UCD SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCE

WORKING PAPER SERIES

2013

The Place of Family Group Conferencing in Child Welfare in the Republic of Ireland

Dr Valerie O’Brien

WP28

May 2013

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

BELFIELD DUBLIN 4
The Place of Family Group Conferencing in Child Welfare in the Republic of Ireland

Dr Valerie O’Brien : School of Applied Social Science :
Contact details : Valerie.obiren@ucd.ie

Abstract / Introduction

This paper provides a brief overview of the practice of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) in the Republic of Ireland through a review of what has been occurring within the child welfare arena. The Irish legislation, policy and practice developments are reviewed against international trends. The Chapter focuses on what has been working in conferencing in Ireland as well as the aspects that need attention and identifies key questions about the future direction and place of the practice.

This paper is based on a review of small scale Irish research studies as well as legislative, practice and policy documents and a number of interviews with key service providers. It is written through a reflective process from the vantage point of one who was deeply involved in the development of kinship care (O’Brien 1997, 2012) and Family Group Conferences in Ireland from 1998 – 2003 (O’Brien 2001, 2002, O’Brien & Lynch 2002). Reflexivity involves looking again at perceptions in the light of new knowledge, understandings and perspectives.

Doolan’s (2007) conceptual framework for analyzing the provision of conferencing is used to aid and structure this examination and presentation. This distinguishes between legislative, procedural, and ‘best practice’ elements and uses the differences between ‘mandate’, ‘strategy’ and ‘fit with other agency processes’ to identify key implementation issues.

Family Group Conferencing

The FGC is an innovative joint family/ professional decision-making model that originated in New Zealand as part of their Children, Young Person and Families Act, 1989. It is based on principles of partnership and empowerment of families, and fits with the increased emphasis on strengths-based approaches for working with families. The model is seen as simple in so far as it is a time-limited process with a clear delineation of steps. These involve a referral stage, a preparation process and a meeting that is divided into three phases: information sharing, private family time and presentation and discussion of the family plan which is aimed at addressing the issues that led to the referral. The independence of the process coordinator is seen as a key aspect. The family plan is accepted unless there are indications that it puts the child at further risk. In New Zealand, the FGC became the major decision-making process within the child protection system (Doolan 2007, Connolly 2004, 2009).

The model has been adopted in a numerous countries (Nixon et al 2005). However, few countries have embedded this radical decision-making model in their legislation. Where it has been provided for, the legislation is usually less detailed in respect of the scope and detail of
the principles and processes compared with New Zealand’s original legislation (Children, Young Persons and Families Act, 1989).

Ireland is one country that has introduced the FGC process as part of its legislation via the Children Act, 2001. However, the context of this legislation is primarily juvenile justice, and is only relevant to the family welfare system where a small cohort of cases intersect between child protection and juvenile justice. While the practice model used in child welfare is based on the principles and processes inherent in the New Zealand model of family group conferencing it is defined as a ‘Family Welfare Conference’. The naming of the practice in child welfare contexts arises from the legislative provision. The background and the consequences of this labelling are discussed later. For the purpose of this chapter, the terms ‘family welfare conference’, ‘conferencing’ and ‘family group conference’ will be used interchangeably, unless specifically stated.

**Backdrop of FGC Service Development in Ireland**

A number of key context markers have shaped the child welfare system in Ireland in recent years, and it is against this backdrop that conferencing has been developing.

Child Welfare services have been delivered as part of the health care system in Ireland. In the past decade, there has been an unprecedented degree of organisational change in health services delivery, with all the implications that major change processes of this type engender. In 2004 health service delivery changed from a region-based administrative system to a national health service with the setting up of the Health Service Executive (HSE).

Ireland’s child welfare system shares many similar trends to systems in other jurisdictions (Buckley 2008, Buckley et al 2011). There has been a major emphasis within policy and practice on partnership, solution-focused and family-centred practice and commitment to family support. Where care is needed, there is acceptance that the children have complex needs that warrant a range of responses, and that kinship placement is a preferred choice if possible (O’Brien 2012). Paradoxically, there is evidence that the system is becoming more risk averse, and it is characterised by growing managerialism, legalism and a reliance on a tighter and tighter procedural approach (Lynch & Burns 2012).

Legacy issues associated with the past treatment of children and their families by the child welfare system have been a recurring theme in Ireland for the past fifteen to twenty years (Raftery & O’Sullivan 1999). The focus on abuse of children within institutional settings (Ryan 2009) and the abuse of children by members of the Catholic Church who were in positions of authority (Murphy 2009) have resulted in both public outrage and debate on the country’s failure to protect vulnerable children in the country in recent years (Keegan, 2011). The issue of child abuse and children’s rights has been routinely propelled by the latest scandal to occupy a high position on the political agenda.

As well as legacy issues, public and political interest in child welfare has gained further momentum in recent years through examination of contemporary practices arising from perceived and dramatic failures to protect vulnerable children. Recent
investigations and reports on individual child protection interventions continue to shock the country, e.g. (Roscommon Child Care Inquiry 2010). An in-depth examination of the cases of children who died while in the care of the HSE (or who died soon after leaving care) has recently been undertaken (Shannon & Gibbons 2012). The litany of failures and accompanying series of investigations/reviews have led to a major focus on child welfare interventions and propel the paradoxes inherent in the system. They have also prompted policy changes (Department of Health and Children 2000, 2007) as well as further major restructuring of child welfare services.

The appointment by a new Government in 2011 for the first time of a full cabinet position of Minister for Children with her own separate Department has been heralded as an indication of the political commitment to making major changes in the child welfare system. The long-awaited referendum to strengthen children’s rights in the Irish constitution has been promised to take place in late 2012. It has been decided to establish a National Child and Family Agency in 2013 to separate child welfare services from the national health services (HSE) which is itself undergoing a further round of re-structuring.

Major preparations are underway to deliver the intended changes and to demonstrate how the future will be better for vulnerable children. A major target for the new Child and Family Agency is to provide consistent and standardised services across the country. A package of ‘business processes’ are being developed to enable this to happen (HSE 2009). There has been much debate about this departure (IASW Special Interest Group, 2011). On the one hand, the need to ensure equity, transparency and standardisation in service delivery is welcomed generally. However, the challenge remains as to how to retain sufficient flexibility to enable professional judgment to have a central place, and how to avoid the negative features that have been associated with overly procedure-driven systems that have been identified elsewhere (Munro 2011). A very real concern is that the separation from the health service and the standalone nature of the new agency will militate against achieving coordinated, multi-disciplinary services that have been associated in recent years with achieving better outcomes. Despite the political commitment (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2012) and the blueprint involving recommendations to address many of the issues, implementation of key steps, including extracting of appropriate budget levels from the health service, are not achieved at this stage.

The economic crisis, which commenced in late 2007 after the biggest boom period in Irish history, has led to huge levels of personal indebtedness, rising un-employment, emigration as well as dependency on social welfare and growing levels of poverty and inequality. These are classic factors which will generate need within the Irish child welfare systems. However, the dramatic deterioration of Ireland’s economic situation over the last five years is also the major determinant of the direction in which public services, including child welfare, will go in the years ahead. Currently, much of Ireland’s economic policy is determined by ‘The Troika’ - the combination of EU institutions, the European Central Bank and the IMF who are providing funding to run the state. It is a major concern, notwithstanding the local political will, that the Government will be able to channel adequate resources to child welfare and to manage the level of change and to achieve the outcomes envisaged.
The Irish Research Base

Family Group Conferencing was first piloted in a kinship care context in child welfare in Ireland in 1999, followed closely in 2000 with a second pilot aimed specifically at demonstrating the potential of conferencing within the child protection system (O’Brien 2001, 2002). At the same time, conferencing was also piloted as part of a juvenile justice diversion scheme (O’Dwyer 2001). The interest in conferencing within the Justice sphere led to it being included in legislation in the Children Act, 2001 primarily with a juvenile justice orientation. In 2004, a further regulatory framework was enacted (Department of Health & Children, 2004) in response to the primary legislative requirements, and this enabled conferencing services to be established in a range of settings including child welfare, probation and juvenile justice (police) settings.

A series of small studies have been used to evaluate child welfare conferencing services provided directly by the HSE, (O’Brien 2000, 2002, O’Sullivan et al 2001, Brady 2004) and services contracted out by the HSE to Barnardos (Craven 2003, Kemp 2007, Brady & Canavan 2009). These studies provide rich data, especially in terms of insights into the processes involved, and utilise a range of methodologies, principally qualitative in orientation.

The evaluation of conferencing services provided by the police and the probation service has been the subject to limited research. The studies conducted by O’Dwyer 2001 and by Burke 2006 in probation are high quality, but Burke 2006 p 3, emphasises the need for ‘structured and focused research’ across all domains. This was recognised by the Conferencing Implementation Group set up under the Children Act 2001, but there has been no progress on this call. It is hoped that this chapter, albeit focused predominantly on child welfare, will go some way towards pulling together what is happening in the field and will provide an impetus for a much needed debate in Ireland on the future of conferencing and perhaps may highlight the need to conduct the research as originally envisaged by the implementation group.

Service Delivery within Child Welfare

Within the HSE’s child welfare system, the conferencing service is entitled the ‘Family Welfare Conference Services (FWC)’. It is considered that the ‘policy and practices on which the National FWC’s service is based adheres to the internationally established best practices ‘Family Group Conferences’ model ( HSE 2012, p. 21). There are currently fourteen separate FWC services run by the HSE across the country: four in the Greater Dublin/ Leinster Area, and five services each in the West and the Southern Areas of the country. Twelve of the FWC services are provided directly by the statutory child welfare agency (HSE) and it is a contracted out service provided by Barnardos, a voluntary organisation, in two locations.

Information on activity levels in respect of conferencing in child welfare is limited and presents a challenge in conducting a robust analysis. The number of FWC’s increased from 191 in 2007 to 207 in 2008, an increase of 8.4% according to a HSE report (2008, p 53). The HSE’s National Service Plan 2010 set a target of 477 FWC referrals, with the actual number achieved being 461. However, the target of actually holding a conference (as opposed to obtaining a referral) was 268, and this figure surpassed the target set by 5%.
Performance indicators for the FWC service were removed in the HSE National Service Plan of 2011 without any explanation being given.

The following observations are made following an examination of available data:
the number of court referrals was lower than initially expected;
there was a high number of referrals to the service that did not actually lead to a meetingconference been held, and
there is a wide variation in the pattern of FWC use across the country.

Caution is necessary regarding the reliability of data trends presented as there are limitations with what is available. Limitations are seen in terms of:
  differences in terms used to describe practices and processes;
  difficulties involved in capturing the complexity of the activities;
  failure to obtain data from some regions thus leading to incomplete data sets, and
  a reliance on stand alone quantitative data.
These data limitations presents difficulties not only for the analysis of what is currently happening but also for planning future services.

Although some of the individual regional services have had their own service evaluated, the failure to conduct a national-level evaluation of the FWC service since its inception is a major constraint. Any such evaluation would need a detailed analysis of conference referrals activity against other variables in the child welfare system such as the total number of referrals into the child welfare system, the number of children in the care system, the demarcation of these cases within child protection and child welfare categories, the pathways of these cases through the system in terms of interventions, the progression of these cases through specific regulatory junctures ie placement decision-making, care planning and the extent to which informal kinship placements are being encouraged. The implication of this proposal is discussed further alongside outcomes and conferencing in a later section of the paper.

Exploring the Mandate for Conferencing in Ireland

The provision of FWC in Ireland can be described as containing all three elements identified by Doolan (2007) - legislative, procedural and best practice. There is evidence that the ‘best practice’ element is still dominant, despite the legislative basis for conferencing (Kemp 2007, Brady & Canavan 2009) and that within child welfare it continues to be seen primarily as a family support intervention (Review of Adequacy Report 2008, 2012). Overall, conferencing occupies a very peripheral place in the system.

Legislative Basis for Conferencing
The legislative basis for conferencing in Ireland is narrow and is primarily geared towards juvenile justice. This legislation enables the police service (An Garda Síochána) to divert young people from adversarial court processes through a range of methods, including holding a ‘conference’. It enables a judge to adjourn proceedings against a child who has been charged with an offence and to request a ‘family conference’. It provides for a judge to request the HSE to hold a ‘family welfare conference’ if a young person is before the court for criminal behaviour and the judge is of the view that there is a care and protection issue to be addressed (Section 77). The Act also provides for the holding of a ‘family welfare conference’ if the child welfare agency decides that an application to the court is warranted
to provide a secure placement for a young person that may be at risk of harm and needs such security for their own protection (Section 23). There is little or no difference surrounding the conferencing processes arising from the various enabling statutes.

The FWC service was developed to meet the HSE’s legislative responsibilities under the Act. The legislative terms ‘family welfare conference’ (in child welfare), ‘family conference’ (in probation) and ‘conferencing’ (Juvenile Diversion in Police) have been used in naming the national services in the different settings. The different terms were an attempt to distinguish agency responsibility for convening conferences in respect of young people at different stages of their care and/or criminal careers. The use of separate terms for conferences is confusing, especially as there are no major differences in the principles or in the actual process of the various categories of conference. The insertion of the new terms also excluded any reference to ‘family group conference’ in the legislative provision, though this language had been central to the earlier pilots. While this may not seem important of itself, it may help account for the limited visibility of the developments in Ireland within the international ‘family group conference’ field in recent years.

There is evidence that the different terms has led to a level of confusion for service users and that important opportunities for co-ordination have been lost. The issue of naming alone, however, cannot account for the lack of coordination across settings. The standing down in 2006 of the Conferencing Implementation Group, set up following the enactment of the legislation, was premature in light of the limited progress towards coordination, collaboration and communication. The challenge of coordination has also been a feature even within single settings i.e. HSE, a point which is elaborated further under ‘best practice developments’ below. In the academic / training context students learn about international practices and, while attempts are made to find a fit between Irish and practices in other contexts, the particular term used in Ireland may contribute to a disassociation at a practice level and this may be a factor in the low referral rates to the service.

‘Procedural’ Developments

A procedure-oriented service is generally characterised by a set of explicit processes aimed at ensuring a standardisation in practice. Robust information systems are considered an important feature in ensuing accountability and transparency. A challenge in the development of FGC across jurisdictions has been to find a fit between what may be viewed as a rather simple process/methodology and the procedural systems already in place (Brown 2003, Morris 2011).

Procedural systems have been dominant in child protection across many jurisdictions for some time, and Ireland has been no exception to this trend. The publication of ‘Children First 1999’ and the recently updated ‘Children First 2011’ provides the framework for the child protection system. The development of conferencing within Ireland has been shaped by these publications. The 1999 framework did not embrace the FGC specifically but it recognised its potential as a mechanism to draw up support plans when working with families (p 62). The more recent publication ‘Children First 2011’ does not name conferencing as a process, even though it has been seen as an important option in the new business processes underpinning the child welfare system (HSE 2009, 2012). While FGC has been used in child protection cases through the pilot set up to examine and progress the application (O’Brien 2002), other research has shown that it is the ‘lower end’ (i.e least serious) of child protection cases that
are referred into the service (Kemp 2007). Even if cases contain elements of child protection, it is generally described as a family support case at the outset and not described as a child protection (Brady & Canavan 2009).

Two major policy developments have occurred in recent times that will undoubtedly shape the future place of conferencing in child welfare, and particularly in the child protection part of the system. The first development has been the demarcation between child welfare and child protection cases and the development of different but integrated service delivery models to manage cases. The threshold of significant harm (defined as being reached when the child’s needs are neglected to the extent that his or her well-being and/ or development is severely affected) is used to demarcate between the two categories. There is evidence of Ireland following UK developments in child protection systems, but it is considered that many of the system failures in the UK (Munro 2011) have not being recognised sufficiently within the new Irish policy.

The second development is the publication and decision to implement a set of detailed ‘business processes’ (HSE 2009), previously mentioned, which set out detailed procedures to cover all child welfare and child protection activity. These processes provide for family welfare conferences as one of a number of options at key junctures within the child welfare and the child protection system. In theory, there is provision for the FWC service to be used at the ‘assessment stages’, as part of a ‘strategic meeting’ set up to discuss a case, as part of ‘family support plan’, as part of ‘case conference’ or when child protection plans needs to be reviewed or if a child is been ‘discharged from care’. However, within the current business process system, there is limited provision for accounting for why this option was activated (or not activated) and, secondly, what the consequences of a particular action may be for both the service and / or the individual case.

However, it is early days in this new system. Implementation of many of the business processes has commenced, and a six month pilot of how the specific ‘family welfare conference business processes’ will operate in practice is about to commence in one area of the country (HSE 2012). This development is to be welcomed, as conferencing up to this point has played little role within the Irish child protection system and has remained peripheral.

From this author’s perspective, it is regrettable that the findings and recommendations of the original FGC pilot project were not acted upon (O’Brien 2002). At the time, great leadership and foresight was shown in setting up and supporting such an innovative project. A major task identified in the 2002 report (O’Brien 2002) was to develop a series of mechanisms showing how FGC could be integrated into the Child Protection System. A template of different options was presented to facilitate this development work. The positioning of the FGC as a complementary and process-enhancing approach within the then current professional and professional/ family decision-making process was seen as key to working out the fit between the FGC and child protection system’ (p 128). It was stressed that FGC should not be seen as a ‘once-off’ event but as part of the ongoing process. Sadly, very little progress has been made in integrating or using the FGC in the intervening twelve years. It is interesting to speculate on the reasons for this.

The most obvious factor, perhaps, is the enormity of the rapid organisational changes that occurred subsequently at so many levels of the child protection system. Career opening and movement became a feature of the change and, as many of the original champions involved
in the developments moved within the system and the potential of conferencing to be realised was lost.

The irony, however, was that the legislative provisions of Children Act 2001 and Regulations (DOHC 2004) enabled a national FWC service to be set up. However, this service was dispersed and was not central to many of the other developments and changes occurring in the child welfare system. Staff numbers in the service remained small, and the primary focus was on setting up a service that could respond to the HSE’s statutory responsibilities. Also, the numbers of referrals remained lower than anticipated, and in this context, the people involved placed much energy into convincing colleagues of the potential of the conferencing practice.

The major changes underway, and the inherent paradoxes embedded in the Irish child welfare, discussed earlier, will have a major impact on what the future holds for conferencing within a procedural-driven child protection system. Time will tell if this will enable conferencing to occupy a more central role than it currently does in the system. In the meantime, many aspects identified by the research in respect of conferencing and child protection will need to be incorporated more systematically into care planning. It is crucial to see conferencing as an on-going process, and not as a single event. This may imply having a number of conferences until such time as a safe care and protection plan can be put in place for the child. This will have major implications, undoubtedly, as the fit between the FGC and other decision-making structures in child protection will have to be very carefully considered. The risk averse aspect of current child protection practice, combined with the current focus on standardised practice, may provide limited possibilities for innovation and family empowerment in decision-making.

**Best practice developments**

Doolan uses the ‘best practice’ element to describe situations where a conferencing service is developed outside legislative and procedural mandates. This is generally dependent on having champions in key positions to propel its development. In Ireland, despite the legislative basis, champions of the service continued to be needed, especially to generate referrals. The extremely low referral rates from the courts (Section 77) and court applications for secure accommodation (Section 23), and inconsistency of use between geographical areas provided an opportunity to develop conferencing using the ‘best practice’ frame within the child welfare field. This has afforded a certain luxury to the existing service, but it has also frustrated many of those involved in service delivery as they expend huge energy in continuing to champion the process. They report that they work continuously to increase referral rates, to obtain referrals of a type that fit best to conferencing strengths, to explain outcome information from cases that are multi-faceted and are simultaneously engaged with many other interventions and to educate the professionals and senior managers on the processes and principles inherent to the conferencing model. For many service managers, the continued frustration at its peripheral position within child welfare has perhaps been the most difficult to endure. However, there is evidence that many of these difficulties remain, albeit at different levels, even when implementing this decision-making model across systems where it has been established for longer than in Ireland (Doolan 2007).

On the other hand, the slower development has allowed innovations to occur outside a tight legislative and procedural frame. Staying true to the core features of the model, including the
independence of coordinators, good preparation, private family time and acceptance of family plans are all considered important. Organisational commitment to the process, as exemplified by paying coordinators and service managers at high rates, commensurate with others senior post-holders has been welcomed, though the lack of a senior manager mandated to drive the service development at national level has had an impact.

The recent appointment of a manager to drive the place of FWC as part of the business processes will help to redress this hopefully. This addition to the structure may also give fresh direction and momentum to the family group conference service managers group. The need to enable this group to function more purposefully has been recognised in the latest strategic plan of the HSE Child and Family Services (HSE 2012). Inconsistency in participation in the national group, a level of confusion regarding mandate and accountability structures, limited provision for collating and sharing innovation, having limited structures to capture complex data activity on a national level and failure to develop national solutions for implementation challenges, have been some of the frustrations/features/experiences of this group. The abolition of the conferencing implementation structure provided for as part of the 2001 legislation and the varying levels of buy-in re conferencing at regional level have militated against developments occurring. Also, the lack of provision for service managers meeting/working as a coherent group in recent years, arising predominantly from cost-cutting and an imposition on travel ban outside of their own geographical areas, has impacted and video-conferencing has limitations. Recent moves within the HSE to re-activate this group has been seen as positive for realising the potential of conferencing (HSE 2012).

Moving Forward

This Chapter has set out to provide a broad overview of what has been occurring in conferencing development within child welfare in Ireland over the past twelve years. Doolan’s (2007) framework for understanding the basis for practice was used to track the developments. From this point, the additional components of Doolan’s framework, ‘mandate’, ‘strategy’ and ‘fit with existing decision-making services’ are used to map key questions that need attention if conferencing is to become more integrated as a main stream intervention in practice. It is beyond the scope of this Chapter to address these questions in detail, but any future work will need to consider them. Other contributions in this book also provide important information which will further assist in this process.

Strategy

A key element for the strategic direction of conferencing focuses on the issues of outcome and evidence base, and the key question is seen as:

How will the increased interest and demands to provide robust outcome information on conferencing be met?

Kemp’s assertion that the concept of outcomes in child welfare is theoretically slippery remains important (2007), but progress in terms of indicators of child well-being has helped to address some of the challenges (McAuley et al 2010). Nonetheless, in the field, research remains limited, methodological challenges are complex, there is a level of confusion regarding what outcomes are being sought. More longitudinal outcome studies are needed to ascertain the consequences, both short and long term, for children, their families, carers and agencies involved (Sundell & Vinnerljung’s 2004, Holland et al 2004, Tinworth. & Merkel-Holguin. 2006, Marsh & Walsh 2007, Kemp 2007)
Notwithstanding these general limitations, a number of subsidiary questions that could propel developments further are:

How will it be possible to hold and value the positives associated with this way of working, especially the benefits at a processes level, while devising a methodology to measure if the conference process actually enables outcomes in respect of the issues facing children and their families?

How can outcome data be collected to ensure that the impact of other interventions and dynamic processes that may be occurring simultaneously is captured?

If conferencing is seen primarily as a desirable method of decision-making, the distinction between the processes of decision-making, and the decisions reached, needs to be very clearly demarcated and seen for what they are.

It is important also to distinguish between outcomes in relation to family participation in decision-making, family involvement in providing concrete services and the extent to which the State has a role in supporting families to take on these commitments. Or is the unspoken agenda to enable the extended family group to harness their own resources, and to be less dependent on the State. These are core policy issues that will need to be addressed, especially when the profile of families involved in the child welfare system are taken into account (O’Brien 2012a, 2012b, HSE 2012).

A further question that needs to be addressed at a strategic level is as follows:

Are there other processes that could be used which could have same benefits and results that may be easier/ cheaper?

A significant theme in the literature concerns the problematic nature of being able to assign or ascribe specific outcomes to the conference.

What would happen conferencing if the essential problem with being able to assign or ascribe specific outcomes to a conference was accepted?

**Mandate**

It was the enactment of legislation that provided for the setting up of the conferencing service on a national scale and this has enabled conferencing to maintain a position in the child welfare system. Nonetheless, a number of key questions remain that require attention, namely:

Why are there so few referrals from the courts and within the child welfare?

Why do so few of the referrals that are made go to conference?

The referrals rates for conferences provided for by the legislation remain very low. While, on the one hand, the reason may be the very narrow legislative basis, on the other hand, it is possible that more nuanced processes are occurring, given the differences in the spread of actual referrals made. It is seen as important that a more detailed evaluation of this issue is undertaken, and it is recommended that the exploration needs to provide for a national overview and a comparative perspective of referral rates across all settings.
However, a narrow focus on referral rates can miss the more complex dynamics at play in relation to paradoxes associated with shared responsibilities between families and state, the challenges of partnership and the fear and risk aversion embedded in current child protection practices. Equally, the limitations of this way of working needs to be considered, including the limited family networks that may surround a minority of people, the need to ensure safety in the light of certain family histories and the particular challenges to the model if professionals simply go through a required process, while simultaneously starting to dilute the core principles that underpin it. In other words, the desire to hold power and control over the process gets reasserted.

**Fit with Existing Child Welfare Structures**

The key questions is if the new business processes / procedures will afford opportunities for the further development of conferencing or will opportunities be more constrained, as a result. Within the business processes, conferencing has been clearly identified at different junctures in the child welfare system as one of a number of options that may be utilised. Time will tell if this will enable conferencing, and its associated benefits, to occupy a more central role in the system than it currently does. Consideration needs to be given to the level of joined up structure, planning and evaluation needed to build on experiences.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an outline of developments in Ireland in respect of conferencing and, in particular, within the child welfare field. Similar to international trends, it has been found that the FGC is not a simple solution that will resolve a complex issue quickly, but it does offer a model to put into practice the spirit of partnership and inclusivity which can involve individuals and families in child welfare and protection work. It represents a major new departure for dealing with family crises, as it recognises the crucial significance of the family in relation to securing positive outcomes for children. Family strengths, knowledge and resources are utilised to make decisions, both to protect the child and maximise opportunities for ongoing family commitment and involvement in the life of the child.

The conferencing model’s values and principles fits with the way many professionals wish to work with families. There has been an increased emphasis within many professions on the need to engage in a more participatory practice with families, and to be aware of the impact of ‘expert identities’ to this process. It has been found that the introduction of FGC’s practice, regardless of the commitment to this decision-making model, requires a major shift in both professional thinking and practice. For a process that is simple in essence, it presents major challenges to implement. Fundamental, perhaps, is the realisation that conferencing is not a professional framework that families attend, but rather a family process that professionals support.

Inherent in this realisation is the challenge of sharing power and responsibilities and how best to find ways to deal with many of the practical and emotional impact on all parties involved arising from this way of working. The questions remain of how best to find a fit between existing decision-making processes and this way of working and what changes to mandate and strategic direction is needed if the key questions identified are to be addressed.
The harnessing and implementation of FGC remains a major challenge for child welfare but the many benefits connected to building better relationships remain core. The conferencing approach generally strengthens relationships within and between family members and with the statutory services. The FGC helps the family to work with the statutory services, sharing responsibility and risks, while also identifying supports. The FGC helps promote self-determination in family decision-making to its fullest extent, while enabling the statutory services to discharge/share their duties. Where there has been a history of acrimony between state agencies and families, convening an FGC can offer an alternative way of working.

Meanwhile, in Ireland, we continue to hope that the current momentum for change will harness better the possibilities of conferencing for vulnerable children and their families and that our economic difficulties will propel innovation, rather than being a barrier.

References for Family Group Conference


Children, Young Persons and their Families Act (1989) (New Zealand)


Irish Association of Social Workers (2011) *A Call for Change Discussion Document*, Dublin: IASW.


Bio for End

Dr Valerie O’Brien is a College Lecturer at the School of Applied Social Science at University College Dublin. She has a background in social work and systemic psychotherapy / family therapy. She has a particular interest in action based research and she has been to the forefront in aiding the developments of family group conferencing, kinship care and adoption in Ireland. She can be contacted at Valerie.obrien@ucd.ie