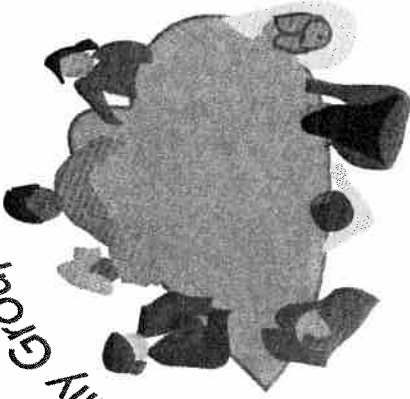
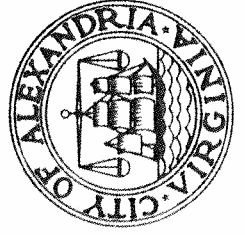


Family Group Conferencing



Alexandria Department of Human Services

# Family Group Conferencing Handbook



**Child Advocacy Center  
1900 N. Beauregard Street, 2nd Floor  
Alexandria, VA 22311**

## Welcome to Family Group Conferencing!

This handbook is designed for family members and professionals who have decided to participate in a Family Group Conference (FGC). It will provide you with information on how FGC works and your role in the process. It is divided into three sections:

Part I	contains general information	.....	Page 1
Part II	is for family members	.....	Page 5
Part III	is for professionals	.....	Page 8

It is our goal to provide the highest quality of service and ensure that the FGC process remains family-centered. If you have any questions or comments, feel free to call the FGC Coordinator, Anita Martineau, at 703-838-4381 ext. 470.

## Part I GENERAL INFORMATION

### What is Family Group Conferencing?

Family Group Conferencing brings family and support people together in a facilitated way to make plans for children to have safe, stable, and permanent living arrangements. It combines the strength of the family with the resources of the community to resolve issues and build ongoing supports. Families, along with their chosen support network, are the decision makers.

### What makes a successful Family Group Conference?

A conference is considered successful when a family is able to reach consensus in designing a plan for the safety, stability, and permanency of a child that can be approved by the Alexandria Division of Social Services. Prior to the conference the family and the agency agree to a broad goal of the Family Group Conference. However, the agency has no predetermined ideas on how the family will reach the identified goal. The family uses its own strengths, communication style, and cultural values in a private conference to design the plan to reach the goal. This is why the process is described as being "family-centered."

### Is there a cost to the Family?

There is no financial cost, only the commitment of time.

### Who is involved?

The family's assigned social worker will explain Family Group Conferencing and ask if the family would like to voluntarily participate. If so, members of the immediate family work with the FGC staff to identify extended family support people to be invited to the conference. Everyone who attends has a specific role with specific tasks.

### Family Group Conferencing Mission Statement

The Alexandria Department of Human Services Family Group Conferencing practice provides a voluntary, facilitated service to promote family decision making in developing a plan for child safety, stability, and permanency. FGC is designed to encourage cooperation, collaboration, and communication among families, professional, and community partners in such a way that the dignity and integrity of the family is protected.

## What are the roles and tasks?

The roles include: Family, Extended Family, Friends & Others, Support Person, Referring Worker, Family Group Conference Coordinator, Guest Speaker, Information Provider, Service Provider, Family Representative/Recorder, and Parent Advocate. Prior to the conference, a member of the Family Group Conferencing staff will meet or talk with each participant to be sure they understand and are comfortable with the associated tasks.

## What if someone cannot be there?

If someone cannot attend, a member of the FGC staff will get his or her statement to ensure that it is presented. A letter, voice recording, or videotape may be used. For families with difficult work and travel schedules, the conference can be scheduled after hours or on a weekend.

## What about safety issues?

The FGC staff works with each family member to successfully address physical and emotional safety concerns. The conference is held in a safe place selected by the family. Children and concerned adults may have a Support Person who looks out, specifically, for them.

## Are there other preparations for the Conference?

Yes. The family's assigned social worker and the immediate family must reach consensus on the goal of the conference. The FGC staff will explain to the family how the conference works and discuss specific arrangements with them. Releases of information will be signed to respect confidentiality. Plans to ensure the physical and emotional safety of all participants will be made, if necessary. The location, time, and food to be served at the conference will be determined with the family. Special child care, transportation, and lodging needs will be discussed, if necessary. The FGC staff will coordinate conference preparation with the service providers, as well.

## How does the conference work?

Participants in the conference remain focused on designing a plan for the child's future. The conference has three stages:

- ❑ **Information Sharing** — This includes personal introductions and welcoming traditions or rituals requested by the family. The social worker informs the family of the basic requirements of the plan. Professionals share information with the family about the concerns that brought them together, as well as services and resources that are available to them.
- ❑ **Family Decision Making Time** — The family meets privately without interruption to discuss the concerns and decide how to deal with the issues. They develop a plan to resolve the issues which include the participation and support of all family members attending. Social workers and other service providers are not present during this time.
- ❑ **Present Plan** — The family, social worker, and FGC staff review the family's plan for approval.

## Who approves the plan?

Family members agree on the plan and the social worker checks that the plan meets the basic requirements. The plan may be identified as "Pending" if the worker needs to obtain supervisory approval of the plan after the conference. The FGC staff will mail a final copy of the approved plan to all participants within a week of the conference. Unless all family members agree on a plan, the plan is not accepted.

## Who monitors the plan?

The family chooses a family representative to be responsible for monitoring the plan and maintaining contact with the social worker.

## What if something happens that affects the plan?

Situations change. Sometimes a good plan does not work for unforeseen reasons. The family can adjust the plan. If necessary, the family can reconvene and have another conference.

## **Part II**

### **Information for Family**

**Why should I consider participating in Family Group Conferencing?**

In Family Group Conferencing the opportunity for designing a plan of safety, stability, and permanency for a child rests with the family. Alexandria Division of Social Services and service providers play a supportive role to the family by providing information so that the family is aware of optional community services they can choose to include in their plan. The family is afforded uninterrupted family private time to design their plan. The family chooses who will be there, where and when the conference will take place, and the food to be served.

**What happens if I decline to participate in a Family Group Conference?**

The family is not penalized for declining to participate in a Family Group Conference. By declining, the family relinquishes the opportunity to become the primary party to design the child's plan and returns the responsibility to the Alexandria Division of Social Services. The agency is still required to consult with the family in designing the plan.

**Is confidentiality provided?**

Everyone who participates in the conference must agree to sign a confidentiality statement. However, there are a few limitations on confidentiality mandated by law. Some examples are: 1) if a new incident of child abuse or neglect is revealed during a conference; 2) if suicidal or homicidal intent is expressed; and 3) if a judge later orders a conference participant to testify about statements made during the conference.

**Can the child be present?**

Children of all ages are encouraged to be present at a conference. However, if there is a risk to the child's physical or emo-

tional health, the FGC Coordinator will discuss with the child and/or his or her caretaker an alternative way to share their views. For example, the child may choose to write a letter, draw a picture, be videotaped, or participate by conference call.

### **What if I want one or more family members excluded from the conference?**

This is a matter to discuss with the Family Group Conferencing staff who will explore with you the reasons for your wishes, possible impact on the conference, and safety planning, if needed. In general, Family Group Conferencing supports “widening the family circle” so that as many family and extended family members as possible can attend—even those who may not have seen eye-to-eye in the past—to focus on planning for the child’s future. However, the FGC Coordinator is also responsible for the physical and emotional safety of all participants. Exclusion is one possible strategy among others to consider as a method to ensure safety. When a question of exclusion is raised, the FGC Coordinator consults extensively with the family and professionals to solicit all perspectives on the issue and reach consensus, taking into particular account the feelings of the family. If consensus cannot be reached after exhaustive consultation, the FGC Coordinator will make the final determination on exclusion.

### **What is a Support Person and what does he/she do?**

Children and their caretakers select a Support Person to attend the conference with them for the sole purpose of providing emotional support. The Support Person does NOT speak for the family member they are supporting or participate in crafting the plan. However, they monitor the well-being of the family member they are supporting and respond when needed. For example, if the family member shows signs of discomfort, the Support Person can offer suggestions to reduce stress, such as taking a break.

### **What is a Parent Advocate and what does he/she do?**

A Parent Advocate is a neutral volunteer who is available to

provide information and help caretakers make decisions concerning their participation in the FGC process. The FGC Coordinator can help caretakers contact the Parent Advocate.

### **Who approves the plan?**

At the end of the conference, your social worker at the Alexandria Division of Social Services will review the plan with you. If it is acceptable to the social worker, he or she will pass it on as soon as possible for supervisory approval. In general, you will be notified within a week if the supervisor has approved the plan. If it is not approved, the family will have the option of reconvening a conference to amend the plan.

### **Will I get a copy of the plan?**

Yes. The FGC Coordinator mails all participants a copy of the written plan within a week of the conclusion of the conference.

### **How is the approved plan used?**

The approved family plan clarifies who is responsible for implementing the various elements of the plan and how the plan will be monitored. It will be used as an outline to provide services to the family and may be used as the basis of a service plan presented to the court for approval.

### **Will I be asked to do anything after the conference?**

If the plan indicates you have responsibility for implementing or monitoring a part of the plan, the family social worker will remain in contact with you. The family may request a follow-up conference if the plan is not working or if a change in circumstances requires an amendment of the plan. You will also be contacted 3 months and 6 months after the conference by the FGC Coordinator to evaluate the process.

## **Part III Information for Professionals**

### **What is the role of the Service Provider in Family Group Conferencing?**

In Family Group Conferencing, Service Providers support the family by describing to them services they can offer for the family to select as part of their family plan.

### **Why should I consider participating in a Family Group Conference?**

Research published by the American Human Society shows Services Providers are highly satisfied with the outcomes of community centered child welfare partnerships, such as Family Group Conferencing. In Washington State, 94% of Service Providers agreed that “The service plan appropriately links the family with local services.” Families report feeling more invested in treatment services and confident that Service Providers are working in their best interest, thereby improving communication between families and professionals.

### **How do I prepare for the conference?**

The Family Group Conference Coordinator will contact you to discuss preparing for the conference. If you are not already providing services to the family, you may be asked by the family to participate as a Guest Speaker to provide general information on a topic in which you have expertise. You may also be asked to attend as an Information Provider to explain the services you have available to offer the family. If you are already working with the family as a Service Provider, you will be asked to provide a very brief summary at the beginning of the conference explaining how you became involved with the family and the services you can make available for the family to consider including in their plan.

### **When and where are the Family Group Conferences held?**

As a family-centered practice, Family Group Conferences are held at a time and place selected by the family, often outside normal business hours to accommodate the family’s work and school schedules. If a professional does not have a flexible work schedule to allow attendance, he or she can submit a written statement of other type of communication that will be conveyed to the family during the conference by the Family Group Conference staff.

### **How does Family Group Conferencing meet my professional requirement for confidentiality?**

Family Group Conferencing requires that the family sign a specially designed “Consent for Release of Confidential Information” form that enables the family to share specific information with specific professionals, including the Family Group Conferencing staff. The release is HIPAA compliant and bound by 42 U.S.C. 290dd-2 and by Part 2 of Title 42 Code of Federal Regulations governing Confidentiality of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Patient Records. You can request a copy of the release of information form for your review or have specific questions concerning confidentiality answered by calling the Family Group Conference Coordinator at 703-838-4381 ext. 470.

### **Will I be asked to do anything after the conference?**

If the family requests a follow-up conference, you may be asked to return. You will also be asked to complete an evaluation form three times: immediately after the conference, three months after the conference, and six months after the conference.

### **Will I get a copy of the plan?**

Yes. The FGC Coordinator mails all participants a copy of the written plan within a week of the conclusion of the conference.