

Family Group Decision Making is an innovative model being implemented in Armstrong County as well as the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that encourages system reform in working with children and their families. The model expands the involvement of immediate family members, extended kin, support persons and communities in planning for child safety, permanency and well-being. The model is helpful in; increasing safety for children and families, engaging families and communities in the helping process, resolving concerns, strengthening families, building independence, creating an attitude of hope for families and helping professionals and avoiding worker burnout.

Mission and Purpose

Armstrong County's Family Group Decision Making practice and philosophy is a strength-based, family-centered, child-focused and culturally sensitive approach. It is based on the belief that the best care, planning and protection for youth and children can be achieved when the positive aspects and strengths of the families are aligned with community and human service agencies. This partnership supports the family and facilitates their planning for the safety, care and protection of youth, children and the community.

The purpose of Family Group Decision Making is to offer a practice in which families plan for themselves. Our objective is to have a family meeting, not an agency meeting. This objective is met by creating an environment where the family has the opportunity to:

- Be strengthened
- Be empowered
- Receive customized services
- Minimize trauma and maximize healing
- Increase and improve their options
- Identify, build-upon and utilize their family resources
- Balance the power between "authorities" and family/community members
- Utilize their own expertise in developing their plans

Values and Beliefs

- Families have strengths and can change
- Strengths are what ultimately resolve concerns
- Strengths are discovered through listening, noticing and paying attention to people
- Strengths are enhanced when they are acknowledged and encouraged
- People gain a sense of hope when they feel someone has really listened to them
- Options are preferable to advice

- Empowering people is preferable to controlling them
- A consultant is more helpful to people than a boss

Why FGDM Works

- People are actively valued
- Worker is no longer the problem finder/advice giver
- Communicates in a language of "concerns" versus "problems"
- Strengthens families by harnessing their commitment, wisdom and responsibility to protect children and insure well-being
- Counter isolation of at-risk families
- Better informed plans because of family knowledge and expertise about themselves
- Enhances family's feeling of security, belonging, respect and understanding
- Simple and easy to understand
- Encourages collaboration between service providers working with the family
- Provides a "similar" language between family and agencies and among service providers from different agencies
- Decreases burden on service providers and balances power
- Creates an opportunity for families to realize their potential in caring for their children
- Increases investment and ownership decisions

The Meeting

The actual Family Group Decision meeting focuses on establishing a safe environment which facilitates honest and open communication among participants. The meeting begins with ground rules, introductions, including an explanation of each participant's connection to the family. The purpose of the meeting is then discussed and consensus is reached.

What Happens At an FGDM Meeting

- Introduction: Greetings, family traditions, guide lines and purpose are discussed
- Information Sharing: Everyone is given the opportunity to ask questions and share information
- Private Family Time: All service providers leave and the family develops their own plan aimed at serving the best interest of the child
- Presentation of the Plan: The entire group comes together again and the family presents their plan, which may be strengthened as needed

What Happens After an FGDM Meeting

- The plan is distributed to attendees
- Those identified in the plan follow through with their commitments.
- All those involved will monitor the plan's progress
- Follow-up meetings, if needed, are scheduled to review progress on the plan and make

any needed changes

Family Group Decision Making is provided in Armstrong County as a collaborative effort between Armstrong County Children, Youth and Family Services and Holy Family Social Services.

Cross-System Use of FGC

In Armstrong County, we believe that it is essential to utilize the FGDM philosophy and practice from a cross-system perspective. Here are just a few systems that are taking a close look at when FGDM works best in their day-to-day practice with families:

Child Welfare

- To keep children safely at home
- To return a child safely from foster care
- To identify the best placement for children
- To identify the best permanent plan for children
- To help stabilize a troubled placement

Juvenile Justice

- To plan for a juvenile who has admitted to the offense or been found guilty of the offence
- To plan for a juvenile at the Court/Intake level
- To plan for a juvenile who is under supervision
- To return a juvenile safely from placement

Schools

- To resolve disruptive behavior
- To help students succeed in school
- To resolve concerns of suspension and expulsion

MH/MR

- To resolve disruptive behavior
- To help youth remain in the community
- To more fully involve the family in treatment
- To reduce issues of isolation, secrecy or stigma and rather mobilize community involvement

Drug and Alcohol Services

- To reduce issues of secrecy
- To minimize family isolation
- To involve community/family in recovery
- To help families in their own recovery
- To invite open and honest communication regarding addictions

Faith-Based Services

- To utilize the strengths of the Faith-Based community
- To acknowledge the positive role faith can play in healing a family
- To strengthen the fabric of the family
- To honor the family's culture and heritage