

Information sheet for workers:

Family Networking and Family Group Decision Making with children who are living at home

Background.

[Working together to safeguard children](#) (2023) sets out expectations that multiagency practitioners ensure a child's family network is engaged with and empowered from the earliest point. A child's family network can be their blood relatives but should include any "connected people" such as close family friends, neighbours, or previous foster carers; anyone who can offer safety, stability, and love. The goal of family networking is to utilise and build on the strengths and safety of the naturally existing network so that children can be better supported within their own families.

Family group decision-making (FGDM) is an umbrella term for family-led decision-making in which a family network is brought together to make a plan that addresses concerns about a child's safety or wellbeing. Family Group Decision-Making is a core component of children's social care transformation and should be offered from the earliest stages of involvement with children and families. Evidence from research shows FGDM processes can provide substantial benefits for children and families as well as reducing the likelihood of children entering care.

The Family Networking and Family Group Decision-Making Foundation training provides practitioners with the core skills to identify and mobilise a child's extended family network. It also provides practitioners with the understanding and facilitation skills to bring family networks together so they can consider children's needs and any concerns and create a family-led plan that prioritises the child's safety and wellbeing. These are now central expectations in guidance and reforms, aimed at keeping children safely within their families wherever possible.

How does it work when the child is living at home?

Finding - The worker, working directly with the child(ren) and parents, identifies members of the network that could be involved in planning and support. Start with a network map /cultural genogram and ecomap. Use safety circles if there are issues about who can be told what or mobility mapping to help find people who can provide support that the parent or young person has lost touch with. The wider the network the better. Explore social connections by discussing what happens on birthdays, Christmas', or other religious/cultural events, or who they have positive contact with on social media. Also talk about supportive people from the child or the parent's past.

Engagement - Contact those people identified to see if they would be interested in attending a meeting to help the child and family. The meeting should happen at the earliest point possible, while respecting network members caring or work responsibilities (NB: Where there are imminent risks to the child, the first meeting involving as many people from the network as possible, should happen the same day as the strategy discussion so that an interim plan with a clear bottom line can be put in place that keeps the child safe and out of care).

Meetings - All meetings should start by establishing the ground rules. The members should be empowered to decide what these should be and suggestions could be offered about listening, not interrupting, and taking a break where needed. The number of network members attending should be greater than professional support, and membership should remain under review to ensure that if anyone has been missed out they can be invited to future meetings. The network will need to know why they are there, any bottom lines about what they need to include or cannot include in their plan, and what professionals will do (the professional contingency plan) if the family are unable to improve the safety and wellbeing for the child to meet the bottom line. This may involve mapping in 3 columns (What are the worries, what is working well and what needs to happen) to ensure everyone has a full picture of the dangers and safety for the child, much of which workers will not yet know about. The network should also be made aware of any professional support available.

Those people in the network who can show commitment to the child decide what resources, support and/or protection they can provide alongside the professional support required. It should be clear who will monitor the arrangements, and this might be a combination of workers and family/network members working on a rota system that includes weekends.

The Plan- The (safety) plan is written up and shared with all those attending as well as workers. There should only be one plan for each family network to be working to, whether it is a Family Support Plan, Child in Need Plan or Child Protection Plan. Where children are the subject of child protection procedures, the family network plan should be taken to the conference by the social worker and members of the network, to form the basis of the child protection plan. The family network will then review progress at core group meetings with the other workers involved. These should be arranged around the family network. All plans should be clear, easy to understand and jargon free. They should use the wording of the family wherever possible. The family should also be given the opportunity to create their own contingency plan.

Review- All family network plans must be regularly reviewed to check on progress. Follow up meetings should be arranged for network members to review the plan and make amendments depending on what has worked and what else needs to happen. These meetings should align with statutory responsibilities, i.e. minimum of 6 weekly for CiN and 4 weekly for Child protection.

Sharing the plan with the child

While some children will want to be part of the Family Group Decision Making, others may only attend part of the meeting, or may not want to attend. Children should always be given an age-appropriate version of their plan, so that they know who should be doing what and when, and who they should talk to if they are worried or things are not happening as they should. This might take the form of simplified words where they can draw the pictures.

Frequently Asked Questions

What if the family is unsafe?

You won't know who is safe and able to offer a meaningful commitment to the child until you involve them. The likelihood is that families are far more aware of people who could present a risk than workers and will not agree plans that could place the child in any danger.

Are we doing this already?

Yes, in some services this already happens. We need to make sure it is a consistent approach for all children and a shared vision across Norfolk.

Can the meetings have an informal approach?

Yes, absolutely. We will all need to think about the timing of meetings, venues, and refreshments to ensure the meetings are child, young person and family friendly. If a child is attending the meeting, this will need to be carefully planned so they are not overwhelmed, perhaps by arranging for the child to attend just part of it.

What if a person is considered to be unsafe by the parent, carer or network but the child wants to see them?

The risks and safety must be explored with the network; what we are worried about, what existing safety there is or could be, and what needs to happen. The child's welfare must be paramount, and they will need to be helped to understand if there are things that can't happen and why, using words and pictures to explain the reasons people are worried. The situation may be able to be kept under review if it is a situation that might change over time.

What will happen if the Family Network Meeting doesn't work out? E.g. the family network member did not attend?

The network, including the workers, will need to understand why a person didn't turn up. Sometimes parents and other important people in the child's life have their own vulnerabilities that need additional support. The meeting coordinator and network members will need to agree how they will explore this in the best interests of the child. It is important that issues of commitment are not confused with genuine difficulties around timing/transport etc. Offering opportunities to share feedback about the meeting is also very helpful to ensure that everyone feels comfortable to attend.