

Information sheet for workers:

Family Networking with children in care or care leavers

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, and ensuring children who enter the care system continue to receive the love and care of their natural network, even if those network members were not in a position to take on their full-time care.

How does it work when the child or young person is in care or leaving care?

Finding - the worker, working directly with the child or young person helps identify members of their network. Depending on the child's age and understanding and when they came into care, a network map or cultural genogram may need to be undertaken with both their parents or grandparents. You could support them to create an ecomap of all the people they remember being supportive as well as all those they are still in contact with. You could use mobility mapping to help them remember the supportive people in their life. Explore the supportive people currently by discussing who they have contact with on their birthday, Christmas, or other religious/cultural events, or people who they have positive contact with on social media as well as who provided positive support in their past. The family network for a child in care might involve a combination of carers, family members, friends, family or carers friends.

Engagement - Contact those people identified to see if they would be interested in attending a meeting to help the child or young person and potentially become part of the young person's network of support.

Meetings - The first meeting should be used to establish rapport between members of the group. All meetings should also have some ground rules to ensure everyone feels safe. 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. It is likely that more than one meeting will need to take place before the network is properly defined and there is understanding about the commitment from network members to support the child/young person long term.

The Plan - Any plans that the network put forward will need to be shared with the Independent Reviewing Officer if the young person is under the age of 18 and become part of the Care Plan/Pathway Plan. Everyone should have a copy of the plan to make sure everyone knows what is happening. There should only be one plan for each family network to be working to. Where the child/young person wants to involve network members in their LAC review, the review should be arranged around this.

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, but also take place more regularly where this would support the child/young person. The network should be working towards running their own meetings/get together, as the young person is supported towards independence and will need the ongoing support of their 'forever network' as and when.

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.

Is the idea to place children with extended family members/friends rather than place them in foster care?

Where possible we want children to remain with parents or in the extended network, as research shows that this creates a better sense of identity and supports their long-term wellbeing. However, where this is not possible, we want to make sure good links are maintained with the child's network that supports their development while in foster care and their sense of belonging within their community when they leave care.

What about children who are already in foster care or residential care?

We do not want to disrupt stable placements or plans where permanence has been agreed through foster care. However, we know that young people transitioning to young adults will often rely on or need a combination of family, friends and support networks to provide support.

Does that mean foster carers will be left out of decision making meetings?

Not necessarily. For many young people in foster care, the foster carers family and friends will make up the extended network. Others may want to involve people from their community of origin as well. We want to ensure that all those who could provide the young person with support they need are offered opportunities to make plans and decisions with the young person and be part of their lifelong network.

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.

What about contact arrangements (Family Time) that has been agreed through the courts?

Time with family should be discussed as part of the Family Network meetings. It is likely that involving more people in the planning will support children's time with parents and other family members, but it needs to be safe, in their wishes, best interests and in accordance with their age, understanding and development. The aim is for time with safe family members to become a part of their life in the same way that other children see members of their family for days out. This can be agreed through reviewing the child's normal routines and activities in the network meetings.

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. For younger children, the network may need to meet without the child present, at

least initially, and they could be shown the plan using words and pictures the network put together for them, as well as photos of the meeting, before they attend in person.

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

The risks and safety should 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 members 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/yp. 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.

Sometimes children and young people do not always say who they are missing from the past, or this takes time. How will this be managed?

Children should always be given the space and time they need to think about the past. Social workers are being trained in undertaking life story work as well as having the Family Networking Training. Mobility mapping will need to be undertaken carefully to ensure that the questions stay focused on finding out who is/was helpful and supportive in the child's life, and do not get overtaken by problems or difficulties that may need more therapeutic space. Often the network will know about people in the child's network that the child/yp may not immediately remember, and this will need to be discussed with the child/yp.

How can the carer feedback things that the child has said about who they would/would not like to see?

Normally, the carer will be involved in the network meeting but should also have a separate conversation with the social worker where this would be helpful. A partnership approach is essential.