

Lessons From the Field: Successful Strategies for Implementing Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM)

In fiscal year (FY) 2011, the Children's Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) funded a group of demonstration grants to test the effectiveness of Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) and how to best implement it. These projects used FGDM meetings and other teaming approaches as a means of family engagement and capacity building to strengthen protective factors and reduce risk factors for child maltreatment. Each project conducted its own evaluation and submitted a final report, and all grantees participated in a cross-site evaluation commissioned by the Children's Bureau.

This guide was designed to help agencies and organizations seeking to start a new FGDM program or improve an existing program. It describes challenges faced by the FGDM grantees and strategies the grantees developed or identified to address these challenges. The guide also provides links to applicable resources and tools.

The guide is based on the James Bell Associates report titled *Family Connection Discretionary Grants 2011: Funded Family Group Decision-Making Grantees Cross-Site Evaluation Report* (<https://go.usa.gov/xX57f>), Child Welfare Information Gateway site visit reports and articles, and the final reports submitted by the projects. The links to the site visit reports, articles, and final reports for each State can be found under each State in the section titled FY 2011 FGDM Grantees.

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What Is FGDM?

While there are several different FGDM models, research has shown that the following six elements are critical to success (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, 2016):

1. The presence of an independent coordinator who does not carry any cases and acts as a facilitator for the family group meeting
 - a. The coordinator is respectful and recognizes that all families are unique and are experts about themselves
 - b. The coordinator is committed to developing an understanding of families' cultural values, assumptions, world views, and decision-making models.
2. Recognition and acknowledgment by the child welfare agency that the family group represents a key decision-making partner in the child welfare case process, including committing the time and resources necessary to convene the family group meeting
3. Inclusion of private family time so that family members have the opportunity to process information and develop a plan to address identified concerns without the presence of child welfare authorities or service providers
4. Preference of the case plan developed by the family over any other plan, as long as child safety is maintained and other agency concerns are adequately addressed
5. Provision of services, resources, and supports necessary to implement the case plan agreed upon by the family and the child welfare agency
6. Follow-up after the FGDM process until desired outcomes are achieved

Benefits of Using FGDM

The child welfare system has sought ways to improve family engagement, and improving child and family involvement in case planning is addressed in the Federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs). In Round 2 of the CFSRs, conducted between 2007 and 2010, every State received an "area needing improvement" designation for the well-being outcome concerning child and family involvement in case planning (item 18) (HHS, 2011). In the Program Improvement Plans submitted by each State in response to the CFSRs, 37 States indicated they were either starting to use or were expanding and strengthening the use of some type of FGDM.

In FGDM, child welfare agencies, working independently or in partnership with local social services agencies, actively engage families in the development of a plan to ensure the safety and well-being of their children. FGDM meetings help child welfare professionals recognize families' strengths and address each family's unique needs. In addition, the FGDM process gives each family a voice and a greater sense of ownership in the decision-making process, which can result in more engagement with the services provided and better outcomes.

When compared with families who did not participate in FGDM, participating families experienced higher satisfaction and have increased participation in services (National Center on Family Group Decision Making, 2010). Additionally, FGDM has shown promising results regarding child safety, permanency, and well-being. For example, children are more likely to be placed in the care of kin when families participate in the FGDM process.

Challenges, Strategies, and Resources

The FY 2011 FGDM grantees encountered some common challenges to successful implementation of their FGDM programs. Challenges included the following:

- Initial resistance to FGDM on the part of agencies, workers, and/or families
- FGDM cannot begin until family crises are resolved
- Insufficient FGDM data to support continuous quality improvement and evaluation
- Insufficient community resources and services to meet FGDM goals
- Grant-funded FGDM programs can be difficult to sustain

Table 1 presents the challenges and the corresponding strategies developed by the grantees to address those challenges. In addition, strategies found to be beneficial during a literature review as ways to mitigate the identified challenges encountered by the grantees are included in Table 1. Strategies reported by specific grantees are identified by the State in which the grantee was located. For example, the YMCA Families United Family Group Conferencing Program in San Diego will be referred to as CA.

Table 1
Challenges and Strategies

CHALLENGE	Child welfare workers and agencies are resistant to the FGDM process.
Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child welfare agencies may not understand their roles when partnering with other organizations in the FGDM process. ▪ Child welfare agencies and workers may not understand the FGDM process. ▪ Child welfare agencies and nonprofit organizations generally intervene when a problem is identified, so a strength-based perspective can be hard to develop and maintain. ▪ Child welfare workers may have trouble finding time to attend FGDM training, read materials, or prepare families for FGDM meetings.
SOLUTION	Organizations should build strong relationships with child welfare and other partner agencies prior to implementing FGDM.
How?	<p>Formalize relationships with partner organizations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop memoranda of understanding and memoranda of agreement (CA). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>2016/2017 Prevention Resource Guide: Building Community, Building Hope</i>, "Chapter 3: Using Protective Factors as a Framework for Your Community Partnership" (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/prevention_ch3.pdf) • <i>Multiparty Agreement</i> (https://childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/7%20-%20Multiparty%20Agreement%20Action%20Plan%20Form.pdf) ○ Form advisory boards with partner organizations in the community (MI).

	<p>Provide training for as many child welfare workers as possible, which can increase knowledge of and support for FGDM and promote a more family-centered approach in general.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource: “Believe it or Not: The Interplay Between Child Welfare Agency Staff Attitudes and Knowledge About FGDM and Implementation” [Webinar] (http://ow.ly/PP8p30aoYFR) (CO) <p>Examine caseload and workload management issues to find areas where improvements can be made.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource: <i>Caseload and Workload Management</i> (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/case-work-management/) <p>Colocate project staff in the child welfare office to assist caseworkers in understanding the FGDM process and how it can benefit families (CA, MI).</p> <p>Promote a family-centered agency culture.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource: Creating a Family-Centered Agency Culture [Webpage] (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/agency-culture/) <p>Include child welfare caseworkers on initial home visits whenever possible (CA, MI).</p>
CHALLENGE	Families are resistant to the FGDM process.
Why?	Most of the target populations for the FY 2011 FGDM grantees were voluntary cases. ¹ Projects reported that many families were reluctant to enter into any service offered by or procured through child welfare services.
SOLUTION	Collaborating agencies and child welfare agencies need to actively promote a public perception that they are supporting families rather than punishing them.
How?	<p>Develop ongoing community engagement campaigns.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource: Public Awareness & Creating Supportive Communities [Webpage] (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/communities/) <p>Provide cultural, educational, and recreational services to the wider community in order to form positive relationships with families (CA, MI, NJ).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource: Family Engagement Inventory [Website] (https://www.childwelfare.gov/fei/) <p>Offer motivational interviewing training or “tune-ups.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource: “Motivational Interviewing Techniques in Child Welfare” [Video] (http://ow.ly/YtxV30aAMEF) <p>Allocate resources for identifying and finding extended family—especially fathers—and community members to build a strong support network for the family (CA, FL, MI, NJ).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse [Website] (https://www.fatherhood.gov/) <i>A Tool for Reducing Barriers to Finding Fathers Through Mothers</i> (http://ow.ly/uqfZ30ap2ll) “Family Search and Engagement: An Overview” [Webinar] (http://ow.ly/7PzD30ap2s7) Searching for Relatives and Kin [Webpage] (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/kinship/locating/searching/)

¹ Services provided to families involved with the child welfare system may be voluntary or court ordered and encompass an array of interventions and supports provided directly by, or on behalf of, a child welfare agency to all children in a family to ensure their safety and promote well-being (Child Welfare Information

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Engaging Fathers</i> [Podcast series] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Engaging Fathers Part 1” (https://go.usa.gov/xX5HM) • “Engaging Fathers Part 2” (https://go.usa.gov/xX5Hz) • “Engaging Fathers Part 3” (https://go.usa.gov/xX563) <p>Include parent advocates and mentors who are available to support families (MI).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Resource: “Developing and Sustaining a Parent Partner Program” [Podcast] (https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/child-welfare-podcast-parent-partner) <p>Encourage participation by children and youth.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Resource: Engaging and Involving Youth [Webpage] (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/youth/engagingyouth/) <p>Offer families referrals, resources, and programming before implementing FGDM in order to build trust (NJ).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Resource: <i>Family Engagement: Partnering With Families to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes</i> (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-fam-engagement/)
CHALLENGE	Referred families are currently in crisis, and agencies cannot implement FGDM until the immediate crises have been resolved.
Why?	Families involved in the child welfare system may experience ongoing issues in a variety of areas, including domestic violence, substance use, and involvement with the legal system.
SOLUTION	Staff should perform an initial assessment at the point of referral to determine if an immediate crisis is present. If a crisis is indicated, staff should defer FGDM services until the crisis no longer requires immediate attention.
How?	<p>Make a safety plan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ For families experiencing issues of domestic violence, explore conducting two separate FGDM meetings—one with the perpetrator and the family and the other with the victim and the family. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resource: <i>Domestic Violence and the Child Welfare System</i> (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/domestic-violence/) ▪ For families experiencing issues of substance use <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resource: Family Engagement and Retention in Substance Use Disorders Case Planning [Webpage] (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/bhw/casework/families-sud/parents-sud/family-engagement/) ▪ For families currently involved with the legal system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resource: <i>Understanding Child Welfare and the Courts</i> (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/cwandcourts/)
CHALLENGE	The FGDM program does not have enough data for continuous quality improvement or evaluation.
Why?	Child welfare agencies and collaborating partners use a wide range of databases for collecting data that do not necessarily include the same pieces of information. Additionally, FGDM may have long-term effects that cannot be shown from shorter-term data points.

SOLUTION	Partners should plan for both process and outcome evaluations as part of the initial program design. They should utilize common assessments and data sources for evaluation so that future assessments and comparisons can be made.
How?	<p>Use a process evaluation to measure how well the program is being implemented and whether it is reaching the target audience (FL).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Evaluation Brief: Conducting a Process Evaluation</i> (http://ow.ly/P31e30ap7uT) ○ <i>Evaluation Brief: Critical Issues in Evaluating Child Welfare Programs</i> (https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/evaluating-child-welfare-programs) <p>Use an outcome evaluation to measure program effectiveness in meeting objectives (FL).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Resource: <i>Evaluation Brief: Conducting an Outcome Evaluation</i> (http://ow.ly/dcdl30bEbFw) <p>Use assessment instruments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Family Needs Scale (FNS) (CA, FL, MI, ND, NJ) ▪ Parenting Stress Index (short form) (PSI) (MI, NJ, UT) ▪ FRIENDS Protective Factors Survey (PFS) (CA, CO, FL, MI, ND, UT) ▪ North Carolina Family Assessment Scale for General Services & Reunification (NCFAS-G+R) (CA, UT) <p>Access existing data sources.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) (CA, CO, FL, MI, ND, NJ, UT) ▪ Resource: <i>Evaluation Resource Guide for Children’s Bureau Discretionary Grantees</i> (http://ow.ly/GmH730ap8yO)
CHALLENGE	The needs and goals for the family being addressed by the FGDM process cannot be met due a lack of community resources and services.
Why?	Families involved in the child welfare system often have complex needs related to income, housing, education, mental health, and substance use disorders. Services to meet these needs are not always available within the community.
SOLUTION	Partners should find out what the needs of the community are during the project-planning phase to determine the availability of resources that meet those needs for the target population.
How?	<p>Conduct a community needs assessment.</p> <p>Resource: <i>Assessing Community Strengths and Needs</i> [Webpage] (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/developing/assessing/)</p>
CHALLENGE	It can be difficult for partners to sustain the FGDM program beyond the initial funding period.
Why?	Partners may be unable to increase their general budget to absorb the ongoing costs of FGDM that were initially covered by a grant. Staff turnover may further complicate sustainability.

SOLUTION	Partners should plan for sustainability when they design the program, even if it is a short-term grant or pilot project.
How?	<p>Plan for sustainability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ For the overall program <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lessons Learned Through the Application of Implementation Science Concepts to Children’s Bureau Discretionary Grant Programs</i> (http://ow.ly/xJAG30apanI) • <i>Sustainability Planning Worksheet for Children’s Bureau Discretionary Grantees</i> (https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/cbdg-toolkit-sustainability-planning-worksheet) ▪ For securing sustainable funding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resource: <i>Financial Sustainability for Nonprofit Organizations: A Review of the Literature</i> (http://ow.ly/SWbl30apc0P) ▪ For staff retention <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resource: National Child Welfare Workforce Institute: Retention [Webpage] (http://ow.ly/mGf530bEbet)

Outcomes Reported by the FY 2011 FGDM Grantees

The FY 2011 FGDM funding opportunity announcement (FOA) required that each project evaluate its program on measures of safety, permanency, and well-being. The FOA is available at <https://go.usa.gov/xX5MG>.

To measure **safety outcomes**, projects collected data from both public records and evaluation instruments they administered to families. The number of reported maltreatment recurrences was measured by public child welfare data (i.e., SACWIS). Some projects measured safety and risk assessment outcomes from the information families gave during the intake process and at the end of the project. Other projects administered the NCFAS-G+R before and after the FGDM process to measure any changes in the family’s level of safety.

Projects measured **permanency outcomes** by determining whether families had continued involvement with the local child welfare agency. They used data from SACWIS and follow-up telephone surveys.

Projects measured **well-being outcomes** using instruments administered to families before and after the FGDM process. The well-being outcomes that projects assessed included presence of protective factors, level of family functioning, level of parenting stress, family needs, and child well-being.

Table 2 presents some of the outcomes that resulted in either positive trends or mixed results (James Bell Associates, Inc., 2015). While results were generally positive, some States and measures could not be compared either due to a lack of data in a particular area or the use of different measures. Grantees also conducted FGDM meetings at different points in the case process and used slightly different FGDM models. Additionally, the target populations and resources available within the local communities differed from site to site. All of the reported results across the projects can be found in detail in the cross-site evaluation report by James Bell Associates (2015). The positive trends that were reported

for child safety, permanency, and well-being are promising, but further study is needed.

To learn more about the grantees’ evaluation models and reported outcomes, see the cross-site evaluation report at <https://go.usa.gov/xX5M6>.

Table 2
A Selection of FGDM Grantee Outcomes

Safety Outcomes	As Measured By	Grantee Results
Child safety and maltreatment recurrences	Public child welfare data (SACWIS)	Positive trend (FL, MI, NJ)
Safety and risk assessment outcomes	Family-level data collected by grantees	Positive trend (FL, ND)
Family safety	NCFAS-G+R	Positive trend (CA, UT)
Permanency Outcome	As Measured by	Grantee Results
Child welfare involvement at follow up	Public child welfare data (SACWIS) and telephone surveys	Positive trend (CA, FL, MI, NJ, ND)
Well-Being Outcomes	As Measured By	Grantee Results
Protective factors	PFS	Mixed results (FL, MI, UT)
Family functioning	(NCFAS-G+R)	Positive trend (CA, UT)
Family needs	FNS	Mixed results (MI, NJ, UT)
Parenting stress	PSI	Positive trend (MI, NJ, UT)
Child well-being	Child Well-Being Scale and the Youth Outcomes Questionnaire	Positive trend (NJ, UT)

FY 2011 FGDM Grantees

Table 3 briefly describes each project and provides links to resources they developed or that otherwise describe their work.

Table 3
FY 2011 FGDM Grantees

State	California
Project Title	YMCA Families United Family Group Conferencing Program
Lead Agency	YMCA of San Diego County
Target Population	Families in San Diego County with substantiated child welfare services referrals but who were not at imminent risk of having children enter or reenter foster care
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>YMCA of San Diego County Families United Family Group Conferencing: Project Summary and Findings</i> (http://go.usa.gov/x8RZV) ▪ <i>Site Visit Report: YMCA Families United Family Group Conferencing Program</i> (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/funding/funding-sources/federal-funding/cb-funding/cbreports/fgdm/) ▪ <i>A Practical Guide for Planning and Sustaining Demonstration Projects</i> (http://go.usa.gov/x8RZz) ▪ <i>Handbook for Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children</i> (http://bit.ly/2fufUDy)
State	Colorado (with two additional sites in Texas and South Dakota)
Project Title	No Place Like Home: Family Group Decision-Making for Children and Families Receiving In-Home Services
Lead Agency	Larimer County Department of Human Services
Target Population	Families receiving in-home child welfare services who have children at risk of entering or reentering foster care in three different localities

Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Site Visit: Family Group Decision-Making for In-Home Services” (https://go.usa.gov/xX5Me) ▪ <i>No Place Like Home: Final Progress Report</i> (https://go.usa.gov/xXNrd) ▪ Williams, J. R., Merkel-Holguin, L., Allan, H., Maher, E. J., Fluke, J., & Hollinshead, D. (2015). Factors associated with staff perceptions of the effectiveness of family group conferences. <i>Journal of the Society for Social Work & Research</i>, 6(3), 343–366. ▪ Allan, H., & Maher, E. (2013). All in the family: Variations in the use of family meetings in child welfare. <i>Child Welfare</i>, 92(6), 97–110. ▪ “Leading the Way: Supervisors Promoting Critical Thinking in FGDM Practice” [Webinar] (http://ow.ly/NoJx30apinI) ▪ “Believe It or Not: The Interplay Between Child Welfare Agency Staff Attitudes and Knowledge About FGDM and Implementation” [Webinar] (http://ow.ly/ws0c30apiyp)
State	Florida
Project Title	Family Group Decision-Making: Engaging, Encouraging, and Empowering Families to Succeed
Lead Agency	Kids Central, Inc.
Target Population	All families who were referred to in-home diversion services
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Engaging, Encouraging, and Empowering Families to Succeed: Family Group Decision Making: Family Team Conferencing Process Manual</i> (http://go.usa.gov/x8RB2) ▪ <i>Site Visit Report: Family Group Decision-Making: Engaging, Encouraging, and Empowering Families to Succeed</i> (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/funding/funding-sources/federal-funding/cb-funding/cbreports/fgdm/) ▪ “A Community Approach to the Welfare of Children” [PowerPoint] (https://go.usa.gov/xX5eS) ▪ “Family Group Decision Making: Engaging, Encouraging, and Empowering Families to Succeed” [Webinar] (http://ow.ly/bg0Y30apjdN)

State	Michigan
Project Title	Nurturing the Resiliency in Wayne County Families: Rethinking the Family Decision-Making Model as Community-Centered Child and Family Work
Lead Agency	Homes for Black Children
Target Population	African-American families at risk of having their children enter the foster care system or who have experienced recent reunification with their children
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Nurturing the Resiliency in Wayne County Families: Rethinking the Family Decision Making Model as Community Centered Child and Family Work: Final Report</i> (https://go.usa.gov/xNV2g) ▪ <i>Site Visit Report: Homes for Black Children: Nurturing the Resiliency in Wayne County Families: Rethinking the Family Decision-Making Model as Community-Centered Child and Family Work</i> (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/homesforblackchildren.pdf)
State	North Dakota
Project Title	Family Engagement for Native American Youth
Lead Agency	The Village Family Service Center
Target Population	All Native American youth (0–18 years of age) from six counties (Cass, Burleigh, Morton, Ramsey, Rolette, and Ward) in State or county foster care during the project period
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Family Engagement for Native American Youth: Final Report</i> (http://go.usa.gov/x8RqF) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Appendices (http://go.usa.gov/x8R3W) ▪ “Site Visit: Technology Promotes Project Knowledge, Implementation” (https://go.usa.gov/xX5tb) ▪ “FGDM Evaluation at The Village Family Service Center” (http://ow.ly/wc2r30apjNx)

State	New Jersey
Project Title	Kinship Family Group Decision-Making Program
Lead Agency	The Children's Home Society of New Jersey
Target Population	Kinship families who do not currently have open cases in the State child welfare system but who care for children at risk of entering or reentering the child welfare system
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Kinship Family Group Decision-Making: Final Report</i> (http://go.usa.gov/x8Rck) ▪ <i>Site Visit Report: The Children's Home Society of New Jersey Kinship Connections Program</i> (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/funding/funding-sources/federal-funding/cb-funding/cbreports/fgdm/)
State	Utah
Project Title	Implementing Family Group Decision-Making to Improve Child Well-Being
Lead Agency	Ute Indian Tribe
Target Population	Native American families of the Ute Indian Tribe who have been referred to the Tribe's social services department due to possible child abuse or neglect

Recently Awarded FGDM Grants

In 2015, the Children's Bureau awarded three 3-year awards through a new discretionary grant cluster titled Building the Evidence for Family Group Decision-Making in Child Welfare (HHS-2015-ACF-ACYF-CF-1008). To view the funding opportunity announcement, visit <https://go.usa.gov/xXNcT>. These grantees will collaborate and use common data sources and assessments.

To view information and resources about Children's Bureau discretionary grants, visit the Discretionary Grants Library at https://library.childwelfare.gov/cbgrants/ws/library/docs/cb_grants/GrantHome.

Additional Resources

Below is a list of additional resources to

- Child Welfare Information Gateway
 - Family-Centered Practice: Family Group Decision-Making (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/famcentered/decisions/>)
- National Center on Family Group Decision-Making (<http://ow.ly/KrYC30apHsf>)

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