

**HANDBOOK FOR
FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCING**

PROMOTING SAFE AND STABLE FAMILIES

**IN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS
FOR CHILD PROTECTION**

**For
The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation**

And

**The Four Community Partnerships Sites
Cedar Rapids Iowa
Jacksonville, Florida
Louisville, Kentucky
St. Louis, Missouri**

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Introduction

The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's initiative, Community Partnerships for Child Protection, is assisting St. Louis, Missouri, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Jacksonville, Florida and Louisville, Kentucky to develop new approaches to child protection. The goals of the initiative are:

- ☞ To assure that children in the neighborhoods targeted by the initiative will be less likely to be abused and/or neglected;
- ☞ To assure that children who come to the attention of child protective services (CPS) will be less likely to be re-abused and/or re-neglected; and
- ☞ To reduce serious injuries to children in the targeted neighborhoods due to abuse and neglect.

One of the critical strategies for accomplishing these goals is employing an *individualized course of action* or ICA with each family served. An individualized course of action is an approach to helping and serving families which includes the following characteristics: It is strength based, focused on the underlying needs of the family, highly individualized and heavily reliant on assistance from the family, the family's natural helping system and formal and informal community stakeholders. These contributors make up a family team, which supports and assists the family in ongoing problem solving.

Families have a powerful role in the ICA process and are active participants in the process of assessing needs, identifying team members, planning and implementing plans of support. A key element in enlisting the family's participation in crafting its own individualized course of action is engaging the family with warmth, empathy, genuineness and respect. The ICA is more than a plan: it is the process for good practice that makes families stronger and keeps families safe.

There are five basic components central to developing an individualized course of action. They are:

1. *engagement of the family;*
2. *the assessment process;*
3. *developing and implementing the course of action (or plan);*
4. *tracking progress and responding to new concerns; and*

5. *sustaining the change.*

A central part of an effective individualized course of action is the use of Family Team Conferencing as a tool to involve the family team in organizing, coordinating and empowering the change process.

What is a Family Team Conference?

A Family Team Conference is a gathering of family members, friends, community specialists and other interested people who join together to strengthen a family and provide a protection and care plan for the family's children. Family conferencing evolves from the way that families form a natural helping system to meet needs and solve problems. The Family Team Conference is often the forum in which the child and family team come together to help the family craft, implement or change the individualized course of action.

***The Family Team** - Families need help in times of crisis, so they draw together people whom they trust and who can help in responding to the issues they face. Almost everyone can identify a time when they formed a team, sometimes involving professional helpers, to meet a specific need. Likewise, most people who have drawn a team around them are willing to become contributors to such a team or circle of friends.*

Families in which children need protection also require a supportive circle of friends that includes family members, neighbors or other members of the family's informal support system, members of the community and professional support from schools, the medical community, therapists, social workers, churches and other community resources. Sometimes families in crisis can themselves mobilize part of the support system. However, they often need assistance in organizing this process and developing a full array of members for the team. Partners who see their role as helping the family in the change process can make a more effective contribution if a team facilitator is responsible for bringing the team together. The team should be brought together in a Family Team Conference at a time and place accessible to the family, facilitating the development of a plan, recording specific responsibilities of team members, ensuring that steps are accomplished and monitoring progress towards change. Team members are critical to identifying strengths, identifying options for accomplishment of goals, contributing their skills and resources as family supports, holding others accountable for their commitments, identifying critical decisions and providing feedback about progress. Bringing a team together contributes a variety of constructive benefits including:

- ~~///~~ Increasing the variety of options for solutions;
- ~~///~~ Preventing removal;
- ~~///~~ Increasing the likelihood of matching the appropriate service to needs;
- ~~///~~ Identifying kinship placement opportunities;
- ~~///~~ Increasing the capacity to overcome barriers; and
- ~~///~~ Creating a system of supports that will sustain the family over time.

The team that comes together provides an alliance of support for the family and facilitates the family's participation in decision-making regarding safety, permanence and well being for their children. Teams that are well constructed and meetings that are effectively facilitated will draw on the family's strengths and resources, the strengths of the system and the strengths of other community agencies and individuals involved in the family's life. The family team through Family Team Conferencing reaches out to family members that are concerned about the child and family but may not have been aware of the issues currently facing the family. The conference informs members of the team about how they can help.

Family Team Conferencing is a solution focused method that draws on the family's history of solving problems, determines times when the family is currently able to solve the problem (even if only for a brief period) and develops the family's vision for a preferred future. Family Team Conferencing can work to strengthen families in a way that they can find immediate solutions to needs and provide long term solutions for issues related to safety, permanence and well being.

Family Team Conferencing is based on a number of beliefs and practice values. Following are some of the most important principles that make family conferencing work:

- ✍ Genuineness, respect and empathy are the three core helping conditions of successful engagement with families. **Genuineness** is communicating with the family with honesty and congruence between what we say and do. **Respect** is demonstrating the belief in the value and potential in every human being. **Empathy** is the ability to express an understanding of and compassion for the other person's experience. If we can communicate respect for the family and empathy for its struggles in a genuine way, real partnerships are possible in addressing the family's needs.
- ✍ The focus should be on needs rather than symptoms. Unless the underlying conditions producing the behavior are addressed, symptoms will only be suppressed, to reappear later.
- ✍ People are capable of change, and most people are able to find the solutions within themselves, especially when they are helped in a caring way to identify that solution.
- ✍ All people and families have strengths. Strengths are discovered and confirmed when people are affirmed, listened to, acknowledged and encouraged.
- ✍ Recognizing strengths in families builds a foundation for a trusting relationship and a platform for change.
- ✍ There is a great deal of family wisdom that can be brought together to help a family. Most families have elders and leaders that have been resolving family issues and concerns for many generations.
- ✍ A solution that a family generates with a team is more likely to fit that family because it will respond to its unique strengths and needs.

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- ✍ A family is more invested in a plan in which the family members believe that they are full partners in the decision making process.
 - ✍ When extended family members and friends become part of a team, they frequently identify solutions that no formal system would be able to generate.
 - ✍ Family and friends provide love and caring in a way that no formal helping system can. That support during a Family Team Conference helps a family take supported risks toward change. They also provide a level of accountability that is unique to their relationship with the family.
 - ✍ When you bring together a number of caring people in the same room you obtain energy that fuels the engine of change.

Origins of Family Team Conferences

As mentioned previously, families have a long history of dealing with crises and solving problems by convening their own network of members and supports to help address both routine family issues and emergencies. These natural networks, usually informally organized, occur in all cultures as a means of adding problem solving expertise and expanding the family's strengths.

Commonly in our culture, natural family teams deal with problems such as financial pressures, employment needs, domestic conflicts, child rearing and child management issues and health needs, for example. The greater the complexity of the problem, the larger and more diverse these teams become as families try to add new expertise and contributors to problem solving. Prior to the development of formal social service helping systems, families had only their own friends, neighbors and churches to rely on.

As the extended family structure began to erode, and as increased mobility, economic pressures and economic opportunity caused family members to relocate long distances from home communities and other family members, many families lost access to traditional family supports. Increasing numbers of individuals found themselves isolated in new communities with few allies to call on when problems arose. Even in communities where extended family networks remain intact, people today are less likely to depend on family supports than in past generations, and more likely to turn to professional services when they need help.

For families experiencing the most intense pressures, such as extreme poverty, child abuse, mental illness or substance abuse, isolation from natural helping networks can have a devastating effect. And in the case of families where a parent has abused or neglected a child, even voluntary social service supports are not without risk; mandatory child abuse reporting requirements make it difficult to ask for help without risking possibly severe sanctions. The existence of legal consequences and the stigma associated with child maltreatment only reinforce the isolation of many families at greatest risk.

The formal social services systems of today have attempted, with mixed success, to replace some of those supports which families can offer with formal social service structures. "Professionalized" service systems often presume to know better than parents do what they need and attempt to substitute a categorical array of services for many of the informal supports a family might choose for itself. Plans for families may be prescriptive and coercive, failing to incorporate the family's perspective, knowledge and resources in either goal setting or selection of services. As a result, many families commonly react to the experience of being forced to change, as we all are likely to do, initially resisting the intervention and ultimately complying only in appearance. These are the families who stay in our systems for years and the parents whose children still are not safe.

New Approaches to Family Team Conferences

In recent years, the field has begun to recognize the value of greater family involvement in decision making and of expanding the community of helpers beyond formal systems to include the family's own natural helping systems. Innovations in the area of mental health services and services to the developmentally disabled have produced experience that led these fields to promote family involvement in case decision making. The family resource movement has also emphasized a high level of self-determination in responding to the needs of families. The practitioners of wraparound service approaches have been vigorous proponents of active family influence over the service planning and delivery process. And for years child welfare has included family involvement in the service planning process as a foundational principle of practice. Unfortunately, the nature of family involvement in child welfare decisions has never lived up to the principles of the field.

As experience demonstrated the value of family involvement, models began to appear which formalized processes for greater family involvement. These models, such as Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) from New Zealand, the Family Unity Model from Oregon and the Family Team approach, refined in the Alabama child welfare reforms, offer distinct benefits to families.

The Community Partnership Family Team Approach embodies a number of the elements of the other models. However, due to its incorporation of a flexible, highly individualized and needs based approach to practice, a focus on neighborhood-based supports and the goal of identifying a "caring adult" to help the family sustain the change, it provides significant flexibility for use in the complex and unpredictable environment of community child protection.

The Community Partnership Family Team Approach also is designed to be just that: an approach, not a rigid model. It is designed to adapt to the intricate challenges of families served in community child protection, whether a large and resourceful network of supports is available or whether the family is completely isolated and overwhelmed.

The creation of the team begins with the family's own response to the question, "Who can you turn to when you need help?" Some families need help in identifying potential supports, so gentle coaching may be needed to assist the family to think creatively. If parents or grandparents are unavailable, for example, the family member may need to be encouraged to consider a minister, a neighbor or a work colleague. Other team members routinely include all the formal agencies involved in the case, such as mental health counselors, family preservation workers or teachers. Teachers can be especially important contributors. Teams will change as the needs of the family change.

Family Team Conferences are held at locations most comfortable and convenient to the family, such as the family's home, at a church or community center, at a school or other neutral site, for example. The team meeting relies strongly on identifying and using the family's strengths, with team members speaking directly and genuinely to the family about their strengths and capacities. Strengths are listed, usually on a flip chart, and posted for the team to see. Next, the family briefly tells its own story. Team members further the assessment process by identifying the family's needs, the underlying conditions that services and steps are designed to solve. For example, in the case of a mother who has used excessive corporal punishment to discipline a daughter caught with drugs at school, her need is to be assured that her daughter is safe from behavior that will hurt her. Until this occurs, an emphasis on alternative methods of discipline alone is not likely to prevent a recurrence.

The team's response might not be a parenting class, which is a typical response, but an array of supports ranging from in-home parenting supports to addressing the teen's self-esteem problems that contribute to her experimentation with drugs. A variety of team supports could assist this parent in a coordinated and responsive way. As the plan evolves, services and steps build on strengths and are matched to needs. Assignments are made and timetables formalized. Often one team member agrees to record the plan and distribute it to all other members. Because planning fully involves the family in the identification of strengths, assessment of needs and matching of services to needs, the plan becomes the family's own plan. As a result, experience has shown that the family is much more likely to follow the plan because it is the family's own.

The Family Team Conferences are the focal point for case planning, coordination and accountability. By having all of the service supports present concurrently, all contributors are aware of and in agreement with the plan, know their role and how their role relates to that of other contributors and understand what other members of the team expect of them.

Family Team Conferences are not an isolated event. They should occur throughout the life of the case, with conferences occurring whenever goals and services need to be changed or when there seems to be insufficient progress.

Many teams find it useful to schedule periodic meetings, such as at monthly intervals, for example, to insure that strategies are working. More frequent meetings may be needed early in work with families than are required after the plan has been refined.

Certainly Family Team Conferences are useful as a regular tool for updating and developing the individualized service plan. Family Team Conferences can also be used at any key decision making point, such as dealing with escalating risks of harm, for reunification planning or concurrent permanency planning, to address child behavior problems, to plan for and support termination of parental rights or to deal with a crisis.

Monitoring is a remaining critical step. Many plans fail because one or more contributors failed to complete the assigned tasks. The facilitator of the team often assumes responsibility for monitoring, following up with team members to insure that assignments have been completed and assessing progress.

In summary, the key features of the Community Partnership Family Team approach are as follows:

- ✍* Highly individualized and flexible
- ✍* Strengths and needs based
- ✍* Involves the family's natural helping systems
- ✍* Solution focused
- ✍* Responsive to the family voice
- ✍* Services flexibly matched to needs
- ✍* Composed of key stakeholders
- ✍* Supports the family throughout the life of the case
- ✍* Enables continued team support after the case is closed
- ✍* Family centered

Logistics of a Family Team Conference

(Why, Who, When, Where, What)

Why should Family Team Conferences be held?

Because the conference is effective in securing the family's investment in the plan or course of action and in improving the coordination of services, almost any situation in a family can be addressed through a Family Team Conference. Family Team Conferences can also be used to integrate the plans into court orders when court involvement has occurred or is necessary. Family Team Conferencing is best used:

- ✍ If there are uncontrolled risks of harm.
- ✍ If the helping systems and the family are "stuck" and progress is not being made.
- ✍ If the family wants to care for its child or wants the child cared for in its own family system.
- ✍ If the birth parents/primary caretakers or formal systems are concerned about a child's behavior.
- ✍ If relatives express interest in helping the family or interest in caring for children who are either at risk of being removed from the family or who are already in foster care.
- ✍ If the professionals/helpers can engage their resources and energy toward mobilizing the family through whatever crisis brought the family into the child welfare system.
- ✍ If mandated agencies are willing to let the family be the architect of the family case plan.

Some Family Team Conferences which might involve all family members require particularly careful thought and preparation. Situations where such conferences may not be advisable are:

- ✍ Certain types of sexual abuse situations (sibling incest, for example).
- ✍ Domestic violence cases (particularly where the victim is still dependent on/vulnerable to the partner and a continuing risk of violence remains).
- ✍ Court involvement that includes restraining orders or warrants for one of the parents.
- ✍ When termination of parental rights has already been determined and filed, and the child has been stabilized in a permanent or adoptive home.

It should be noted, however, that rules alone cannot govern the appropriateness of family circumstances for conferences. Each case is individual and should be evaluated based on the family's needs.

Who should attend?

Everyone is welcome at the Family Team Conference. To an extent, the family is the decision maker about who is invited to attend, inclusive of service providers, community partners and informal supports. Discuss with the family who needs to attend the Family Team Conference, including the family's own support system (including friends). Ask family members who might attend the conference with them to help them feel more comfortable. The case manager or facilitator should offer encouragement about who might be helpful to the process. For example, the case manager might remind the family that an ex-family member (such as a former spouse) at one time expressed an interest in the children. Whenever the Family Team Conference also serves the purpose of review of the case plan, caregivers should be invited to the meeting (relative caregivers or foster parents should be included).

Help the family broaden its definition of who is family and who would be a good team member. If the family finds it difficult to identify team members, help by asking a few questions such as: "Who do you spend holidays with?" "Who cares about what happens to your family?" "Who do you talk with on the telephone?" "Who attends your children's birthday parties?" "Who do you borrow money from?" "Who are some of the foster parents or case managers from your past?" "Who calls you when they are in trouble and need your help?" "Who is the person in your family everyone goes to when they need help?"

Note: There is no consistent rule about inviting children. Children should be invited when they are old enough to understand issues and contribute to and benefit from the meeting. Involving young children is often disruptive. Be cautious about inviting children who have been abused or neglected by a member of the family team if there is the possibility the child could be coerced into recanting. Even if it is not appropriate to invite a child to the initial family conference, when a child's behavior is one of the issues the family wishes to address, it is usually helpful to involve the child in a subsequent meeting. Children can participate for a portion of the conference and then be excused from more adult discussions.

If the child welfare worker believes the family's team needs additional members to act in the best interest of the child or children, then a decision must be made about who else should be included in the family conference. If a person or provider, not a part of the family's team, is needed to help make decisions, the child welfare worker must invite the person or provider to participate. If this circumstance happens, then an option needs to be given to the family. If the family does not want the person to be included, then a separate conference can be held. Ultimately, the best interest of the child is not negotiable.

When should the Family Team Conference be held?

Family Team Conferences should be held at a time convenient for the family members. However, sometimes a balance is needed between the best preference for the family and the ability to get a provider included. For example, with a medically fragile baby, the physician's attendance is important. In such cases, the schedule of the physician might take priority for

this meeting. Facilitators have found that lunch hours, during a teacher's planning period, after work, or Saturdays are examples of times when Family Team Conferences can be held.

Family Team Conferences can be held when developing the initial plan for the ICA and at any other times the plan is reviewed. In addition, because forming a family team is meant to support the efforts of the family, the right time to hold a Family Team Conference might be at any time there is a need for a decision or need for support. Keep in mind that every member of the team does not have to be present at every Family Team Conference. A few of the team members may meet around one particular issue. For example, if a child has a misbehavior incident at school, and people need to look at how to prevent the incident from escalating into a suspension, only part of the team (mother, foster mother, case manager, teacher, and child) could meet.

Where should the Family Team Conference be held?

The best place to hold a Child and Family Team Conference is the most informal, neutral setting you and the family can find. It is desirable to have a setting with a living room-type atmosphere with comfortable chairs, where participants do not have to sit around a table, for example. The most important issues, however, pertain to privacy, security and a place of no interruptions (no telephone calls). The family's home is a consideration, but neutrality could be an issue for the participants, especially if parents do not live together or if the family's home is a place some participants would not be seen as welcomed.

What do you need to do to conduct Family Team Conferences (or other logistical supports)?

- ~~✍~~ Set up a room so that participants can see one another easily and so that they can interact with ease.
- ~~✍~~ Invite participants and follow up with them by letter or telephone call. Schedule with the family the tentative date, time and place of the meeting. (See Appendix 2 for a sample letter to remind participants of the place, time and date of the meeting. It is helpful to attach directions to the meeting location.)
- ~~✍~~ Address any barriers participants may have such as needed transportation and day care arrangements.
- ~~✍~~ Provide food/snacks at each Family Team Conference. Food seems to welcome people; it levels the group in regard to their roles (when food is shared in common they get out of their roles). Family Team Conferences can be long so that during and at the end of the conference food can be used as a refresher and a "pick-me-up". Also, some conferences will be scheduled at times when food is needed (lunch, after school, end of their work day).

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- ~~///~~ Provide reimbursement for transportation, if necessary, for family members to travel from another city, county or state. Also, if family members cannot travel to the conference, a speaker phone might be used to get their input. If family members cannot travel to the conference and if they know what is going on and what the goals are, consideration may be given to having the family member send input by audiotape or even a note. As an alternative, the family member might give a message/input to the case manager or another family member to be shared with the group at the appropriate time.
 - ~~///~~ Provide a flip chart with several markers and masking tape.
 - ~~///~~ Provide name cards, if appropriate.
 - ~~///~~ Identify someone to write up the notes from the conference and distribute them to the appropriate participants.
 - ~~///~~ Provide additional supplies such as tissues.

The Family Team Conference Process

The management and facilitation of the work of the child and family team are crucial to developing and implementing the individualized course of action. A useful approach to employing the team process effectively is to bring the team together for a Family Team Conference. The basic steps of a Family Team Conference are outlined as follows:

Step 1. Information Gathering and Assessment

- ✍ Help the family determine the concerns and issues they believe can be addressed at a Family Team Conference.
- ✍ Organize and review case file.
- ✍ Review all psychological, educational and other professional assessments, social summaries, court reports, etc. (This is particularly important to determine whether there is family history that involves substance abuse, domestic violence or mental health issues.) Review the files as if you know nothing about the case to prevent overlooking vital information.
- ✍ Make a list of critical questions left unanswered after completing the case review or any questions raised by conflicting information.
- ✍ Obtain other assessments as needed.
- ✍ Make a list of family/child strengths and needs which may be present in the areas of: community, neighborhood, educational, developmental, psychological health, vocational, cultural, behavioral, housing, legal, medical, family, crisis and independent living.
- ✍ Conduct strengths/needs assessment with family:
 - Identify individual and family strengths.
 - Identify underlying needs.
 - Prioritize needs based on the issues that seem most important to the family and cause the most pain and create the greatest safety risks to children.

Step 2: Preparation for the Family Team Conference

- ✍ Determine the main outcomes that the family wants to occur at the conference. Ask: “What would you like to have happen as a result of this meeting?”
- ✍ Clarify your role as Facilitator.

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- ✎ Explain to the family that the purpose of the meeting is to develop steps/services to meet identified needs directed towards critical goals.
 - ✎ Encourage the family to articulate their strengths/needs, to ask questions and contribute ideas in the design of services (preparation may be facilitated by role-playing). Ask: “What do you see as your family’s strengths? What do you need? What are your children’s strengths? What do they need?”
 - ✎ Discuss confidentiality issues with the family.
 - ✎ Discuss with the family who needs to attend the Family Team Conference, including their own support system. Ask: “Who are the people who care about you and your family? Who would you want to be at the team meeting?”
 - ✎ Help the family broaden their definition of who is family.
 - ✎ Schedule with the family the tentative date, time and place of the meeting. A meeting location comfortable for the family will produce better results. Discuss possible barriers such as transportation.
 - ✎ Invite participants, including service providers, and prepare them to create positive expectations and avoid conflicting agendas (the family may choose to invite their own support system). Ask: “What may be some of your concerns? What could go wrong?”
 - ✎ Help the participants understand the family’s primary goal prior to the conference.
 - ✎ Be sure to determine any bottom line issues and those areas of concern that may not be negotiable (such as court orders that may require supervised visits).
 - ✎ Help the parents or other family members prepare to tell the story of how they became involved with the agency.
 - ✎ Help participants who may get upset plan how they will manage their emotions, including what they want from you, as the facilitator, in that situation.
 - ✎ Ask all team members to be prepared to name some strengths of the family.

Step 3: The Family Team Conference

A. Introductions/Purpose

- ✎ Facilitator greets the participants and helps them get seated. Have the family prepare name tents to promote communication.
- ✎ Explain purpose of confidentiality statement and ask everyone to sign it.
- ✎ Explain purpose of the meeting is to develop a plan based on strengths/needs and to address the factors that place the child at risk by the development of specific goals and steps.

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- ~~///~~ Have the parents or a family member tell the family's story that explains their current situation and the reason for the conference. Facilitator directs group's focus to keep the meeting moving according to the time agreed by the family.
 - ~~///~~ Ask the group to establish "ground rules." Some suggested ground rules: be respectful of all participants, one person speaks at a time, everyone has an opportunity to speak, it is okay to disagree, what is discussed at the conference is confidential and everyone's contributions are valued. An important additional ground rule is for participants to speak to each other, not about each other. Addressing comments directly to the person referenced, rather than using the third person, helps avoid speaking of members as if they are not present.
 - ~~///~~ Gain agreement about the purpose for this conference.
 - ~~///~~ Use solution focused and open ended questions to maximize positive participation by all members.
 - ~~///~~ Discuss the family's options for resolution of concerns.
 - ~~///~~ Ask the family to briefly tell its own story.

B. Case Summary

- ~~///~~ Strengths/needs may be listed on a flip chart individualizing each family member.
- ~~///~~ Explain that some strengths/needs were previously identified with the family.
- ~~///~~ Look at the child/family when you recognize a strength or suggest a need.
- ~~///~~ Keep the discussion away from services until needs are identified.
- ~~///~~ Do not substitute services for goals or needs statements. Make sure that goals address the risk factors that brought the child into care.
- ~~///~~ For the child in care, always address the child's needs for family contact and maintaining attachments, including visiting arrangements.

C. Develop Goals

- ~~///~~ At least one goal should be selected for each selected need, and each risk factor that brought the child into care must be addressed by specific goals.
- ~~///~~ Each goal should describe how to determine that progress is being made toward meeting the need.
- ~~///~~ Some goals will be long-term and some short-term. It is critical that goals address the reasons for the child's removal.

~~///~~ Discuss that goals may change if the goals are achieved and that steps will change if a more appropriate match of needs/services is necessary or if a more effective method of service delivery is necessary or when/if additional goals are identified.

D. Brainstorm Strategies for Meeting Goals

- ~~///~~ Create extensive lists of possibilities. All ideas are valid.
- ~~///~~ Don't limit the possibilities based on availability of existing services or funding issues.
- ~~///~~ Always consider natural helpers/informal supports.
- ~~///~~ Be inventive and creative. Ideas should be generated rapidly. Participants should reserve comment or questions about another's ideas. Participants should be encouraged to build upon an idea.
- ~~///~~ Agree on the problems and the goal or outcome.
- ~~///~~ Identify and list ideas as quickly as possible.
- ~~///~~ Ask the family to identify an idea they could implement.

E. Select Steps/Services

- ~~///~~ Insure that steps are small, measurable, have time limits and are matched to needs (a step need not be a service).
- ~~///~~ Identify what, who, and when to accomplish steps.
- ~~///~~ Design some steps to be short term to permit early success.
- ~~///~~ Review steps.
- ~~///~~ Discuss whether to plan for crisis (crisis plan may be separate) or create a Plan B for what could go wrong.

F. Closing the Meeting

- ~~///~~ Thank family and other team members for their effort and cooperation.
- ~~///~~ Advise team that the plan will be reviewed regularly and revised when needed.
- ~~///~~ Note that any team member can request a review (remember that the family is a member of the team).
- ~~///~~ Set date for next meeting or review of the work.
- ~~///~~ Commit to provide a written copy of the plan to each team member. Discuss with parent a time to get signatures on the plan.

Step 4: Follow Up to the Conference

- ✍* Write the plan promptly.
- ✍* Distribute the plan to the team promptly.
- ✍* Within two weeks follow up to be sure that services have been initiated.
- ✍* Assess progress with the family to determine if the plan is promoting change.
- ✍* Case manager must develop a plan for monitoring oversight of the plan.
- ✍* Reconvene the team if steps are not being accomplished or progress toward goals is insufficient.
- ✍* Always consult everyone affected by a change to the plan before a decision is made, if safety allows.

Role of the Facilitator

Facilitators may be child protection agency staff, case managers or supervisors, provider staff, community partnership staff, family support staff or others trained to facilitate the conference. People responsible for facilitating conferences need to be able to play a neutral role as the person responsible for directing the process. Often the best facilitator may be the helping team member with the most trusting relationship with the family. When a team member has a history of conflict with the family it is hard for him or her to be neutral in the facilitation process. In such cases it is desirable for someone not directly responsible for the case to be the facilitator. One of the principles that makes family conferencing effective is that the family has the opportunity to have a fresh start in resolving their concerns. A facilitator must be able to offer this opportunity.

Three of the most important responsibilities for the facilitator are:

- ~~•~~ building the team,
- ~~•~~ directing the process and
- ~~•~~ resolving differences.

Let's examine some of the ways a facilitator can carry out these responsibilities:

To build a team a facilitator can:

1. Help each participant in the conference see the value and worth of each person in attendance.
2. Encourage team members to be honest and open with each other.
3. Ensure the team members demonstrate respect for each other.
4. Make sure that the team has a common purpose and goal.
5. Express empathy for the pain and concerns communicated.
6. Use solution focused questions to keep participants viewing the possibilities.
7. Help the team work through differences.

To direct the process the facilitator can:

1. Encourage participants to talk directly to one another.
2. Cue the group so their efforts develop a plan that will work for the family and team.

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3. Use reflections to let the family and team know what is being expressed both verbally and nonverbally.
 4. Reframe discussions toward the positive and focus toward the task and toward solutions.
 5. Use interruptions only to maintain ground rules and when it is necessary to bring the group back to task.
 6. Use summarization purposefully to focus the group and reinforce agreement.
 7. Use solution focused questions to draw out options, to help the team use solutions that have worked in the past and to focus on underlying needs.
 8. Assume that the family is allowed to tell its story uninterrupted.
 9. Add key points of information if the family member forgets.
 10. Offer support.

To resolve differences the facilitator can:

1. Assess and decide if all family and team members should discuss the conflict or differences. To make this decision some questions to consider are:
 - ~~///~~ Does the issue involve the whole team?
 - ~~///~~ Does the issue need the whole team to solve it?
 - ~~///~~ How might this conflict impact the development and implementation of the family's plan?
 - ~~///~~ Does this conflict influence the ability of the team or family to assure greater safety, well being and permanence for the child?
 - ~~///~~ Do you need help or support from someone who is not a participant in this conference to resolve this issue?
2. Use strategies to build consensus such as:
 - ~~///~~ Clarifying the areas of agreement and disagreement;
 - ~~///~~ Helping the participants to lay out options and then to see their choices; and
 - ~~///~~ Trying to identify a higher principle that members can agree upon.
3. Use skills and techniques for conflict resolution such as:
 - ~~///~~ Clarifying what the real disagreement is about.
 - ~~///~~ Finding the common goal.
 - ~~///~~ Generating as many alternatives as possible.
 - ~~///~~ Focusing on points of agreement.

Confidentiality

Participants are informed at the beginning of a Conference that everything said during the conference is to remain confidential. Exceptions to maintaining confidentiality are the same as those mandated by law to report:

- ~~///~~ new allegations of suspected child abuse/neglect,
- ~~///~~ the belief that the individual intends to harm himself and
- ~~///~~ the belief that the person intends to bring harm to others.

See Appendix 3 for a confidentiality form for all participants in attendance at the Family Team Conference to sign.

Appendices

The Family Strengths Assessment

Purpose: To learn the good news about the family; to get a truly balanced picture of them; to begin the process of joining with the family; to discover what might appeal to the family in a motivational sense.

Rationale: It is people's strengths that pull them through life's crisis moments, not their pathology or diagnosis. The strengths of the family are the most useful foundation for the construction of a viable individualized course of action.

Process: The conference or discussion should look more like a chat than a formal assessment. It can occur over several meetings and interactions, in a variety of locations (over coffee, in a car, in the family's home or at the beginning of a conference). The task is to get to know the family, not to attribute etiology or get a history of interaction with the child protection system. If history is needed, look first in case records and reports. Typically when families are referred for this process, lots of information is already available and documented. Be attentive to the fact that existing information may not be strengths based.

Method: Imagine that you are in a social situation with people you don't know. Think of how you interact and learn about them. Begin a dialogue with the family, sharing common sorts of information back and forth. This is a circumstance where self-disclosure can be a valuable trust-building experience and a way to demonstrate to the family that you care enough about them to share a little about yourself. If the family has inadvertently been "trained" to respond to members of the professional community with a social history, bring the conversation back to strengths by asking questions.

Documentation: The best method is to remember what is said and outline the strengths later. Remember that this is a conversation. If your memory is not up to this, ask for permission to jot down a few notes. Keep your notes accessible to family members so they can see what you are writing down. If the strengths assessment is occurring in a Family Team Conference, have a co-facilitator record the list of strengths so you can concentrate on talking to the family.

Tips for Successful Family Team Conferences

- 1) Help the family think through in advance what their goals are for the Family Team Conference.
- 2) If the family cannot think of its own formal supports for the conference, use your skills to help them think creatively about who would be a resource that could be developed.
- 3) Review the file and other records as if you know nothing about the case (there are always critical facts in the record that are forgotten and issues related to substance abuse, domestic violence and mental health are particularly important).
- 4) Assume that the team members need reminding about the ground rules, especially treating the family with respect.
- 5) Think strategically about seating arrangements. Do not seat the family so that they are the center of attention and surrounded by formal agency stakeholders.
- 6) Prepare the team members in advance to think about the family's strengths and look at the family when you affirm their assets.
- 7) Listen, and write goals and steps in the family's own words.
- 8) When families become uncomfortable with an important issue, transition to other, safer issues until it is natural to return to the issue causing stress.
- 9) Think about future transitions in the family's life when crafting the plan and encourage the family to anticipate the stresses of future events (such as new family members or losses of support).
- 10) As the plan for the individualized course of action is developed, ask the team and family, "What could go wrong with this plan?" as a form of crisis planning.
- 11) Encourage creativity among the team when brainstorming solutions. Think beyond the traditional categorical supports.
- 12) Insure that team members are clear about assignments and your intent to follow up to see that they are completed.

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- 13) Build capacity to support the family when the team is no longer a necessity.
 - 14) Don't expect to address all of the family's needs in a single meeting. A successful meeting can be one that provides new information on which to act in future meetings.
 - 15) Once the team develops, you can expect that team members will want to continue to meet to assess progress, develop new strategies and to update the course of action. Depending on the purpose and outcome of the first conference, you may find it helpful to schedule the next conference at the end of that conference to address future and/or unresolved issues.
 - 16) Some family team conferences require rapid follow-up. In those situations, such as when the team has created a safety plan that needs close monitoring, a quick follow-up meeting will be helpful to assess progress and identify additional supports that may be necessary.
 - 17) When a family team meeting could be useful and is desired by a family member who is a victim of domestic violence, it will be helpful to suggest inviting a domestic violence specialist to be a part of the team meeting.
 - 18) If it is determined that the family does not acknowledge or recognize the safety risks, it would be helpful to have the protective services worker present at the conference to ensure that safety issues are properly addressed.
 - 19) The child welfare worker can look for opportunities to delegate tasks, to create a phone tree and share responsibilities with other team members before offering to do more.
 - 20) POST THE PURPOSE AND THE GROUND RULES ON NEWSPRINT SO IF THE GROUP BECOMES UPSET OR DRIFTS FROM THE PURPOSE, FACILITATORS CAN ASK THE GROUP: "HOW ARE WE DOING WITH OUR AGREEMENTS FOR THIS MEETING?"

(Date)

Mr. and Mrs. Team Member
1111 Helpful Way
Anywhere, USA 55555

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Member:

I am writing to remind you of a meeting that has been scheduled for

_____ on _____ at _____
(Time) (Date) (Location)

The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the case plan for _____
(Family name)

You are invited to attend this Family Team Meeting in order to develop the plan along with the family. Others invited to attend are:

Prior to the meeting, please make a note of the strengths for the _____ family that you have identified. At the meeting, services to meet the family and child's needs will be designed to draw upon the various strengths identified by the team members.

If you cannot attend this meeting at this scheduled time, date or location, please call me at _____.

Sincerely,

Cc: Community Partner
Bc: file