānau feel disempowered and do not find any benefit from going through the FGC process.

What constitutes good practice has been well articulated for the FGC process, however to sustain this over time requires much more attention to maintaining quality and providing an organizational environment that supports good practice. For example, the legal and policy framework, leadership, management structure, resourcing, professional development and supervision, cultural supervision and support, an organizational focus on community engagement and interagency collaboration all need to be focused on quality improvement.

A review of CYF data found the collective outcomes for children and young people are unknown due to the way data is collected. Outcomes for individuals can be accessed via their case files but this is not aggregated to generally inform how children and young people are faring post their care and protection FGC either in the short or longer term. The outcomes framework for vulnerable children will go some way to identifying outcomes across a range of agencies including CYF, Health, Education, and Justice. It would be very useful if data from these agencies can be identified for children and young people who have had FGCs to build a fuller picture of their short and long term outcomes.

There are methodological difficulties in extrapolating how outcomes from this general data could be attributed to the FGC process. More in-depth analysis of a large sample of cases using a case study approach involving interviews and case file analysis and examining outcomes over time would inform 'how' the FGC process impacted on outcomes for children and young people.

Since our evaluation took place in early 2013 CYF have continued to instigate a number of local and national initiatives to reinvigorate FGCs and improve practice standards. They are also focused on engaging and working more closely with whānau/hapū/iwi, community organisations and other government agencies. It will be important to evaluate these initiatives to assess their effectiveness at improving practice and outcomes for children and young people and their families and whānau.

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APPENDIX 1: FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE PRACTICE AND OUTCOMES – LITERATURE REVIEW

The Family Group Conference (FGC) is a participative approach to child protection and youth offending. Mandated by the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act (CYP&F) 1989, it involves the young person, their parents and members of their extended family coming together to develop solutions to specific situations. The process aims to empower families to resolve issues and subsequently strengthen family and community relationships (Levine, 2000). The introduction of the FGC model in New Zealand marked a significant movement to family decision-making and restorative justice. It was based on the assumption that, not only are families capable of making the decisions relating to their own wellbeing but also, they have a right to do so (Huntsman, 2006).

The CYP&F Act led to dramatic changes in the services provided for children and families. For several years prior to the legislation wide public consultation took place. Concern from Māori that the then Department of Social Welfare was failing to meet the needs of its Māori clients led to the release of a report referred to as "arguably the most significant ... concerning welfare issues and the needs of Māori" (Connolly & McKenzie, 1999 p.36). Puaoteata identified issues of institutional racism endemic within the department stating that it could not meet the needs of its non Pakeha clients without "major changes in policy, planning and service delivery" (Ministerial Advisory Committee, 1986, p.6). FGCs were one response to this report and are based on the traditional Māori practice of collective decision-making, involving the community and encompassing Māori custom, beliefs and values (Connolly & McKenzie, 1999).

This review of published and unpublished material, relating to FGCs comprises an evaluation of studies conducted in New Zealand and internationally. The literature search covered a range of databases that access multi-disciplinary journals and other sources. Literature was accessed through the 'Multi-Search Database Link' from the University of Canterbury Library database and the "Google Scholar" search engine. Combinations of relevant search terms such 'family group conferences', 'family group decision making' and 'family conferencing' were used to access the relevant material.

FGCs and Youth Justice

FGCs, in the context of New Zealand youth justice, deal with child offenders (between 10 and 14 years old) and youth offenders (between 14 and 17 years old). The FGC has a number of aims:

- Supporting offenders in taking responsibility for their actions
- Addressing the impact of the offender's actions on the victim
- Changing the offender's behaviour

The makeup of the FGC is specified in the CYP&F Act. For youth offenders, the facilitator is a Youth Justice Co-ordinator (YJC). The conference can be made up of the young person, their family, the victim, a representative from the police, any support person required by the young person, a social worker and the victim. The aim of the conference is to empower the family to produce a plan of action for the offender that is agreed upon by all attending. If a young person denies the charges the FGC cannot proceed and the matter is referred to the Courts. The FGC in youth justice is based on the theory that, while contact with the criminal justice system is harmful for young people, being held accountable for their behaviour can enable them to make changes. In this way its aims align with restorative justice programmes but add to this the empowerment of the offender and their family (Connolly, 2009).

FGCs and Care and Protection

FGCs are required under the CYP&F Act for all children and young people assessed as being in need of care and/or protection (Connolly, 2006). Care and protection FGCs are facilitated by a Care and Protection Co-ordinator (CPC). As with youth justice conferences, the CYP&F Act specifies that family members and others concerned with the young person may participate in the conference. Professionals and the family meet to consider any care or protection issues for a child or young person and make decisions, recommendations and plans for their future. The role of the professionals is to provide information to family members enabling them to make a plan focused on the wellbeing of the child or young person. Private family time, the choice of venue, the timing and the fact that the style of the meeting can be adapted to suit the situation, set it apart from other meeting types (Marsh, 2009). The theory behind the FGC is that by harnessing the strengths of the extended family and social networks, better outcomes for children at risk can be achieved (Connolly, 2006).

New Zealand studies of FGC practice and process

Youth Justice Conferences. Despite the overwhelming support that professionals have expressed for FGCs in this country, New Zealand has been slow to research their efficacy (Connolly, 2006). The available research is limited and the majority has focused on youth

justice conferencing. In the first assessment of FGCs, following their implementation, Maxwell and Morris (1993) evaluated the consistency of practice with the principles of the CYPF Act. While they argued for the potential of FGCs, and found that families appreciated the opportunity to be heard, they raised concerns about a number of practices that were not in line with the legislation.

Of particular concern were the considerable regional variations in FGC process highlighted in their study. Their report was also critical of practices that saw FGCs held during working hours and in the then Department of Social Welfare (DSW) offices. The research highlighted that 54% of FGCs were held before 4pm on a weekday, 66% were held in DSW offices and only 3% were held in a Marae. The authors commented that, “holding FGCs in DSW offices is no doubt convenient for the YJCs and social workers involved, but it does not meet the spirit of the legislation” (Maxwell & Morris, 1993, p. 73). Furthermore they noted that victims were more likely to attend if the meetings were held after working hours (72%). In evaluating participant satisfaction, they found that victims were the ones least likely to be satisfied with the process. The researchers suggested that many were not well informed about the process and the expected outcomes.

Maxwell & Morris (1993) also drew attention to the presence of social workers at conferences despite their attendance not being justified in terms of the legislative requirements. Their report highlighted a number of cases where social workers and/or co-ordinators did not leave the room to allow families to deliberate in private. Criticism of the influence some professionals may exert over the process was also made by Tauri (1999) who argued that the FGC can be disempowering for Māori in that it appropriates traditional Māori systems of justice without giving Māori the complete autonomy for decision making. He was also critical of the number of conferences held in DSW offices rather than on Marae. Maxwell and Morris (1993) similarly raised concerns regarding cultural appropriateness. Their research concluded that at times the process of cultural awareness was token and recommended that the FGC process be managed by those who fully understand the culture.

Further research by Maxwell and Morris (2003) investigated the effectiveness of youth justice FGCs in relation to reoffending. The aim of this study was to identify aspects of FGCs that may be related to reductions in reoffending. Their study used self-reporting data in conjunction with reconviction rates of young people who had participated in FGCs from 1990–1. Interviews with 108 young people and 98 parents were carried out from

August 1996 to December 1997. The research identified a number of aspects relevant to reduced recidivism: remorse, not being shamed, participation in decision-making, acceptance of the conference conclusion and meeting with and apologising to the victim. The authors concluded that FGCs can be effective in reducing reoffending but only when these aspects are present.

The most recent study of youth justice FGCs in New Zealand focused on identifying best practice in relation to the role of the co-ordinator. Slater's (2009) research with YJCs identified consistency, both across co-ordinators and with FGC policy process, good preparation by the YJC, and victim inclusion in the process as integral to successful FGCs. Slater (2009) also noted that YJCs perceived the FGC process to be effective for the majority of young people involved but not for those repeat offenders demonstrating more complex needs.

Care and Protection Conferences. As identified above, research involving Care and Protection FGCs is limited in this country. A study conducted by Connolly (2006) with CPCs indicated a high level of support for the CYP&F Act and the FGC model. Co-ordinators reported that families generally welcomed the opportunity to be involved and "were well served by the legislation"(p.536). Preparation and information sharing by the co-ordinator were identified as key process aspects. The study, however, highlighted significant practice variances, particularly in relation to the level of involvement of professionals during the family deliberation. A number of those interviewed noted cases where co-ordinators and other professionals were unduly involved in family time in a significant move away from the legislation. Others reported feeling they needed to be present at family time in order to give guidance. Further aspects of this research project were also reported in Walton et al. (2005). They highlighted that, despite legislative requirements for family time and co-ordinators seeing it as positive, family time is not always carried out.

Similarly, in findings that correlate with Maxwell and Morris' (1993) earlier study, Connolly (2006) noted that Care and Protection FGCs were more likely to be held during working hours and in DSW offices. She concluded that these factors, along with the intervention of co-ordinators during family time, may improve the administrative efficiency of the process but may impact on the family's perceived control of the process and clash with the intent of the legislation. This seems to support the findings of Maxwell and Morris (1993) who argue that, while policy specifies that the role of the co-ordinator and other professionals is to prepare information and create a situation where the family

can make their own plans, in practice professionals have more influence than is supported by the legislation.

An evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of child welfare services (including FGCs) was conducted by Child, Youth and Family (2006). Following analysis of administrative data in relation to FGCs the study reported that:

- FGCs seem to deliver better outcomes than Family/Whānau Agreements
- In relation to clients experiencing neglect, Care and Protection FGCs have a positive impact on the rate of re-substantiation in the first year but the impact declines during the second year. The report suggests that more effort is required to maintain changes initiated in the FGC plan.
- Youth justice clients who have completed an FGC are significantly less likely to re-offend. 32% of young people with completed plans re-offended whereas 65% of young people re-offended where a plan was not completed.

Results from this project do need to be treated with some caution, as they are not adjusted for the impact of bias in decision-making concerning the selection of intervention.

International reviews of FGC practice and process

While family group conferencing began in New Zealand, it has spread throughout the world (Merkel-Holguin, 2004). Variations have been adopted in youth justice and care and protection in a number of countries including Australia, the United States, Canada, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Sweden and the Netherlands. A number of other terms have emerged to describe FGCs in these countries including Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) and Restorative Youth Conferences (RYC). Although the process may vary from country to country, in general, conferences all include three key practices: information sharing, private family time and the formation of a plan for the future care and protection of the child (Marsh & Crow, 1998, Connolly, 2006). Marsh (2009) however notes that in the youth justice context there are models being referred to as FGCs that don't actually contain the key elements of private family time and an independent co-ordinator. For this reason some caution is required when interpreting international research for a New Zealand context.

Measures of effectiveness

Participation rates and participant satisfaction. A number of evaluations of FGC projects have been carried out in other countries. Due to the scope of this literature review, however, only research pertaining to Care and Protection FGCs has been included. In general, evaluations have been small in scale and have focused on assessing the satisfaction of those attending, measuring the numbers of those attending, and identifying if plans have been generated (Marsh & Crow, 1998). Such reviews have found general family satisfaction with the process and the plans generated during the conferences (Morris & Burford, 2007; Pugh, 2002, Velen & Devine, 2005) and increased family cohesiveness (Pugh, 2002; Velen & Devine, 2005). The research suggests that families respond well when given the opportunity to take a key role in decision-making (Burford, 2005; Holland & Rivett, 2008; Titcomb & LeCroy, 2003) and that they are able to develop effective plans (Thoennes, 2003). Social workers were reported as being satisfied with the process, in particular the reduction in conflict and their increased ability to coordinate services following the meetings (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2003).

Successful life outcomes for the young person. It appears from the studies undertaken internationally that the practice of family group conferencing is supported by families and professionals alike but that the efficacy in terms of achieving successful outcomes for children is still undetermined (Holland & Rivett, 2008; Merkel-Holguin et al., 2003). While more large scale research projects are needed, there have been a considerable number of small scale projects indicating that outcomes for children are at least comparable to those in more traditional child welfare interventions (Merkel-Holguin, 2004).

Pennell and Burford (2000) reported on a project in Canada to test the Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) model in relation to its effectiveness in reducing family violence. The study found that FGDMs were effective in reducing rates of child abuse and neglect and intimate partner violence (IPV). Overall, conferencing was deemed to be successful except where violence against children by their mothers existed or in which plans were ineffectively administered amongst families with particularly tumultuous relationships.

While the study did highlight a lack of follow up by family members and agency staff, the research concluded that the majority of families were better off because conferences “promoted family unity” (p.144). It is important to note, however, that a minority of families reported being worse off as a result of plans not being followed through. Several

other studies have also highlighted the need for families to receive more support in implementing their plans post-conferences (Berzin et al. 2008; Crampton, 2006).

From their review of the literature Merkel-Holguin, et al. (2004) concluded that the FGDM model can be used safely with high risk families, for example, those experiencing sexual abuse or domestic violence. Like Pennell and Burford (2000) they highlighted the increase in family cohesiveness and support following meetings. They do comment, however, that while the literature indicates young people are being well served by FGDMs there is little long-term evidence to support this. Barnsdale and Walker (2007) similarly concluded that FGCs encourage family participation in decision-making but that plans are often not followed up and there is little evidence of long-term successful outcomes for children.

A number of studies from the United States have indicated successful short-term outcomes for children after participation in conferences. A study in Michigan, compared outcomes for foster children referred to FGCs with those referred to other services. During the two years following the study, children who participated in FGCs were less likely to have contact with Child Protection Services and more likely be placed with extended family (Crampton & Jackson, 2007). Similar results were reported from an evaluation of an Arizona based FGDM program. The vast majority of children in the programme remained with their extended families and 87% had no reports of abuse or neglect in the three years following the FGDM (Titcomb & LeCroy, 2003). Gunderson et al. (2003) report comparable findings from a study with 70 children carried out in Washington. Wheeler and Johnson (2003) report from their evaluation of a programme in Santa Clara that children are more likely to remain in family placements following participation in FGDM.

These results are very promising, however, two studies indicate that they do need to be treated with some caution. A study in the United States found no significant difference in outcomes between children randomly assigned to FGDM groups or traditional child welfare services. The children were assessed in terms of child maltreatment, placement stability and permanency outcomes (Berzin, 2006). Sundell and Vinnerling's (2004) study of client outcomes of FGCs in Sweden produced less favourable results. While the process evaluation showed the FGCs were being carried out as intended, the research found that young people who had been involved in the FGC were more likely to be re-referred to Child Protection Services and that when compared with traditional services the impact of the FGC was "scant" (p.268). The authors comment that while both the children in the FGCs and the comparative group were similar in terms of the problems leading to

their referrals and their socioeconomic situation, those attending FGCs were experiencing more serious problems. The authors recommend further studies to ascertain if the adverse results were due to circumstances peculiar to this project.

Outcomes for Minority Groups

Although FGCs were developed as a culturally appropriate response to child protection in New Zealand, only limited research has been carried out to assess the effectiveness of the model with minority groups in other countries (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2010). Much of this research has, however, been favourable. Several studies in the United States have found high take up of FGCs by Black, minority and ethnic (BME) families (Gunderson et al., 2003; Velen & Devine, 2005). An Australian evaluation of an FGC pilot program involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders showed effective outcomes for nearly half of the group with the remainder being assessed as "progressing satisfactorily" (p.2). All children had remained within their extended family and there were no further reports of abuse or neglect. The program was positively viewed by participants and assessed as being empowering for Aboriginal families involved.

The situation is not so clear in the United Kingdom. Marsh and Crow (1998) concluded that BME groups were participating in FGCs and that outcomes were similar amongst families from different ethnicities. More recent studies in the United Kingdom have indicated a low uptake of FGCS up by BME families (Lupton & Stephens; Haresnape as cited in O'Shaughnessy et al., 2010). When evaluating this aspect, Barn et al. (2010) found that families identified the process as supporting their cultural practices, however they recommended that conferences take place in the family home and that co-ordinators be from the same ethnic background. The authors report that the incorporation of FGCs into social services was useful for BME families but argue it is crucial to provide adequate financial resources and staffing. O'Shaughnessy et al. (2010) concluded that FGCs for BME children were being carried out in a way that provided BME families with a voice and were respectful of each family's culture. The authors questioned, however, if the needs of all BME families can be met using FGCs. Like Barn et al. (2010) they draw attention to the importance of adequately funding FGCs and caution against the use of conferencing as an alternative to providing access to the services to which low-income families are entitled. Both of these research projects emphasised the need for further research with BME families.

Role of the Co-ordinator

In alignment with the New Zealand research (Connolly, 2006; Slater, 2009), the international literature emphasises the role of the co-ordinator in a successful FGC (Crampton, 2007; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2010). Holland and Rivett (2008) noted the emotional impact of FGCs on families and commented that families need to be prepared for the possibility of this impact prior to the conferences. Conferences can be time consuming to set up (Levine, 2000), however, the literature emphasises that good preparation, and co-ordinator training and experience are key to a successful FGC (Merkel-Holguin, 2003; O'Shaughnessy, 2010). Crampton (2007) however comments that this assertion is not supported by any research demonstrating a link between preparation time and successful outcomes for families.

Power imbalances within FGCs

The concept of the FGC, based on the premise that when families are adequately resourced they are able to make effective life decisions, challenges the historical notion of professionals as key decision makers in care and protection practice. Much of the literature reviewed above has noted the empowerment of families that can occur as a result of participation in FGCs. Of particular relevance to New Zealand FGCs, however, is Barnsdale and Walker's (2007) comment that engaging families in decision making is potentially empowering when it is done voluntarily, but where their presence may be statutorily required it may be less so. Furthermore, as noted earlier, the legislative drift in New Zealand, for example, the holding of conferences during working hours and in co-ordinators' offices, and the presence of co-ordinators and social workers at family time, has the potential to shift power away from the families and back into the hands of the professionals (Connolly, 2006).

The theme of power imbalance is also referred to in the international literature. Ney et al. (2011) note the possibility for those involved in the administration of an FGC to manipulate the result of the conference. Similarly, Crampton (2007) argues that information sharing from professionals is key in order to ensure good power dynamics. Merkel-Holguin (2004) also draws attention to this concern noting that as co-ordinators, and others involved in the process, marry conferencing with existing administrative constraints often "bureaucracies sabotage family group conferencing" (p.160). Her suggestion is not that this a deliberate act on the part of professionals but that a lack of preparation and information sharing from co-ordinators can result in the marginalisation

of a family's points of view. Merkel-Holguin (2004) cautions against professionals having an unjustifiable influence over the process and recommends minimising their presence during the meeting.

Research Gaps

The literature identified some specific areas where further research was recommended. There was a general call for more studies, in particular larger scale studies, studies assessing long-term outcomes and those utilising randomised control trials. Maxwell and Pakura in a review of evaluation and research of FGCs in Aotearoa raise significant questions in regard to evaluation methodologies in an area of practice that is universally applied (making comparative research difficult), where control groups may be unethical and where evaluation is highly dependent on who wants to know and what they may want to know (2009).

Following their review of outcome studies, Frost et al (2012) noted that such studies are limited, rely on small samples and are site specific. They advocate for longitudinal studies to be carried out that will also examine outcomes on a larger scale. Crampton (2007) highlighted the difficulties of undertaking such studies, citing two projects that had to abandon their evaluations because of the difficulty of recruiting participants. Such studies will no doubt be time consuming and subsequently costly, but seem essential in order to ensure the effectiveness of current practice.

There have been few studies in the public realm that have evaluated the impact of FGCs on care and protection outcomes. Connolly's two publications referred to earlier conclude that the participatory decision-making process is effective in itself, irrespective of outcomes, and that as a process it fulfils well accepted human rights and practice standards in care and protection. A later study in 2003 concluded that FGCs contribute to safer outcomes for children and conform to the programme logic of the process in practice (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford).

There have been many reviews of research on participatory family decision-making since this approach was adopted in Aotearoa. The practice has been adopted in many other care and protection jurisdictions (Merkel-Holguin, 2004) and research and evaluation

issues have been widely canvassed in the research literature

(<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/03/26093721/19>). There is a heavy reliance on qualitative evaluations, frequently based on practice and there is an acknowledged dearth of outcome research based on quantitative methodologies; particularly in the child protection domain (Maxwell & Pakura, 2009). Maxwell and Pakura in a review of evaluation and research of FGCs in Aotearoa raise significant questions in regard to evaluation methodologies in an area of practice that is universally applied, where control groups may be unethical and where evaluation is highly dependent on who wants to know and what they may want to know (2009).

Other key gaps in the research include:

- Understanding the impact of varying family attitudes towards the FGC. The research indicates that many families support FGC practice. What circumstances and factors are present amongst families that do not support the model?
- Analysis of the attendance of particular family members (for example fathers) and the impact this may have on outcome.
- Analysis of outcomes for ethnic minority families
- Analysis of the relationship between the fulfilment of the plan and outcomes for children and young people.

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Summary of Outcome Studies

Author	Methodology	Findings
Berzin et al (2008)	RCT – small sample, one site did not include private family time. Compared reports of substantiated maltreatment, placement and exit types.	No difference in re-abuse rates. No difference in exit and case closed types. Authors concluded that children who receive FGDM are no worse off than mainstream service in areas of safety, permanence and placement stability. Families often had difficult completing tasks and maintaining ‘momentum’
Crampton & Jackson (2007)	Comparison of 96 FGDM referrals with mainstream services. Not randomized.	Children less likely to be placed in an institutional setting and more likely to remain placed with extended family. They moved less between temporary homes and had less contact with CPS
Pennell & Burford (2000)	32 families – 37 conferences – 472 participants (384 family, 88 providers) Follow-up interviews ‘progress reports’ with 115 of the participants Reviewed CPS files Defined ‘child protection events’ with 31 indicators of child maltreatment – examined number of child protection events 1 year before conference and 1 year after. Comparison group of 31 families – matched except FGC cases more difficult	Two-thirds felt conference was beneficial even when plan not fully implemented as it brought families closer and strengthened positive ties. FGC provided empowerment for individuals and groups increasing self-esteem and feelings of control. Interviews and file review showed greater safety within families, with less events than pre conference. Comparison group events rose.
Sundell & Vinnerljung (2004)	Comparison of 97 FGC with 142 families utilising traditional services. Follow-up over 3 years and comparison of child maltreatment reports	Research found that young people who had been involved in the FGC were more likely to be re-referred to Child Protection Services and that when compared with traditional services the impact of the FGC was slight.

