

Family Group Conferencing, effective?!

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From 2001 onward, Eigen Kracht-conferences (the Dutch form of Family Group Conferences) have been used in The Netherlands. Over a thousand conferences have been organized already and a lot of experience has been gained. Research data are available on six years of conferencing. In this article, we look into Family Group Conferencing (FGC) as a decision making model, and the way in which plans made by families generate maximum results. We include the research of Bureau WESP into FGC, and we look into possible support from social care workers when it comes to the execution of plans made by families. What makes a plan successful and how may professionals contribute?

The essence of Family Group Conferencing

FGC provides an opportunity for people to draw up a plan to solve their problems, together with people they trust. The people concerned formulate the situation for which they want to make a plan, and they direct the process from start to finish. An independent coordinator is available for assistance, helping with the preparations of a conference: who to invite, what knowledge is needed, what does it take for people who attend a conference to work together towards a solution.

The preparations have practical aspects as well: what is the best time for participants to meet? What accommodation is suitable? What kind of food and drink is needed? Is the catering taken care of by a participant or by a caterer?

Preparations

The coordinator prepares all participants and encourages them to actively tackle the problems presented. Often, preliminary discussions take place between participants, they inform each other and think about what could work or what the best approach would be. The coordinator keeps in constant touch with the person for whom the conference is organized: the director. Will the right people attend? Will the conference be successful with these participants? Will it feel safe enough to say what has to be said, or are additional measures required? Who might assist? What can *you* do?

Conference

The FGC starts with an *informative* part. The person for whom the conference is held, outlines the situation that requires the attendance of those present, sometimes with the help of a professional or an acquaintance. Next, professionals provide information that has been asked for by participants. This may cover all kinds of subjects, ranging from school to health to housing and jobs. Or information on possible help, or help that has been offered in the past. The participants decide in advance on what subjects they need information. Everything they want to know in order to come to a good plan is presented during this phase. They are given the opportunity to ask questions.

Sometimes there is a legal frame that people attending a conference have to take into consideration, like when an investigation by Youth Care is in progress or when a supervision order has been issued. The professional involved will give detailed information on the case and the boundaries within which a plan can be made. In such a situation it is important that the issues are clear at the beginning, in order to make a plan that is acceptable to e.g. a family guardian at the end of the conference. The plan will be checked by the guardian to see if it fits within the frame lined out beforehand. This is mainly to make sure that the plan is safe for the child, and legal.

When the people know all they need to continue, the second part starts: the private time. Neither the professionals nor the coordinator are present during this part, only the people who were invited by the person for whom the conference is held. They will discuss the

situation and together think up an approach, in what sequence things have to be done, and by whom. Usually, they have known the people concerned for a long time, and now that they have the added information from the professionals at their disposal, they have great resources to draw from: not only their own but the community's as well.

They will talk to each other in their usual way. There will be no structured meeting, with a point by point agenda, but an informal back and forth of arguments, often emotionally charged. They will take their time, in larger and smaller groups, as is their custom.

When they have reached an agreement, the third phase of the conference starts: presenting the *plan*.

During this part the coordinator is present again, and often the social care worker who coaches the family is present too. Together, they go through the plan and the agreements, and the coordinator assists with defining the agreements as clearly as possible: who does what, when and how, what happens when things do not turn out as expected, who will meet for evaluation, how often, when will the first evaluation take place? Is help needed from official institutions? How will it be organized, who will give directions from the circle of people surrounding the main person? Only in case of a legal order, the plan has to be approved by the family guardian. He or she will judge the plan made by the participants with regards to the frame laid out in the first part of the conference and will only disqualify the plan when it is unsafe or illegal. This happens very rarely: people make safe plans for children that belong to them.

After the conference

After the conference, the coordinator writes down the agreements and mails the plan to all participants. This means the end of the work of the coordinator and the start of the activities for family, friends and sometimes social care workers: they will execute the plan!

Effect of FGC

So the result of a FGC is a plan, and support for that plan. This is a very important result: those who have a problem (father, mother, children), don't have to face it alone anymore, as is usually the case when people turn to social care or get involved with social care on an involuntary base. More people have become involved, often people who were no longer aware of the daily struggle of the family. When they are invited to think about the problems, when the discussion is about "Do you feel committed to this family, these people", the answer often is "yes". But to ask people if they are willing to support you may be a huge step, be it out of a feeling of shame or as a result of things that happened in the past. However, with the help of an independent outsider, a coordinator, communication and support may be restored. The result of the conference is therefore more than a plan; there is additional value in the involvement of people from the family's network, people who are often willing to take on practical matters. Research into effectiveness as described by Duncan (a.o. 2006) shows that the most important factor with regards to the effectiveness of help is that people believe it will work, and that there is support in the own environment. Add a committed and respectful social care worker and there is a good chance that there will be a positive result, also with multi problem families.

Responsibility

An important feature of FGC is that the responsibility for the problems, and the way to solve them, is not taken away from people. They are and remain responsible. It is their live, the situation in which they find themselves is their situation. It is up to them and the people in their environment to face and improve it. FGC helps them to organize themselves and their network to achieve this. During this process, they are made aware of the possibilities that the government and society can offer them; they can make their choice from relevant services. By doing so, it becomes their choice, they decide if they need outside help, how they want it and in what form. FGC means in fact that people, the main person and his or her network, together decide on a course of action, instead of the system, the social care worker or the

Multi Disciplinary Meeting ... A conference plan may be seen as the preliminary work for an assessment: experts from the own circle have construed a well-considered plan, with the help of information from experts that have been made available by the government during the first part of the conference. Next, that plan must be executed as laid down. This requires professionals who are willing and able to work according to this plan, and a system that is willing to facilitate a plan that is backed up by the people who construed it. It also means that responsibility is transferred: professionals now often feel responsible for the family's wellbeing, it weighs on their shoulders, while it should rest on the shoulders of people who matter to the main person: family and friend who say "we are here for you, we belong to you, you belong to us".

Not for my clients ...

Social care workers care for their clients, they worry about them. From their point of view their clients are people without a network, without people who care enough for them to step in. For social care workers it takes some getting used to the idea that their clients might get in touch again with family members and friends through a Family Group Conference. And to the idea that these family members and friends might be willing to contribute to a solution ... Social care workers tend to say, based on training and experience, "sure, this might work, I really believe in FGC, but it does not suit the clients I work with, too much is going on, the problems are too big, they really have no one to turn to, the people they know have enough problems of their own. It is my responsibility to see to the wellbeing of the children, their safety. It is my responsibility to assess if it is safe enough to let them stay at home under these circumstances And with all the incidents that are covered in the media, social care workers brought to court, the work gets harder and the weight grows heavier

Social care workers are limited in the time they can spend on their clients. It is impossible to supervise a family on a 7/24 basis. Neighbors, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends have a far greater opportunity to do that, they have easier access too, once they have become committed and know what is going on. FGC thus offers social care workers a chance to contribute to a plan made and executed by clients and their network, The clients are in charge, they indicate the fields in which assistance from professionals is necessary. This may result in optimum cooperation between the own support system and the professional network that has been called to assist, with and around the principal person.

Research shows

From the very beginning of FGC in The Netherlands, research has been done. We know a lot about the conferences by now, the yearly data are rather consistent and the findings from The Netherlands are in line with research abroad. We know a lot about the conference as such, about the great satisfaction of participants (child, network, professionals involved), about the plans and their execution. We would like to highlight a number of findings.

Numbers

In 2006 256 applications for Family Group Conferencing were completed (n=256). Of these, 65% were from Youth Care (Youth Care applied for a conference), 12% of the applications was from MEE, in 9% of the cases the family itself applied. It concerned an average of 1.6 child per referral, and a little more children between ages 0 to 12 were involved than aged 13 and above. A little less than half of the conferences (49%) concerned people with a non Dutch cultural background. Of the children who were involved in the conferences, 30% were in an out-of-home situation at the moment the conference took place.

Of the people who have opted for a conference and start with the preparations, 70% actually go on with it; 30% withdraw, partly because the problem has been solved without a conference, partly because there is a reluctance to participate, and partly because the gap between the family and their environment has grown too large to bridge. When a conference is not held because the people involved don't want it or because there is no way to safeguard

the participants, it seems that the people involved start to realize that outside intervention may be necessary.

Nature of the problems

Two third of the families for whom a conference was held, had received help for over a year. Causes: behavior problems, divorce, educational inadequacy, negligence, death or illness of a parent or a caretaker, etc.

Results

An average of 12.9 people participate at a conference, which lasts usually between one and five hours. The private time usually lasts between one and three hours. In 98% of the conferences, the result is a plan (that has been approved). It is a plan that is backed by all participants. On an average, these plans contain 18 very concrete agreements, of which 80% is taken care of by the people from the network. Social care is asked to take care of the remaining 20%. The agreements cover about 4 fields (like upbringing, finances, housing, health, education, work, leisure time, relationships) and they are made for several family members. Sometimes the plans show that pressure is exercised, but as this pressure comes from people who are close to those for whom a conference is organized, this pressure is easier to accept than pressure from "outside".

The follow up research shows that after three months 21% of the plans have been executed completely, 9% has not been executed at all and 80% of the plans is in progress of being executed.

It is remarkable that the agreements made by family and friends are kept more often than those made by professionals.

Professionals

The results of a Family Group conference, according to professionals who participated: the network is activated, people get more support than before and the situation which needed improvement gets better. Yet, time and time again it proves that professionals who did not yet attend a conference are hard to convince of these positive outcomes.

In Flevoland, a province of The Netherlands, a study was done to find out why social care workers are reluctant to make use of a Family Group Conference. First, the knowledge on FGC of social care workers was investigated. Most social care workers who were interviewed (n=25) indicate that in theory they know how FGC works, but it does not form part of their system: in many situations they have not even thought about it, in some cases they thought the circumstances were unfavourable: people without a network, an unsafe situation, a family that refuses to involve others. One social care workers described it as follows: "This is how I work: intake, formulate the care needed, write the assessment, walk out. That's in my system. Isn't it silly, I like this new approach but as it is not in my system I just don't think of it."

Autonomy

This brings us to the conclusion that the idea that people have a right to take their own decisions in their lives (instead of others, like social care workers), is rarely acknowledged by social care workers and care institutions, in spit of the principle that autonomy is a major issue in our democratic society. As soon as citizens become dependent on help from the government, others decide for them. For our clients, we seem to accept that without a second thought, but would we still feel that way if it happened to us, to our family, to our lives?

Another strategy

To change the primate of decision making by professionals and the bureaucratic instances they work for, we have come to the conclusion that it is necessary to aim our attention and information about FGC on clients, civilians, and their representatives, politicians, rather than on professionals and their organizations. In Overijssel, another province of The Netherlands,

we have seen that politicians have gotten the message and turned it into policy: the deputy of the province of Overijssel responsible for Youth Care, Gert Ranter, thinks that the possibility for people to take their own decisions is so important that he has indicated that by 2010 all assessments made by Youth Care must have been preceded by offering a FGC to the family. Thus, he offers Overijssel's citizens a real chance to find their own solution to their problems. At the same time he offers professionals in Overijssel the opportunity to do what they are good at: to make their knowledge available to people who have problems, to give help that is asked for and that is supported by the people surrounding the family. Help offered in this way is much more effective, the work will be more pleasant, it will be done in cooperation with many others who are involved with and care for a person or a family: together they stand a better chance of obtaining the desired result. The weight is lifted from the shoulders of the professional and is shifted to where it belongs: with the principle person and the people around him or her ...

The Law on Youth Care focusses on the client and states that he or she must be overtaxed before help can be offered. Employing a Family Group Conference is completely in line with the objective of the law. It is the ultimate form of a question based approach. First the client and his or her environment, before others decide.

Guts

Needed: social care workers with guts. The guts to dare to make the switch to summon up the forces of the people themselves, to offer them a conference and to make them participate. To challenge them to show *their* guts by the realization that in the end, no one can make it on his own. Social care workers are willing to give a lot, but in daily life they have limited time available for a limited period. They can become ill, they go on holidays, they may take another job. From social care workers, it takes guts to say: "Of course, I want to help you now, and tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, but that won't solve your problems. Dare to organize a conference, maybe you will get more support from the people around you and people you are out of touch with at the moment. For your own future, for the future of your family, dare to have a talk with a coordinator and to start preparations. If you don't try you will never know if it might have worked". And from the research of the conferences held so far, we learned that, on average, in 85% of the cases the preparations result in a plan that actually works. So what are the risks? There's no harm in placing a stake.

Translated by Vertaalbureau Svava

More information: www.eigen-kracht.nl and www.wespweb.nl

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