Using Family Group Conferencing to Achieve Permanency for Youth

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As the number of youth, aged 12 to 18, living in foster care increases and the number emancipating from the child welfare system without permanent connections expands (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), 2004), it is critical to review new strategies for achieving the highest degree of permanency for young people. This article will discuss family group decision making, particularly the family group conferencing process, as an effective approach to creating permanency for youth in foster care.

Adolescence

Many youth experience adolescence as a chaotic period filled with self-doubt and self-discovery. Adolescents no longer want to be treated like children, yet have not fully acquired the skills necessary to achieve self-sufficiency. Adolescence can be just as challenging a period for family members and other care providers as it is for youth (Charles & Nelson, 2000). According to Erik Erikson, adolescence is a period of identity versus role confusion. In this period, there is a focus shift from "what is done to us" to "what we do." It is the critical stage when a youth begins to create an individual philosophy of life, fed by life experiences and current relationships. Although youth launch into a greater degree of independent thinking and personal autonomy, it is also essential that they have healthy, stable, and meaningful relationships that will support their successful passage from adolescence into adulthood (Harder, 2002). It is through having a lifetime family, informal but substantive connections with other caring adults, and supportive communities that youth are able to move into healthy and productive adulthood.

Youth in foster care

Given that the adolescent stage can be a tumultuous experience for any young person, imagine the increased complexity and vulnerability for those living in foster care. According to 2004 AFCARS data, almost 40% (118,996) of children entering foster care were between the ages of 11 and 18; and of the 280,000 children exiting out-of-home care, approximately 22% (61,513) were between the ages of 16 and 21. Whether they are ready for the responsibilities of adulthood, it is estimated that more than 20,000 youth age out of foster care at their 18th birthday (AFCARS, 2004). Another essential demographic to identify is that children and youth of

color are disproportionately represented in the foster care system, making up approximately 60% of the entire foster care population. While not exhaustive, cumulatively the following studies illuminate the significant issues that young people in foster care experience, and demonstrate why new approaches to working with youth are essential to achieving positive outcomes.

Westat, Inc. conducted a national project in which 810 former foster youth in eight states were surveyed. The survey found that 46% still lacked a high school diploma. On top of this, two and a half to four years after exiting care, 25% of the youth had been homeless for one night or more. Just under half (49%) of the youth were working, and only 38% had maintained employment for over one year. Only one in six could fully support himself. Thirty-eight percent of the youth had been diagnosed with emotional disturbances, and 9% experienced physical health problems. Despite these circumstances, 42%, including three-fifths of the young women, had already had a child (Cook, 1991).

More recently, a study released by the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Research on Poverty (Courtney and Piliavin, 1998) found that 12 to 18 months after exiting care, 12% of sampled youth had been homeless and 22% had lived in four or more places, often temporarily at one friend's house or another. The study found that 37% of the youth still lacked a high school degree, 39% were not employed, and 19% had not held a job since exiting foster care.

Of the 100 former foster youth surveyed in Clark County, Nevada, 18% had slept on the streets since leaving care and 19% had slept in homeless shelters. As in other studies, Clark County former foster youth also reported frequent troubles with the law, with 41% having spent time in jail since leaving care (Reilly, 2003).

Courtney and Dworsky (2005) found that transitioning youth, who chose to remain under the care and supervision of the child welfare system beyond the age of 18, experienced better outcomes than those who chose to, or were forced to, leave care. Youth who had left care were 50% more likely to be unemployed and out of school than those who stayed in. Youth who left at 18 were half as likely as those still in care to be enrolled in school or a training program. About 14% of those who left reported finding themselves homeless. Of the young people who left care, 11.5% reported sometimes or often not having enough to eat, compared with less than 4% of those who stayed in care.

In a recent study on the transition of foster care youth to emancipated adults (Garcia, Sivak, & Tibrewal, 2003), a pervasive sense of uncertainty was found among youth, highlighting the need to devote serious attention to promoting and planning their lifelong connections.

A historical and prevalent drawback for older youth in care has been that "children often languished in foster care for years, drifting from placement to placement, or remained in the uncertain limbo of the foster care system, until they reached the age of maturity, at which time they 'aged-out' of the system with little support or emotional connections" (Charles & Nelson, 2000, p. 7).

Historically, age 18 has been legally and culturally defined in the United States as the beginning of adulthood. Once young people reach this age, they are allowed to vote and enlist in the military, and many leave home for college or move out on their own. The Children's Action Alliance (2005, p. 8), however, reminds us that, "while eighteen may be the age of majority, nationwide families are experiencing a trend towards longer term responsibility for young adults older than age 18, including continued

financial dependency and remaining at or returning to the parents' home."

Beckman (2004) reported on a national survey conducted by Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates which indicated that Americans believe that on average, young adults are not ready to be completely on their own until age 23. A third of survey respondents did not consider them ready to be completely on their own until age 25 or older. These beliefs have been backed by scientific research that has found that structurally, the brain is still growing and maturing during adolescence. Some scientists say that brain growth matures at age 20; others consider 25 the age at which brain maturation peaks.

Permanency for youth

For the purposes of this article, permanency for youth is defined as "reaching the highest degree of physical safety, emotional security, and legal permanency that can be reached within the context of a family relationship" (Frey, 2004, p. 23). And that highest degree, depending on individual circumstances, "might be achieved through reunification with their family of origin, adoption or guardianship by a family known to the youth, or adoption or guardianship by another family not yet known to them" (Frey, p. 23). In some cases, permanency will not be achieved at the legal level as the above options suggest but through connections with caring, committed adults who do not assume a legal relationship with the youth. As Lewis and Heffernan (2000, p.147) state, it is important to possess the awareness "that permanence is a relationship, not a place," recognizing that some potential connections offer

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the possibility of a strong relationship, but not necessarily a physical placement. They suggest that "while the opportunity to live in a nurturing family relationship is ideal, factors related to the teen, adult, or both sometimes make this goal impossible or inappropriate. These potential permanency relationships should be evaluated on their merits as well as those that offer actual placement."

According to Charles and Nelson (2000), the concept of permanence is not clear-cut for youth. Some youth may refuse adoption, want to live with caring families without necessarily terminating parental rights, or aspire to independent living. Foster Club (www.fosterclub.com), a website for foster youth to express themselves and connect with other foster youth as well as locate resources and information, recently posted an excerpt from the book "On Their Own" (Shirk & Stangler, 2006). Anonymously, several foster youth responded to the story of "Monica," a youth from the book who was stepping out of the child welfare system and into independent living for the first time. Taken from the non-archived message boards of www.fosterclub.com, the following comments from current and former foster youth are unedited and help to illuminate how young people themselves view "the system," transitioning to independent living, and permanency, as well as their feelings about connections and family.

> One youth commented, *"A part of me wants to leave the system so that I will at last be 'normal,' but my better part know that I'm not really ready to leave yet. There is still so much that I need to learn and I need support with. Maybe*

I'm just afraid of the unknown." (age 20, in foster care more than 3 years)

Another wrote, *"I think that once you're old enough and can decipher good and bad judgment. I think all youth should be involved in planning their case, not just in the decisions on whether to go home or not. I also think that they should make these decision carefully because the grass is not always greener on the other side. Who's to say once your back at home and things aren't going the way you planned, then what? You could already by'then have forfeited a lot of the protection and the benef its that being in foster care offers."* (age 23, in foster care more than 3 years)

"I think that once you get close to eighteen you start thinkin about whats goin to become of you. and the only thing that comes to your mind is goin back home, you think to your self that it wasn't that bad and thats where you belong...i know i did." (age 18, in foster care more than 3 years)

"I know how it feels to want to go home. No matter what your parents have done to you, they are still your parents and there is a bond. I still do not think that a foster child of any age should be allowed to decide to return to their biological family. You are in foster care for a reason! Also, everyone I know who has gone home from foster care after being released or aging out has just messed up everything that they had going for them. I aged out on may 9 and started college immediately. I had a chance to go home once and I thank God that I did not take it or I would never be where I am today..." (age 19, in foster care 1 to 3 years)

Barriers to achieving permanency for youth

Attaining children's safety, achieving their permanency, and promoting their health and well-being are desired outcomes of child welfare systems. However, the success of actualizing these outcomes is tenuous (Garcia, et al., 2003).

One of the biggest barriers to the achievement of permanency for youth is the prevailing myth amongst child welfare service providers that older youth are not interested in forming or strengthening connections to adult support and that there are few families interested in committing to youth. Contrarily, Charles and Nelson (2000, p.8) documented that "youth have told us again and again that being an adolescent doesn't mean they don't want to be adopted or find a permanent family connection. These youth want the long-term stability they feel a family will bring even as adults." Family and community ties do not end at adulthood. Such connections serve as lifelong support throughout the years, particularly through tumultuous life changes and important turning points and events.

For youth aged 11 and older, the challenges of responsive support, service provision, and achieving timely permanency often have continued to confound those charged with their care. Youth permanency has been negatively affected by inadequate resources, complex needs, poorly selected and improperly trained foster parents, caseworkers failing to address permanency issues early and frequently, fractured family relationships, and beliefs that it is almost impossible to find adoptive families for older children and that youth do not want to be adopted (California Permanency for Youth Project, 2005).

Similarly, on a national scale, Winkle, Ansell, and Newman (2004), in their review of states' child and family service reviews and program improvement plans, identified the following resource barriers to youth permanency: a gap in youth-focused services (34 states

were rated as inadequate to nonexistent on this resource); lack of placement resources; and gaps in training for staff and foster parents (87% of the states reviewed identified the need for specialized training in assessing youth needs and understanding adolescent issues). These challenges result in youth lacking family ties and connections, meaningful relationships, and permanent families, and ultimately pose significant risks to youth in terms of delinquency, substance abuse, violence, and a decrease in school achievement and employment.

Permanency planning for youth

The process of identifying possible permanency resources for youth has typically occurred through general recruitment. This approach is system-driven and passive, as it focuses on submitting basic information about the child, along with the child's picture, to adoption agencies and websites. This approach is dependent on receiving responses from interested parties, and the process repeats itself indefinitely until a permanent family is found or the youth ages out of the system.

A preferred approach, especially with this population, is *child-specific recruitment,* which strives to be a youth-driven process. While the term child-specific recruitment has many interpretations, American Humane defines this to mean an approach where the youth is proactively involved in the process of achieving permanence, starting with the diligent search and continuing with determining what level of permanence is desired by the youth and choosing who will be a part of his or her permanent support network. With

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this approach, permanence may be defined by the committed connections made with family, kin, and others in the youth's network, instead of or including placement.

Permanency planning for youth should be "youth-driven, family-focused, culturally competent, continuous, and approached with the highest degree of urgency" (National Resource Center on Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning and Casey Family Services, 2004, p. 1). Additionally, permanence should "bring physical, legal and emotional safety and security within the context of a family relationship and allow multiple relationships with a variety of caring adults" (National Resource Center on Family Centered Practice, p.1). It is shortsighted to view permanence as a single connection, a traditional family, or a straightforward relationship. Like all family dynamics, permanence is multi-faceted and specific to the development of both the young person and the "family." What may serve one young person may not be suitable, appropriate, or wanted for the next.

Planning for lifelong permanency can and should begin in the earliest stages of out-of-home care. Ignoring the importance and timeliness of these concerns can lead to a further disservice of the young people traditionally sidelined in the child welfare system. The effects will last beyond adolescence and into adulthood, pointing to the professional responsibility of both child welfare agencies and the community at large to ensure that young people develop permanent connections.

Increasingly, based on the positive

evaluative results, family group decision making (FGDM) is being implemented as an approach to create plans in a specific, relevant, and meaningful way to achieve permanency for youth in out-of-home care. Crucial to working with adolescents through FGDM is the principal belief that every young person deserves permanent connections. Youth participation in planning and identifying people in their own networks through FGDM positions them as leaders and guides of their own futures. Through FGDM, youth and their familial and informal support networks are empowered to create plans that capitalize on their personal investment and responsibility for the young person's future success.

The remainder of this article provides an overview of FGDM, uses a case example to illustrate the application of the family group conference (FGC) process, summarizes the research on FGC and youth, and discusses issues communities can consider in implementing this process with youth.

Family group decision making overview

Family group decision making (FGDM) is an innovative approach, with an increasing body of evidence for achieving child and youth safety, permanency, and well-being (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003). FGDM is an umbrella term for a number of processes that position children, youth, and families as leaders in decision making. Through FGDM processes, children, youth, families, their support networks, and community members develop plans to resolve the issues endangering their young and adult family members, and then the public agency representatives agree to the plan's action steps and authorize necessary resources (Merkel-Holguin, 1998; Pennell & Anderson, 2005; Wilmot, 2000). Public agency representatives, in partnership with

family members, serve to monitor the plan; the family group can reconvene as needed to modify the plan. In the United States, the most common FGDM practice model implemented is the family group conference (FGC).

Family group conferencing was first legislated in New Zealand in 1989 under the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act. This act entitled families and other significant caring persons to have a voice in creating plans for their children and young people who came to the attention of the child welfare and youth justice system. New Zealand's government, with this act, was acknowledging "that their practices toward children and families were not culturally appropriate" (Burford and Hudson, 2000, p. xxiii).

The overrepresentation of minority children in nonrelative or kin foster homes was one of the main issues that led to this act. This occurrence was of great concern to the Maori people, and they worked with the government to have a key role in decision making and planning for the safety and permanency of their children, through the use of family group conferencing.

FGDM: thinking broadly

Lohrbach (2003) describes FGDM as a partnership-based practice where information exchange, consultation, and involvement in decision making are basic to participation and to clients' rights as social work participants and as citizens.

Burford (2004) furthers the concept, focusing on youth and families as architects of civil society and social inclusion when using FGDM. "Partnership practice that widens family members' civic engagement requires getting beyond mere coordination and integration of services and the customizing by professionals of

plans around the identified risks and assessed needs associated with particular individuals and clients, to engaging consumers, their caregivers, and service providers at every stage, including needs assessment, program design, goal setting, implementation, governance and evaluation" (Burford, p. 80). These concepts are particularly relevant to an adolescent population, as during these formative years, concepts of ethics, community involvement, and civic responsibility and both tested and developed.

Merkel-Holguin expands the concept of social engagement, focusing in particular on youth involvement in the FGDM process. She contends that FGDM "provides the opportunity to teach young children, at a young age, the value of civic participation" (2004, p. 157). Not only does FGDM provide opportunities for youth to become involved and engaged in civil matters, but "when children and young people take part in the process, and observe the important adults in their lives positively and humanely participating in difficult deliberations, they are better prepared to become citizens contributing to civil society."

Research on FGCs and youth

While limited, the research and evaluative results on convening family group conferences for older youth in care illustrate the effectiveness of this approach for this population of young people. These results can also be used to inform programmatic development for family group conferences.

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Specifically, one study by the Northwest Institute for Children and Families looked at placement and relationship outcomes for youth (11 to 18 years old) placed in group care. They found that 81% of youth felt safe in the family group conference (FGC) process, 87% of case plans identified a recommendation for permanence, 34% of youth returned home or were placed with kin, and a majority of youth moved to less restrictive placements within six months and remained in them at 12 months (Gunderson, 2005).

Velen and Devine (2005) evaluated the permanency needs of children in Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona, who were in out-of-home care for five years or longer, and of children identified as free for adoption but without an identified adoptive family. Of these youth, their average age was 13.78, they had an average of 8.94 placements, and 62% were children of color. The results of this study appear to support FGDM as an effective method of addressing disproportionality and permanency issues, as plans were developed for all 100 children in the study, including 68 permanency plans. At the time of this report, 17 children had achieved permanency.

Illustrating the family group conference process to achieve youth permanency

Family group conferences are dependent on availability and participation of family and kin as defined by the family. What does this mean for children for whom it has somehow been determined that there are no family members or kin located or available? If the child is in placement, reunification is unlikely, and no family or kin have been

identified to participate in planning for the child's future, it is usually determined that an FGC cannot occur, and general recruitment efforts will likely be initiated in the attempt to achieve permanence. However, this does not have to be the case.

Those who are most likely to experience the circumstances described in the last paragraph are youth who are 12 years of age and older (Garcia, et al., 2003). Often, it is more difficult to achieve permanence for youth with no identified potential kin placements. In recent years, more efforts have been made to actively involve youth in working to achieve permanence, with some child welfare service providers developing youth-centered processes to achieve permanence. Family group conferencing provides the opportunity for a youth-centered process to occur.

Family group conferencing (FGC) as the primary method of the child-specific recruitment process starts with a thorough, diligent search that includes:

- Working with youth to determine who was or is important, and with whom the youth wants to have connection. This process should occur many times, using various methods which encourage the youth to remember different times, places, and people who have played roles in the youth's life. The more people who can be identified as potential participants in the FGC, the greater the resources for the youth.

- Accessing any known family or kin, and past or present caregivers of the youth to gain information about others who have or have had a significant role in the youth's life. Family or kin and caregivers can act as historians for the youth, and

often can assist in determining who is important to the youth.

- Reviewing all existing files, past and present, to identify relatives and other significant people from the youth's life (this includes anyone who may have been considered unable to be a part of the youth's life in the past).

Preparation for the family group conference begins by working with the youth and family to determine who will attend the conference, what the objectives will be, where and when it will be held, what food will be served, what traditions or ceremonies will be incorporated, and if the youth would like to have a support person at the conference to support his or her participation.

Preparing specific participants for their roles at the conference is integral to the success of the FGC. The coordinator's preparation with the youth includes reviewing the steps of the FGC process, the youth's role, the objectives to be discussed, the youth's expectations and how to manage them, and how the youth would like to be supported before, during and after the FGC, and helping the youth understand that it may take more than one FGC for a permanent plan to be developed and that FGCs can continue to be held until permanence is achieved.

When preparing the family and other significant people, the coordinator reviews the steps of the FGC process, any information they may need to know about the youth's circumstances or needs, their roles in the FGC, and the objectives for the FGC. Preparation of the service providers includes clearly defining how the FGC is being used as a primary method of child-specific recruitment, stressing the importance of providing thorough information about

the child's needs in relation to achieving permanence, the steps of FGC process, any information they may need to know prior to FGC, their roles in the FGC, and the goals for the FGC.

During the actual family group conference, it is vital that the coordinator conveys the following information to the FGC participants:

- The definition of permanence, what the youth's current status is regarding permanence, and the need for the highest level of permanence achievable for this youth;

- The possibility of more than one FGC, with the group meeting as often as necessary to develop a plan that best meets the youth's needs; and

- The importance of continuing the diligent search and FGC process through reconvening until permanence is achieved.

Future directions

Sheehy, et al. (2000) suggest that meaningful engagement of youth in identifying and establishing connections with family and other caring adults increases the likelihood of creating permanent relationships. Undoubtedly, family group conferencing not only engages young people in a process that rebuilds their family and social support network, but also serves as a platform to elevate youth and the broader family voice in decision making. The slogan, "nothing about me, without me" embodies the spirit of family group

conferencing in that it recognizes the vital role that young people should play in charting their own permanency planning process.

As communities implement family group conferences for young people in foster care, practice dilemmas have emerged that require careful thought and deliberation by various stakeholders, especially the young people who this process is aimed at helping.

> Given that in many instances, youth in foster care have been disconnected and separated from their immediate and extended family system, how does the concept of a youth-driven permanency planning process fit in with the FGC process?

How do the concepts of youth-driven practice and family-centeredness intermingle or interconnect with the FGC process? In other applications of FGC, the process is espoused as family-driven: one that is not controlled or dominated by any one family member. It is the coordinator's responsibility to work with all family members, including children and youth, to engage them in participating. While an individual family member cannot bar the participation of others, she or he can raise concerns for the coordinator to explore with others. If safety concerns exist, then the coordinator, who is the guider and protector of the FGC process, will employ strategies to bring all voices and perspectives to the FGC with the safety and well-being of all participants being paramount. However, existing interpersonal or interfamily conflicts or an individual's current connection with the extended family does not serve as the basis for excluding individuals from participating in an FGC.

Translate those underpinning values and practices to FGCs where youth

permanency is the purpose. Given that in many instances, youth in foster care have been disconnected and separated from their immediate and extended family system, how does the concept of a youth-driven permanency planning process fit in with the FGC process? Does the youth become the gatekeeper of the FGC, deciding who is invited, including family members, service providers, friends, and others? Or, does it remain the coordinator's responsibility through diligent searching, exploration, and ongoing dialogue with the youth to identify the broadest network possible? The latter embodies the idea that endless possibilities, resources, and solutions exist when the broadest family group is assembled, while allowing one person to limit participation may likely undercut the purpose. Balancing the youth's autonomy, thinking, and desires within an FGC framework is a proposition that requires open communication and substantial skill. In addition, these concepts highlight an important debate about the perceptions of young people's rights and autonomy within the context of their families.

Is preparation a cornerstone of youth permanency family group conferences?
Because relationships between young people and their family members may have been strained, fragmented, or nonexistent, shortcuts in sufficient organizing and preparation of the extended family, community, and youth's social support network will likely result in an FGC that is heavily dependent on, dominated by, and driven by service providers. While service providers have the critical role of illuminating the most vital issues for the youth and identifying resources that can be leveraged in the family's plan, their presence or input should not supersede the youth and family's level of involvement in planning. Family group conferencing has the potential to restructure standard case

planning processes that privilege service providers as decision makers, often at the exclusion of young people and their extended family system. It debunks the myth that young people in foster care have no connections or relationships with their family and kin members. However, the equation can only be altered if active and constant diligent search strategies and family engagement processes are implemented throughout the social work process. This results in a process, like FGC, that positions family and young people in the position of primary decision makers, with service providers playing a supportive role.

Are there any intentional or unintentional by-products from convening FGCs to achieve youth permanency? The purpose of family group conferences – to establish a process where the family group makes decisions and creates specific case plans -- should not be overshadowed by any other benefits that can be gleaned from the process. Undoubtedly, while not the primary intention, FGCs can result in rebuilding of family relationships, restoring hope for young people and others in the family, illuminating the care and concern family members have for one another, creating family harmony, and supporting identity development and cultural formation for youth. However, the FGC process, even in the youth permanency application, should not be significantly altered to achieve these by-products. Embedding solution-focused questions and dialogue into the FGC preparation process can support FGC participants in harnessing their strengths, protective capacities, and "outside the box" thinking in crafting plans. However, in some communities, while unintended, the information sharing process has become overly facilitated and multi-faceted, becoming the "focus" of the FGC, and mirroring a therapeutic intervention rather than a decision making construct. It begs the

question of whether or not these guided, and sometimes lengthy, discussions result in control being absconded by service providers and others.

Are FGCs a moment in time, or an ongoing process? The decisions made through family group conferencing processes, and for that matter, other case planning mechanisms, are serious, life-altering, and intense, and often have a powerful and unpredictable ripple effect not only for the youth and his or her immediate family, but also for their generations to come and the broader community. Depending on a number of factors, including the quality of the preparation, the young person's involvement in organizing the process, the family's connectedness and harmony before the FGC, and the complexity of the issues that prompted the foster care arrangement, communities implementing FGCs to achieve youth permanency may find it necessary to organize multiple FGCs for a youth to reach this outcome. While multiple FGCs require additional resources, they honor the natural decision making process of families and do not unintentionally force family and kin into making lifetime commitments for youth without the time to seriously consider those commitments. When multiple family group conferences are organized, intensive preparation efforts between FGCs and continued diligent search processes to widen the circle may be necessary. Instituting family group conferences for young people in foster care will require revamping business as usual, and reaching far and deep to dispel the myths that have, over the past decade, paralyzed communities serving these vulnerable youth.

Conclusion

Undeniably, there are too many youth living in, or emancipating from, foster care who lack permanent connections and relationships that will support them as they transition into adulthood. The evidence that has been gathered to date, coupled with the child welfare field's espoused philosophical shifts, indicate that now is the time for new vision and a new approach to permanency for youth in foster care. Family group decision making processes, and in particular, the family group conference process as illustrated herein, provide a potential avenue toward achieving positive outcomes for these young people and their families.

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