

Strengthening Relationships: Children's Participation in a Family Group Approach to Family Violence

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Abstract

Family violence strains family relationships and cultural ties. A family group approach strengthens these relationships by centering the family, their relatives, and close supports in safeguarding all members. Risk-averse jurisdictions, however, may prohibit the practice, and workers may hesitate to invite the children. Such responses diminish the opportunity for adults to be inspired by the children to act and for children to gain participatory competence and pride in their family. To support the involvement of family, this article offers strategies shaped to local settings. Reaching into their extensive experience of family group conferences or circles in child welfare, the authors overview inclusive practices in four diverse places: Aotearoa New Zealand, United Kingdom, Mi'kmaq in Canada, and Israel.

Keywords

inclusion, antioppressive practice, modes of practice, domestic abuse, abuse/neglect/violence, subjects of practice, family violence, equity issues/human rights/social justice, cultural diversity, multicultural issues and diversity, children's rights, child welfare

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Introduction: Family Violence and Child Inclusion

Solely defining family violence as abuse within an intimate couple diminishes understanding of its causation and limits the capacity to build caring and just relationships. Such a narrow focus blocks out attending to the historical and current harm experienced throughout the family as well as their cultural networks of community, faith, and identity (Nancarrow, 2010). The result is to occlude awareness of interlocking societal oppressions that divide family members rather than building their connections and valuing their heritage (Collins, 1986).

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Particularly among minoritized populations, the potential rises for family fragmentation, as the criminal legal system incarcerates intimate partners, the child protective system removes children from their homes, and the immigration system deports parents, leaving children behind (Cénat et al., 2021; Dettlaff, 2021; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2016). The loss of these vital relationships saps the strength of families and drains the resources necessary for thriving communities (Roberts, 2019).

In child welfare, family violence against child and adult family members is a common co-occurrence, and both need to be resolved together to be effective (Guedes et al., 2016; Sijtsema et al., 2020; van Berkel et al., 2020). In situations of family violence, a family group approach can counteract dissolution of family and cultural ties. A coordinator brings together the family group—that is, the immediate and extended family and those like family—to work out supports and protections for all their members. At these forums, involving children and young people can shift and enrich the perspectives of service providers and family members. This youngest generation is often the only one connected to all sides of the family group and their very presence motivates participants to change relationships for the better (Pennell, 2023).

Importantly, such an experience can prompt youngsters, especially from minoritized groups, to gain pride in their families and to develop their self-confidence and capacity to participate (Gal & Faedi Duramy, 2015). A synthesis of U.S. research (Allan et al., 2021) found that family meetings in a supportive policy context encourages the leadership of family groups and aids in keeping children safely in their homes or placing them with kin. These same results were found in an early Canadian demonstration of family group decision-making that reduced family violence (Pennell & Burford, 2000).

Families lose out on the benefits of these forums, however, when jurisdictions prohibit practices that bring together couples with a history of intimate violence, even when partners request such options (Cameron, 2006;

Nettleton & Strang, 2018; Villacampa, 2021). These face-to-face practices, including family group ones, are often placed under the rubric of restorative practices or restorative justice (McCold, 2006). Their aim is to restore relationships not to how they were but instead to connectedness based on justice and caring (Braithwaite, 2002; Llewellyn, 2012). Even when legislation does not outright ban restorative practices, agencies may seek to reduce their liability by excluding nonconventional programming (Marder & Zinsmeyer, 2021). Child welfare workers may, also, hesitate to involve children in the proceedings (Pennell et al., 2019). Moreover, the available research does not include large-scale experimental studies of restorative practices with intimate partner violence, which limits its support. This limitation in research may be a result of restrictions by funding agencies and human subject committees concerned about applying restorative processes to intimate partner violence (Sherman et al., 2015).

In this article, we use the term a *family group approach* to encompass two processes used to address child welfare issues: (1) *family group conferencing* (FGC) in Aotearoa New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Israel and (2) *family group circles* among the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia, Canada. For each place, we consider the reasons for involving families and their children (used here to span infancy through adolescence) in the family group deliberations and their methods for working with families to create safe and productive gatherings.

A note, while referencing the restorative literature, we use the terminology of *family group*. Our focus is on child welfare for which the common phrase is family group rather than restorative (Pennell et al., 2021). While the term restorative has been used by all the article's authors in describing family group forums, the field of restorative justice was initially developed in response to criminal offenses and, as some contend, should be kept to these legal matters (Walgrave, 2021). We further acknowledge that Indigenous traditional practices should not be conflated with Western practices though convergences may occur (Asadullah et al., 2023).

In preparing this article, the authors met online or at international conferences to discuss their strategies for inclusive family forums, and these discussions reflected their extensive experience of family forums in child welfare to counter family violence. Their collective experience encompassed attending closely to the views of family group conference/circle participants and community representatives on cultivating family and cultural leadership. The authors applied this local knowledge to initiating, implementing, and directing family group programming that safeguards all family members.

Based on this practice work, they designed, delivered, and revised training on implementing the model. Guided by feedback from family and training participants, the authors crafted, tested, and promoted policy and procedures to sustain the model. In collaboration with involved communities, the authors researched and disseminated the results through multiple channels. All authors have substantially contributed in their respective countries as well as internationally to the advancement of this inclusive approach. Their experience-based insights in different jurisdictions assist in discerning configurations that support child inclusion in family group meetings. This article is one of the byproducts of this effort, reflecting the original approach and ideas provided by participants in trainings and consultations.

Aotearoa New Zealand: Maori Authority and Children's Rights

We begin with Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), which in 1989 was the first country to legislate FGC for families of all backgrounds. Both Maori insistence on tribal authority over their children (Rangihau, 1986), and the United Nations claims of children's rights were written into the NZ legislation.¹ The act specifies that child protection workers were obligated to offer families a conference if children were at risk of removal and spelled

out who was entitled to take part in conferences. Those entitled included the children, their family group, and for Indigenous children, tribal affiliates as well as others of the family's choosing. The role of entitled participants in planning was to be safeguarded by their receiving notification of the conference, relevant information to make decisions, treating the proceedings as privileged with only the participants and plan recorded, presentation of their plan to the referring authorities for approval and resourcing, and as needed, reconvening the family group to review progress on the plan and make any needed revisions. Another safeguard was ensuring that the family had privacy to make their plan; during which time, service providers (including the FGC coordinators) stayed outside the room to forestall professionals exerting control over the family decision-making. Importantly, the roles of referring social workers and FGC coordinators were kept distinct so that responsibilities for ongoing case matters and for organizing and convening the conferences did not become muddled and confusing to family groups.

Practice standards for conferencing emphasized the importance of including *Tamariki*, that is children and young persons, in deliberations. Based on long-term experience with FGC, Practice Standard 2 starts with the acknowledgment:

Tamariki say that one of the most important things is to be listened to, know they have been heard and be involved in discussion of the issues and decisions that affect them. When Tamariki are involved and contribute to the decisions made about their lives, they gain a sense of ownership and are far more likely to work with plans they have contributed to (Oranga Tamariki, last updated October 10, 2022).

At the core of the practice standard was the cultural responsibility “to protect against the diminishing of mana [spiritual strength] and violation of tapu [sacredness].” Hence, FGC coordinators were to meet with the Tamariki

in advance of the conference to prepare them and plan together how to involve and support them throughout the process.

Although good legislation and policy are crucial foundations, a long-term collaborative effort is essential to overcome a mentality of shortcuts in FGC practice that sacrifice quality for rapid and low-cost delivery and target child safety without regard to the safety and wellbeing of the whole family. The necessity of a whole family approach became all the more apparent once the police began making family violence referrals and child welfare caseloads surged (Nixon, 2014). Women's advocates who could have highlighted the needs of the children's mothers were not present at the conferences despite the legislated framework permitting their participation. Their absence reflected the lack of integration of services by child welfare and women's organizations.

Three decades after enactment of the NZ law, a review of the child welfare system (Tukaki, 2021) identified a robust number of FGCs convened, a decrease in the number of children in out-of-home care, but continued overrepresentation of Maori children in care. The report urged further devolution of child welfare services for Maori children, accompanied by resourcing, to tribal authority. One way of holding forums outside (but not in contravention) of state authority was through informal and frequent family-community gatherings convened by tribal coordinators and held on the marae, a sacred and communal place of the Maori (Armstrong et al., 2023). These were steps toward transforming children's individual rights into Maori collective responsibilities.

United Kingdom: Risk-Averse Agencies and Family Rights

The FGC model quickly spread to other countries but with divergences reflecting local service settings and political contexts (Nixon et al., 2005). In the early 1990s, the United Kingdom piloted FGC as a best practice rather

than through legislative mandate as in New Zealand (Brown, 2003). A bottom-up innovation, FGC was heavily reliant on local champions to advance the model. Without a legal mandate, its diffusion was initially slowed by child welfare procedures leaving little room for new practices, worker reluctance to refer families given a sense of threat to their professional identity and trepidations about the potential dangers to children of family decision-making, and funding constraints preventing reallocation to support FGC (Brown, 2007).

Another factor pertained to the suitability of applying the model to address family violence. Child welfare practitioners in New Zealand did not exclude families involved with child welfare services even if they also had intimate partner violence. This controverted U.K. policy of screening out referrals with known family violence because of fears of abusive manipulation, mother blaming, silencing of children and adults, and diversion of domestic violence from the criminal legal system. This exclusion policy quickly proved ineffective, however, because once conference organizing was underway, family violence surfaced as underpinning the presenting issues (Inglis, 2007).

In 2000, a qualitative study found that the use of FGC in the context of family violence had a positive impact on the safety and mental health of mothers who had been abused and highlighted the importance of close attention to the wishes of family members who had been harmed, careful preparation of all participants including children, and multiagency collaboration that included women's advocates (Social Services and Research Information Unit, 2003). Over the first decade of the new millennium, uptake of conferencing was buoyed by early successes, dissemination of practice protocols, and training of FGC coordinators and service providers. This momentum was lost, however, following a 2010 change in administration, ushering in austerity measures; and, in child welfare, "a punitive ethos pervade[d] practices often with parents (especially mothers) constructed as prioritising their own needs over those of their children" (Featherstone et al., 2014, p. 9).

The impact of the changing political discourse on conferencing was reduced FGC funding, fewer coordinators, and the remaining coordinators becoming less skilled and unable to orient agency staff to making decisions collaboratively with families. Social workers sought to use FGC to supplement investigations by posing agency-oriented questions that family members were expected to answer in the meeting. Workers also threatened legal action to prevent children from attending their conference.

Once again, the policy context shifted and appeared to encourage uptake in FGC programming. A U.K.-wide survey sent to all local authorities responsible for child protection tracked the number of agencies starting continuous FGC coverage from 1995 to 2022 and found a notable increase in 2016 and 2017, which the researchers (Wood et al., 2022) attributed to public policy and available funding. FGC practice, though, was unevenly delivered across the country. When conferences were held, most families were offered family private time, and domestic violence was no longer a criterion for exclusion. Half the programs always invited children to take part, and most other programs sometimes did. If children chose to attend, approximately half the programs always offered an advocate to support them during the deliberations.

A troubling finding from Wood et al. (2022) was that fewer than a third of the respondents indicated awareness of an agency policy mandating that social workers offer a conference when children were likely to be removed from their homes. This occurred despite U.K. research supporting the conclusion that conferenced children were less likely to be placed in state care. A case stands out of a city-wide FGC program based in Leeds' statutory child protection agency, which experienced a significant decline in child placement after institution of the model (Mason et al., 2017). Of note, this decline occurred at a time when the trend across England was a rise of children in care (Sen & Webb, 2019). More recently, a large-scale, randomized controlled trial in the United Kingdom reported that conferenced children, compared to those

without a conference, were initially less frequently subject to removal from their homes; a difference that declined by 18 months (Taylor et al., 2023). The study's findings gained extensive attention from government focused on the cost savings from reduced time in state care, and, in turn, this response provoked controversy over whether conferencing should be promoted for its financial benefits to the public purse or as a family right to take charge of their own affair.

Mary Mitchell (2021) closely analyzed the impact of FGC on participants and identified that through the "interlocking experiences of recognition in the form of love (care and support), rights (respect) and solidarity (acknowledgement of contribution) . . . family members build skills and capacity to make decisions and take control over their own lives" (p. 2203). Seeking to create these "interlocking experiences," a program in the London Borough of Camden secured FGC coordinators from the multiplicity of backgrounds in a very ethnically diverse urban setting and engaged FGC participants and the wider community in setting directions for the program. They followed these directions by moving FGC earlier in time to secure supports for families as they were needed and prevent deeper system involvement for children and their families. This work (Dove et al., 2021) expresses the intent of FGC to serve as a "bridge between the system world of professionals and the life-world of families" (p. 160) and to co-create a "spirit of interdependency, connection and love" (p. 158).

Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia, Canada: Indigenous Traditions and Family Circles

Paralleling the early days of FGC in the United Kingdom, the Canadian province of Nova Scotia had placed a moratorium on using a restorative approach with sexual and domestic violence. This policy did not apply to one group—the Indigenous Mi'kmaq. Pushing back against their overrepresentation in criminal legal and child welfare systems, the Mi'kmaq asserted their right to

carrying out restorative processes according to their own traditions (Archibald & Llewellyn, 2006).

As true of Indigenous peoples across Canada, the residual effects of a long history of involuntary family separation transferred across generations. Taking action, the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia negotiated with the province to assume full control of child welfare in their 13 communities, a process successfully completed in the early 1990s; the Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services of Nova Scotia (MFCS) was established. Learning from the Maori, MFCS instituted FGC (Wien & Glode, 2011) but then changed the delivery and terminology from "conferencing" to "circles." Kristen Basque (2023) explained that circles are "a very sacred place, and . . . medicine for us" . . . "where words of consolation can be freely spoken, and healing can begin" [and] . . . "everyone is equal, . . . everyone has a voice" (p. 102). The circle program passed a talking piece around the circle of participants who could elect to speak during their turn. No time limits were set on the circle, which encompassed opening and ending ceremonies, information sharing, a meal, and family private time. What was shared was kept in the circle, with a written record made only of the resulting family group plan distributed to all family group and service provider participants. The plan commonly included a follow-up circle at a time of the family's choosing to update the action steps as necessary.

Circles included all family members once they were ready to meet. In situations of family violence, mothers might first seek refuge with their children at the Mi'kmaw healing centers. Often men who caused harm were court mandated into a culturally based group in which they learned to overcome intergenerational trauma. Men who successfully completed the group were invited into family circles with their intimate partners.

Using various tools, MFCS ensured that children were heard at every stage of the work. Depending on their age and maturity, children might complete forms or letters about their hopes and concerns that with their permission were shared in the circle. The

coordinator might build in a special round devoted to the children in which they shared "their happy memories, worries, and wishes," at which time "we see the walls tumbling down with their parents. We respect and applaud the parents who choose to take part—this takes a lot of courage" (Basque, 2023, p. 104).

In addition to family group circles, MFCS increasingly used *immediate response circles* to offer support early before families moved farther into child welfare. Crucial were the support circles around mothers prenatally and postpartum, especially for special needs children. The multifaceted program reduced out-of-home removals of children or found them kinship placements (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2018). In keeping with cultural traditions, the effectiveness of the circle was founded on "real accountability . . . to the grandmother or godmother; this is unlike any accountability to the social worker or the judge" (Basque, 2023, p. 106).

Israel: Citizenship and Child Participation

Adhering to the NZ FGC format, an Israeli program called Olim Laderech (Getting on Track) was formed in 2018 as a pilot program under the auspices of Mosaica (n.d.), a nonprofit seeking to "cultivate a culture of conflict resolution, dialogue, and consensus-building among families, communities, cultures, and religions." As we wrote this article, the existential crisis of the 2023 war in Israel and Palestine elevated understanding of the necessity for such a culture. Mosaica's Executive Director Ruth Najenson was fully committed to advancing peaceful solutions in overseeing the development of the program and training of FGC coordinators and supporting its evaluation.²

With training from the Netherlands, the Israeli program framed FGC as fulfilling Mosaica's mission by promoting citizenship in which families took charge of their lives with the support of their social networks. The goal of citizenship fit with the program's original aim to act as a bridge for immigrants to

their new country and later to the program's expanded role in improving strained family-state relationships in culturally diverse national regions. Overall, the families faced extensive economic hardship and isolation, especially single mothers. Thus, one aspect of the program stood out as contributing to relational improvements: flexible funding to pay for components of families' plans not usually covered by welfare agencies (e.g., family vacation) (Benitah, 2021).

In Israel, the FGC coordinators were involved in two of the three conference stages: (1) the preparations in which the coordinators invited participants and readied them for the meeting and (2) the meeting that the coordinator convened with the family, supporters, and service providers to develop and approve the plan. In this second stage, the FGC coordinators often advocated to social services about the mothers' right to choose what they wanted in their plan (Shaibe, 2022). Once the plan was approved, implementation of the plan was turned over to social services. Parents could opt to have a paraprofessional family companion stay with them to carry out the FGC plans and help them communicate with social services.

A researcher interviewed parents who affirmed that their children who took part in conferencing experienced a "sense of healing . . . felt cared for and their voices heard" (Mizrahi, 2021, p. 58). In the context of family violence, Ruth Najenson (2022) stressed, the Israeli program recognized that keeping children out of the conference would not protect them from knowledge of the abuse in their homes. They were already fully aware of the abuse, so the question was not whether to involve children in the FGC but rather the scale of their participation. With careful preparation, the children took part when participants shared family strengths and during family private time and then signed off on the plan. Only during the fraught stage of relaying worries about the family would children frequently remain outside the room. Throughout the conference, a support person selected by the child stayed close at hand for comfort and assistance. The very presence of the children

was a realistic check on what action steps were possible, given the child's wishes and level of cooperation.

Practice Implications and Conclusions: Children's Agency in Their Family Group

Children are not simply *exposed* to family violence; they *experience* family violence and act in response to protect themselves and others in the household and to cope with the emotional and physical fallout (Arai et al., 2021). Including children in family group deliberations was a way to support children as agents within their family and cultural network. This did not mean that children were left to hold the responsibility for their families. Instead, with preparation and support, they could offer insights on how to change their families for the better and incentivize others to take action. The family group plan set out agreed-upon steps to ensure that everyone was safe in the family, thus, protecting child and adult members and their familial bonds.

In four distinctive child welfare contexts, this article demonstrates the feasibility and struggles of child inclusion in family group processes, especially to address family violence. The strategies did not hold still and were shaped and reshaped to their local settings. Much borrowing and adaptation occurred across these and other jurisdictions adopting family group methods. Given the extensive occurrence of domestic violence on child welfare caseloads, all four places faced situations of family violence. The origins of each program affected their capacity to guard and improve their family group approach.

In New Zealand, FGC sprang from an assertion of Maori collective authority over their children, and the 1989 legislation enshrined children's right to participate, not as solitary actors but instead as members of their family group or tribe. Practice guidance shifted over time to underline the necessity of frequent meetings and, for Maori children, ones organized by tribal coordinators on their sacred

grounds. Family violence was not a criterion for excluding children, but without the participation of women's advocates, steps to counteract domestic violence were diminished.

Paralleling developments in New Zealand, FGC in Nova Scotia, Canada, emerged in the early 21st century as a response to a history of government deliberately severing Indigenous children from their families and communities. Fairly quickly the method was changed from conferencing to circles to reflect Mi'kmaw traditions. Including family violence situations was never in question. Instead, a range of programming was developed to help families experiencing family violence and to prepare them for joining the family group circles. With careful attention to children's wishes, they were brought into circles.

The programs in the United Kingdom and Israel did not come out of a push for Indigenous control over their children and instead as pilots to create general best practices. FGC was introduced in the early 1990s in the United Kingdom without a guarantee of children's right to take part and was set at risk by changes in government that accelerated a punitive approach to mothers. As a result, FGC programs contended with a mentality of controlling rather than collaborating with low-income, minoritized families and an extensive pushback by agencies and social workers to prevent children from attending conferences. More recently, children were more likely to be included in conferences, and government came to favor FGC because of research showing that it reduced children's time in state care. While children and their family groups wanted to keep the youngsters with family or kin, the financial calculus did not establish family decision-making as a fundamental, inseparable right.

The newest program reviewed was initiated in 2018 in selected Israeli municipalities. Its driving force was a desire for dialog and consensus-building in an ethnically diverse and divided society. Given the poverty and isolation of the participating families, many of whom were new immigrants, attention was given to offering economic and social resources. The FGC coordinators as well as

family companions served as advocates speaking on behalf of the families, especially mothers, to secure what services they wanted. Strategies were developed to support children's participation, including in conferences addressing family violence.

The four examples were described separately because each had to map its own trajectory to countering dismantlement of family and community and to engaging families and their children in decision-making. Taken together, they offer a way to begin to discern configurations of factors that influenced their approaches in specific national contexts. Two examples were of national contexts in which Indigenous peoples pushed for sovereignty and the family group approach could appeal to traditional practices and tribal collective responsibility. The other two examples were of national contexts unsettled by class and ethnic divisions, and the family group approach could appeal to family rights to making decisions over their own. Another factor was the extent of collaboration between the programs and women's advocates, without whom social services were unlikely to acknowledge and respond to the abuse committed against the children's mothers.

What limits the discernment of configurations of factors is that the four examples did not include work on continents such as Africa, Asia, and South America. This sets limits on examining the impact of culture and context shaping programming to nourish and reinforce family and community relationships. The strength of the article is its authorship by practitioners immersed in family group approaches and draws upon their understanding of its outreach to and affirmation of children and their families.

Conclusion

All the authors of this article were extensively involved in the initiation, implementation, and evaluation of FG forums, and all saw the process as safeguarding rather than endangering children and their families. They concluded that a family group approach can strengthen family and community

relationships through involving the whole family, including their youngest members, in making decisions for their wellbeing. In supporting the process, the coordinator works with the family to prepare members for safe and effective participation and orients the involved services to collaborate on offering support before, during, and after the deliberations. In conclusion, the examples in this article illustrate the possibility of inviting the family group of all ages to family group forums, including in the context of family violence; the power of Indigenous and community collaborations in moving forward whole family approaches fitting local cultures; and the global cross-fertilization of inspiring frameworks and ingenious strategies.


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Notes

1. *Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 and Children's and Young People's Well-being Act 1989*. http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/consol_act/ota1989145.pdf [previously called the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989*].
2. From the start, the Israeli FGC pilot program has been evaluated. As of September 2023, 12 master's theses from the Nevet Greenhouse Research Team at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem can be accessed on the website <https://nevetgreenhouse.huji.ac.il/kedem-project>; at the end of these files are abstracts in English. Informational videos in Hebrew on FGC can be found at <https://youtu.be/6cr2p55VrUc> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIIjeeBM6wM>

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