

# A Sacred Circle - Family Group Conferencing

## Discussion Guide

Are you interested in arranging a Family Group Conference? Native Counselling Services of Alberta (NCSA) has offices throughout Alberta and can help you make the necessary arrangements. Please contact us for more information.

### Native Counselling Services of Alberta

10975 124 St., Edmonton, AB T5M 0H9

Tel (Main): 780-451-4002

Fax: 780-428-0187

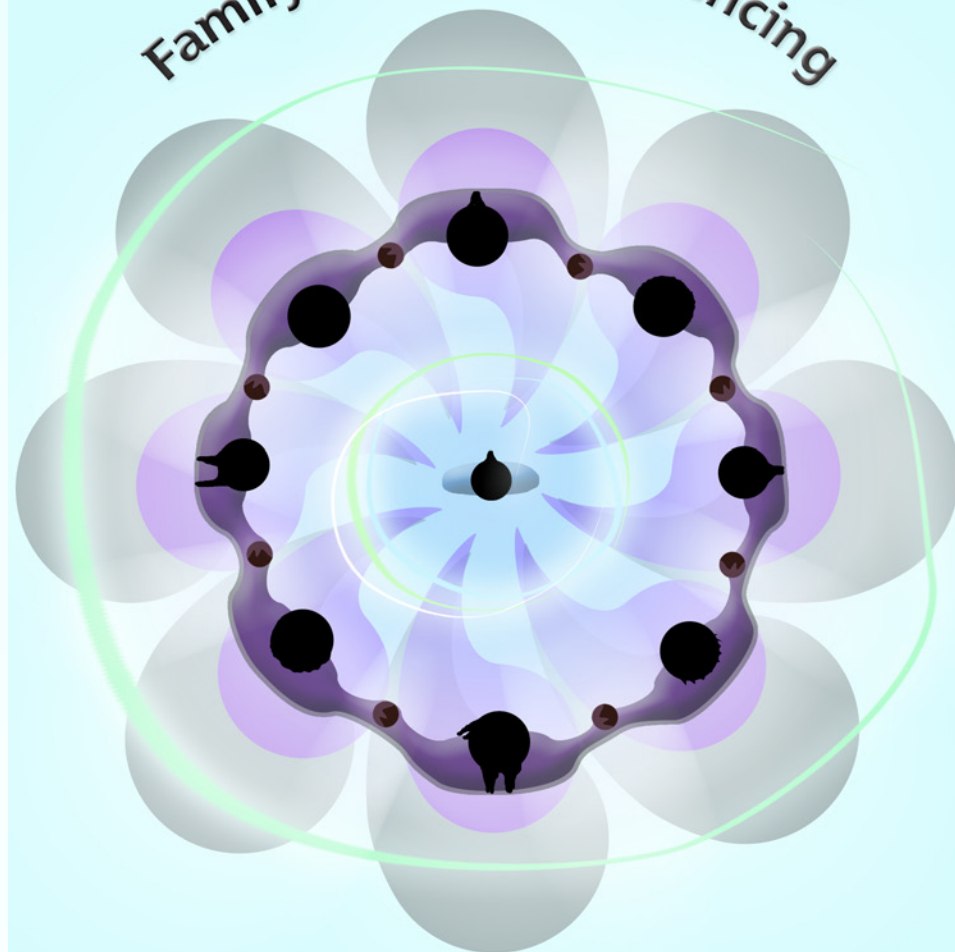
Additional information on Family Group Conferencing is also provided on the NCSA website, at [www.ncsa.ca](http://www.ncsa.ca).

This discussion guide was produced by the BearPaw Legal Education & Resource Centre, the legal education department of Native Counselling Services of Alberta. To find out more about our other legal education resources, please contact us at 780-482-7891, or e-mail us at [ben-freeland@ncsa.ca](mailto:ben-freeland@ncsa.ca). All of our other resources are also available for download on our website, at [www.bearpaweducation.ca](http://www.bearpaweducation.ca).

This publication was made possible by funding from the Alberta Law Foundation and the North Central Alberta Child and Family Services Authority.

# A Sacred Circle

## Family Group Conferencing



## Discussion Guide



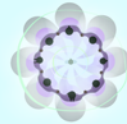
## A Sacred Circle - Introduction

In traditional Aboriginal society, family was paramount and entire communities shared collective responsibility for taking care of children. Moreover, in spite of the damage done to this traditional social structure by a century of colonialism, this deep-seeded emphasis on family and communal responsibility for children is still alive in Aboriginal culture and, as the video *A Sacred Circle* shows, this may indeed help restore harmony and self-determination in Aboriginal communities.

*A Sacred Circle* looks at the family healing practice known as Family Group Conferencing (FGC), a circle process grounded in traditional Aboriginal culture that aims to restore balance and harmony for families and children in crisis. As this video explains, in the days before contact, family based conflicts were settled in a sharing circle made up of family and community members. People would listen and be heard, be treated with respect, and everyone was considered equal. The circle would reach a consensus on the best arrangement for the child and family members, based on traditional values and beliefs, always with the welfare of the community as a whole in mind.

In Aboriginal society, children have always been viewed as 'gifts' on loan from the Creator, and are therefore the focal point of Aboriginal communities. In keeping with this view, Family Group Conferences were - and still are - a spiritual healing practice overseen by Elders and involving ceremonial practices. Today, FGC's are once again growing in popularity, offering families from all cultural backgrounds the opportunity to have a voice in solving their own problems and healing themselves.

Conferences typically last a full day, and may be started the evening before if family members have travelled long distances. Arrangements can also be made for the children to visit with siblings, cousins, and other family members that they may not have seen in a long time. Also, if the family wants to start the meeting with a prayer, a smudging, or another spiritual or religious practice, their wishes are to be honoured.



## Credits

The North Central Alberta Child and Family Services Authority has been using Family Group Conferencing as a casework tool since 2003. In that time, almost 200 FGC's have been held, involving approximately 385 children/youth. Of these, 65 percent have been held with Aboriginal families. In completing FGC referrals and using this process to support case planning and decision making, caseworkers follow the guidelines outlined in the 'Matters to be Considered' section of the Alberta Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act.

The steering committee members who participated in helping develop this educational video and discussion guide are as follows:

**Joni Brodziak** – Region 7 CFSA, Senior Team Lead

**Bonda Thompson** – Region 7 CFSA, Casework Supervisor

**Bill Smiley** – The Family Centre, Clinical Manager

**Aaron Hachkowski** – WJS Canada, Regional Program Director

**Gayle Desmeules** – NCSA, Northeast Regional Manager

**Sharon Steinhauer** – Blue Quills College, Instructor

**Greg Miller** – BearPaw Media Productions, Producer







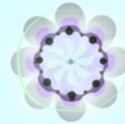
## Reviewing the Plan

Once the family has agreed on a permanency plan, the facilitator(s) and caseworker return to the room, and the plan is shared with the caseworker. This plan is approved if it satisfies the concerns identified in the child welfare file and meets the needs for permanency planning.

In the event a family is unable to agree on a plan, the conference process comes to an end. However, this should not be viewed as a failure, as the conference does allow the child to connect with family members and for the family as a whole to come together. Additionally, the FGC process provides a unique opportunity for caseworkers to meet with and observe family members, and gives caseworkers additional knowledge with which to better help the family in the future. There is also the option of re-conferencing down the road if the family wants to try it again.

### Discussion Question:

- 1) *In what circumstances would it be a good idea to re-conference?*



## A Sacred Circle - Introduction

Featuring commentary from Gayle Desmeules of Native Counselling Services of Alberta, who played a leading role in developing the FGC model operating in Northeastern Alberta, and Cree Elder George Brertton, *A Sacred Circle* focuses on a growing trend in the child welfare system, and one that promises real positive change for families and communities.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1) *In the opening sequence of the video, Gayle Desmeules notes that in spite of the best efforts of many service providers, little has been done to alleviate the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people involved in the child welfare system. What do you think have been the barriers to success?*
- 2) *How do you think Family Group Conferencing could work to enhance conventional case practice regarding the placement of children?*
- 3) *In your opinion, why is Family Group Conferencing a good way to bring fractured families back together?*
- 4) *In the video, it is noted that there is no table in an FGC circle. Why do you think that is?*
- 5) *Describe the role of Elders or other spiritual/religious presence within the FGC process.*





## Referral Stage

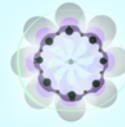
Referrals for Family Group Conferencing as an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) process can be made at any point in a family's involvement with Children's Intervention Services. Referrals can be court ordered, families can request one themselves, or caseworkers can make the referral.

Family Group Conferencing is a very useful process for many families, but is not necessarily the right fit for everyone. Before making a referral for Family Group Conferencing, the following factors must be considered:

- The family's readiness for an FGC
- The purpose for the FGC, as defined by the caseworker together with the parents/guardians, children, and key family supports early on in the process
- That an FGC will indeed be a positive experience for the child and in his/her best interests

### Discussion Questions:

- 1) *At what point in a family's involvement with Children's Intervention Services do you think a Family Group Conference is most effective?*
- 2) *What other factors do you think caseworkers need to take into consideration when proposing an FGC to a family?*



## Private Family Time

After the family has had a talking circle and information has been presented by the caseworker (and other professionals as identified), the professionals leave the room. The facilitator(s) remains on site (outside the room) in case they need to mediate or assist the family in making the plan.

The caseworker should be accessible, either on site or by telephone, to answer any questions the family may have. Family support persons should remain in the room during private family time, and participants are free to take breaks as required. Private family time typically takes two to four hours, but there is no time limit placed on this.

### Discussion Question:

- 1) *How is providing private family time important for the development of a permanency plan?*





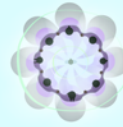
## Developing a Permanency Plan

The Alberta Children and Youth Services Enhancement Policy Manual states the following with regards to permanency planning:

*Enduring relationships and stable placements are two key components of permanency and are fundamental to a child's healthy development and ability to achieve his or her full potential. The goal for permanency planning is to cultivate a sense of belonging and well-being for each child receiving services under Alberta's Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act. A successful permanency outcome is one that builds on stability, attachment and belonging for the child. Depending on the child's legal status and age, either a Concurrent Plan or a Transition to Independence Plan must be completed to address permanency planning requirements.*

*Concurrent Permanency Planning* involves two plans that are required when a child is placed in out-of-home care. Plan A involves eventual reunification with the parent/guardian and Plan B outlines an alternate solution. Success is defined as a permanent arrangement for the child, regardless of whether or not that involves reunification with the parents/guardians or birth family.

The *Transition to Independence Plan* involves putting together a detailed list of activities that will allow the youth to successfully move toward adult independence.



## Pre-Conference Planning Phase

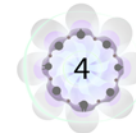
After the referral stage is finished, the lead facilitator begins meeting with family members to plan the FGC. It is recommended that a co-facilitator assist on the day of the conference. The purpose and plan for the FGC is explained to all participants, as are the roles of the facilitator and the family members in the conference. The facilitator addresses any important safety issues or potential barriers in order to maximize attendance. FGC's are meant to be an inclusive process, so as many family members as possible are included.

A support person is identified for the child and the facilitator meets with this person to review his/her role and determine his/her suitability. Parents/guardians are encouraged to bring a support person of their own. In speaking with family, the facilitator determines whether they are interested in having an Elder, a pastor, or other spiritual figure present. The family also sets a date and location for the conference, which should be held in a neutral location conducive to privacy. Arrangements for food and refreshments are made in consultation with the family, who may want to host a potluck dinner, or have food catered. This can also include a birthday cake if there is a family member having a birthday on that day, which can help in rebuilding positive family relationships around the child - a key goal in this process.

Lastly, the facilitator will check to see if family members are willing to share their story so as to help themselves, the child, and everyone else involved come to terms with and better understand the root causes of the problem. This is a unique opportunity for the family to have a sharing circle before the caseworker presents the information from the child welfare file and explains the planning requirements.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why is it important to involve family members in the planning process?
- 2) What reluctance or barriers to participation may arise for family members, current caregivers, or the child/youth? How can these issues be addressed?







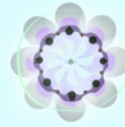
## Role of the Child

A primary objective of the Family Group Conference is to develop a plan that will ensure the child's safety and well-being from a spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental perspective. The child is to be the focus at the conference, and his/her presence is a powerful reminder to everyone about the purpose for the day.

Children who are old enough to do so can share their views and opinions, while at the same time participate by listening and observing. For very young children or infants or high needs children who are unable to participate in the meeting portion of the conference, visitation should be planned for either before or after the conference or during lunch break. On the rare occasions where a child is not able to attend the conference at any point, other arrangements can be made to ensure that their presence is felt, such as writing a letter, making a video recording, or providing photographs.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1) *Why is it important that the child attends the conference?*
- 2) *What are some steps that can be taken to ensure the conference offers a safe and positive experience for the child?*



## Role of the Caseworker

Before the Family Group Conference, the caseworker regularly communicates with the facilitator regarding the progress and helps address any barriers.

During the conference, the caseworker is responsible for presenting information on child welfare history, circumstances leading to the most recent involvement with the child welfare system, the current legal status, supports available, and case planning requirements. Given that family members know their own needs and issues better than anyone else, the caseworker only provides basic information and answers questions about permanency planning requirements. In contrast to standard case management practice, caseworkers at an FGC refrain from sharing their own opinions or giving advice.

At the end of the conference day, the caseworker returns to review the family plan. After the conference, the caseworker and a monitor selected by the family supervise the family's progress over the course of the next few months. Together they will schedule a review meeting, if needed, in order to make revisions and celebrate successes.

### Discussion Question:

- 1) *How is the caseworker's role in the FGC process different than traditional case management practice?*

