Convening family group conferences: Coordinators talk about professional issues

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Introduction

In the past 20 years the notion of involving family in the processes of child protection decision-making has generated momentum inter-nationally. Models of practice that include family participation have become increasingly popular worldwide and the Family Group Conference (FGC) model, which originated in Aotearoa New Zealand, has been particularly influential. Family group conferencing has now been mainstream practice in New Zealand for 15 years. However, research into care and protection family group conferencing has been slow to develop. While writers have offered critiques of the model and much has been written supporting its potential, relatively little research has been undertaken in New Zealand to explore issues relating to practice.

Care and protection coordinators have been convening family group conferences in Aotearoa New Zealand for 15 years. While child care and protection legislation has changed minimally during that time, the context within which practice occurs has changed a great deal. For example, modern child protection practice exists in an increasingly complex environment, with dramatic increases in child protection notifications, staff recruitment and retention difficulties (Ministry of Social Development, et al., 2003), and more demanding casework pressure including increased exposure to violence (Beddoe, Appleton and Maher, 1998; 1999). Inevitably, this changing context impacts on all areas of the child protection system. In this research, Care and Protection Coordinators who have been convening Family Group Conferences (FGCs) since the early years of the legislation talk about their experiences and the issues that impact on their practice within this modern environment. In particular, the research focuses on issues relating to the changing nature of the coordinating role within the child protection system, and professional issues such as supervision, training and registration.

Method

The research was undertaken with Care and Protection Coordinators employed by the New Zealand Department of Child Youth and Family Services (CYFS). Coordinators have the responsibility to convene an FGC when a child is assessed as being in need of care and/or protection. Over 50,000 FGCs have been convened since the introduction of the Children Young
Persons and their Families Act in 1989, and there are currently 46 Care and Protection Coordinators practising across the country. Of this group, 28% were appointed during the period 1989-1993, giving them at least 10 years’ experience in the role. Ten of the coordinators who were employed during this period were invited and agreed to participate in the research. The respondents came from urban and rural centres across New Zealand.

In semi-structured interviews, coordinators were encouraged to talk about their experiences of coordinating conferences over time, and to reflect on any changes in role or practice. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed into textual data for accuracy and ease of analysis. The analysis was influenced by Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory approach, and a model of thematic analysis that was drawn from this work (Connolly, 2003). The research was approved by the Human Ethics Committee at the University of Canterbury, and by the Research Access Committee at the Department of Child Youth and Family Services.

Findings

The findings are reported across four general themes:

- Coordinating conferences in the modern context
- Professional support systems
- The role of the coordinator in contemporary practice
- Training, qualifications, and registration.

Coordinating conferences in the modern context

In contrasting their experiences of convening conferences over time, many spoke of increased violence as characteristic of the modern FGC. Increased levels of anger were identified as contributing factors:

Coord: I really believe there are a lot more angry people out there. On three different occasions I have actually had the Police search people prior to going to an FGC. Now I would never have thought about that a few years ago.

In some offices this has created a need to increase security:

Coord: Something we didn’t have 15 years ago, we are more likely to have security guards now if there are risk factors identified – the social worker being threatened verbally or physically – then we are more likely to have a security guard.

In the early years of the legislation, FGCs were commonly held at community venues, or in the home of family. Now, however, FGCs are often held in CYFS offices. While there are many reasons for this – convenience, neutrality and better use of staff time (Connolly, 2004) – safety was also identified as a significant factor. Coordinators also talked about safety strategies within the FGC:

Coord: I do tell staff that if they feel that people are becoming irrationally excited, that they should back off and just not answer their questions – to just sit there and don’t make eye contact with them. Avoid eye contact. And if I’m really concerned I stand up in between either the social worker and the client, so that they can’t make eye contact with them. Generally if you don’t confront people they will just go on, but they don’t get to the point where they actually start to hit people. If the social worker keeps on giving the information, then you know you really are asking for trouble.

Modern stressors also included feeling like you have to ‘fill in the gaps’ when a social worker doesn’t have sufficient information or is unaware of issues relating to the investigation. In particular, this is when staff changes has resulted in a new social worker taking over from the investigating worker. This was identified as a significant difficulty in offices that experienced high staff turnover:

Coord: It can be as many as three social workers. Or you will get a referral and somebody has been pushed to get the referral in before they leave, and then a new person has to pick it up.

This was seen to also have the capacity to impact on the client’s perception of the service:

Coord: It is very difficult for families to have faith in the agency when there is this major revolving door going on… you know they all say the same thing. It’s so disruptive.
Perhaps not surprisingly, coordinators talked about the tensions and difficulties relating to resourcing and, in particular, the resourcing of the FGC plan. Many of the coordinators indicated that reduced funding to convene conferences (or bringing people to the meeting) had not been problematic. Most said that if they had a reasonable case for funding, it was likely to be approved. However, the funding of FGC decisions and plans did create difficulties for them:

Coord: Early on there was a bit of funding for creative ideas. Now it’s very limited funding. We are saying to families, OK that’s a great idea, why don’t you just think about getting some resources yourself and doing it.

On the positive side, notwithstanding modern pressures, many viewed the coordinator role as one of the best in the service. Coordinators talked with enthusiasm about working with innovative legislation, an enthusiasm that had not diminished over time:

Coord: I still strongly believe in this process... When we get a good range of family together, and we get professionals who are respectful of the process and sharing information, and the families feel they have actually got decisions to make and their decisions have weight – it’s just great.

Professional support systems
Established systems of supervision tend to vary across the country for coordinators. Some have a professional supervisor from within CYFS (there are two such supervisors across New Zealand), others report to a manager who has wider office responsibilities. Coordinators who received professional supervision from one of the two supervisors considered themselves to be most fortunate. They did, however, express concern that in the current climate if these supervisory positions became vacant they may not be replaced. The coordinators reporting to the general manager indicated that they were largely ‘self-managing’.

When the legislation was first introduced, the establishment of the Care and Protection Resource Panels also served as a system of support for coordinators. Some coordinators noted that this was still the case:

Coord: We have a really good discussion. Not necessarily advice, but lots of good discussion, and lots of laughter. Actually its really good, its good therapy.

Others questioned the purpose of the consultation:

Coord: From the point of view of the FGC, I would have to say that I don’t know why they (the panel) are there really... it’s just a process that you go through because it’s required by the legislation.

In general, coordinators found the panel to be a good support system for them, but not necessarily useful in a consultative sense.

Coordinators talked about informal systems of support that were established when the legislation was first in place:

Coord: …we set up a monthly association and kept minutes and all the rest of it. I think we reported back to the Regional Manager, rather than the site manager ... we set up national delegates who met on a quarterly basis with National Office in the morning, and the Commissioner for Children in the afternoon. Now those things have gone and the place of coordinator has sort of slid down the fire pole.

This ‘sliding down the fire pole’ has impacted on coordinators in a number of areas, and in particular with respect to the coordinator’s role.

The role of the coordinator in contemporary practice
In 1989 when the Children Young Persons and their Families Act was introduced, coordinators were appointed to senior positions – senior to the senior social worker. In this position coordinators often had wider responsibilities relating to office management. However, over time the role of the coordinator has been more narrowly confined to convening conferences only. In addition, salary re-gradings have changed the status and positioning of coordinators within the structure of the organisation. Respondents noted that these changes had had the effect of undermining their status with respect to management. This has affected how some coordinators operate:
Coord: I think that it’s a job where experience unfortunately doesn’t seem to be particularly valued and so over the years I’ve just found myself putting my head down and getting on with what I’m doing…

Over time, institutional memory relating to the coordinator role had dimmed, and according to one respondent, the coordinators were not using the guidelines to improve their situation:

Coord: …there is a whole lot of stuff there about the coordinators and their role... We were to establish a supervision relationship for ourselves. We were to ensure that we were part of the management team. We were to establish our relationship with panels... most managers – and coordinators for that matter – have no concept of that. As a professional group we tend not to read our own guidelines, and as a consequence there is just so much that has been forgotten.

Many coordinators expressed support for the appointment of the National Manager of Coordinators. As a member of the CYFS Executive Management Team, the National Manager gives coordinators a voice ‘higher up the totem pole’. This was viewed as a very positive development.

Coordinators were divided on how they saw their role. Some believed strongly that the role was one of mediation:

Coord: …you still need a good knowledge of care and protection, which is part of the social work role, but our actual role is facilitation and mediation. That’s quite different from social work.

Others were strongly of the opinion that the coordinating role was primarily a social work role. Opinions about role, and whether the coordinator thought that it was a social work role, a mediation role, or a mix of the two, impacted on how they viewed registration under the Registration of Social Workers Act (2003).

**Training, qualifications and registration**

Respondents who were strongly of the opinion that the coordinating role was primarily a social work role, also felt strongly about being registered:

Coord: I’m hugely of the view that if we were not registered... I think we would lose credibility, in terms of knowledge – and being looked to for that... It would take away even more.

Respondents also related the question of registration to coordinator status:

Coord: Well, they could not be registered, and I would see that as being very negative because it would contribute to that overall degrading in the status – coordinator status – and somehow that status has to be lifted.

However, if the coordinator role was seen to be primarily a mediator role, then the question of registration seemed to be less significant:

Coord: I don’t really care whether I’m being registered or not. But I’m not interested in doing the ‘B level’.

This raises issues relating to qualification, and whether social work qualifications were considered to be important:

Coord: I can’t see much point in coordinators being expected to have a social work level B because it’s not a social work job really. So it needs to be something quite separate...

A number of the coordinators identified training as an important issue for them. While they had access to more general in-house training, which was seen to be useful, there has been little specific training for family group practice. The notion of the coordinator role needing a different type of training was raised as a training issue:

Coord: …it’s all about facilitation and mediation. I’m enrolled to do a paper this year about facilitation and mediation, but the Department wouldn’t pay for it because it wasn’t part of social work. Yet it’s totally in line with what we do.

While a number of coordinators noted the need for more training that suited their needs, a number also commented on the value of the intensive training they received when they first took on the role. Most had been working in the organisation when the legislation was first introduced, and felt that the training at the beginning had stood them in good stead over the years. The same intensity of training, of course, has not been available for coordinators who have been more recently appointed.
Conclusion

In the 15 years since the position of Care and Protection Coordinator was established, changes have occurred that have impacted on how the role is undertaken. We have yet to see how the new Social Workers Registration Act (2003) will impact on the range of practice positions within child protection. The Care and Protection Coordinator role creates interesting issues for registration, and there will no doubt be debate about how these will be resolved. Within this study, there is divided opinion about the nature of the coordinating role, and whether it needs to be registered under the legislation. But, however, the debate unfolds, perhaps more important is the need to ensure that workers are provided with appropriate training that meets the unique requirements of their role.

Like all child protection work, the practice of Care and Protection Coordinators exists in a changing environment. The complexity of the work has increased, and it is important that professional support systems keep pace with contemporary needs. The pressure and tensions that exist in practice inevitably create issues for people working with families – and this is the case whether you work in the child protection frontline, or within the context of family group conferencing. Best practice in child protection work requires an organisational infrastructure of supervision and monitoring. Processing of difficult or fraught family practice encounters is important for safe practice, and while Care and Protection Resource Panels can provide some outlet for this, it is not their primary function. While some coordinators in practice receive supervision, many are self-managing. This means that they are positioned outside professional supervision and monitoring systems. While the coordinators in this study are senior practitioners, highly experienced and confident in their role, this will not always be the case. Nor does experience necessarily protect a worker from common practice dangers – collusion, power entanglements and over-identification. Providing systems of supervision and monitoring can go some way toward addressing these.

References