

Summary of the Finnish research / Sarianna Reinikainen 2.4.2007

1 Research material:

		1st Family Group Conference		1st follow-up meeting		1 year later
	1. interview	Observation	2. interview	observation	3. interview	4. interview
Child 1	x		x	x		x
Child 2	x	X	x	x	x	x
Child 3	x	X	x	x	x	
Child 4	x	X	x	x	x	
Child 5	x	(network meeting)	x	---		
Child 6	x	X	x	(cancelled)	x	
Child 7	x	X	x	(cancelled)	x	

All observations included all the phases in the meetings.

In addition to the interviews and observations, research material consisted of written documents produced during the processes: summaries by professionals (2–5 for each meeting), questions by social workers (one set of questions for each meeting) and plans (a plan from each meeting).

2 Experiences of data producing:

Interviews

As a basis for and an idea behind interview discussion, *Recalling the future* -method functioned well. The method's three main questions as well as my own specifying questions encouraged children and young people to tell about their situation, their worries and their wishes for change. Especially the younger children appeared to enjoy the way their things were discussed through the method. However, for some young people speaking about their situation as lived here and now may be more natural. For example, with one young person the method functioned as an activator of discussion, and he described his good future without an effort (though shortly to the point). After that he shifted to talk about his situation from today's perspective, bringing anyhow clearly forth what he felt as difficult and what he wished to change. With him it didn't seem functional to stick to the method's original idea.

The second part of interviews, the one that concerned FGC as a method and for which a bunch of questions were defined, didn't inspire children and young people as much as talking about their own things. Also, at times it was obviously difficult for them to understand questions. It seemed important to keep questions open and present them in an unstructured way to make conversation also concerning the meaning of questions (concepts used) easy. Also, under many questions it was obvious that children and young people thought over, analyzed and verbalized their views and

experiences for the first time. Also for that reason giving an answer wasn't always easy for them and they didn't necessarily feel analyzing their views or experiences as useful or interesting either.

Observations

While making interviews and observing the meetings I got to realize that even though interviews were principal and essential as hearing children's and young people's views and experiences, with some of them observation offered such information that hadn't come forth or of which I'd got a different impression in their interviews. With some children and young people observations thus completed the picture of their views I'd formed by interviews, while with some children and young people different forms of data "challenged" each other.

Stories – written by using each child's own way of speaking in I/me (the child/young person) –form

Children's and young people's "own stories" functioned as:

- 1) A part of producing data and at the same time a way of validating researcher's interpretations with children and young people themselves
- 2) A part of analysis
- 3) A way of including children and young people more actively in the research process

The method of constructing stories for and with children and young people was an essential part of the research process, and it helped in empathizing with children's and young people's situations.

Discussions around the stories were also a good start in each follow-up interview as they oriented children and young people to talk about their thoughts and possible changes in their situations.

Reliability of the research (interpretations) increased considerably through discussions around the stories.

3 Results:

1 Changes in children's situations

In the situations of all children and young people changes had happened during the follow-up of the research. Except for one child, their experiences of their situations as a whole were better than it had been before the first FGC. This showed also in their "variables" (in numbers). Among variables there were also things that were not subjects for the FGC and to which children and young people didn't expect the FGC to affect. Changes for better happened in many of these variables too, which is delightful as such and may also show how positive effects of the FGC -process may extend comprehensively to different life areas.

Except for one child, children and young people didn't have many or too big worries or wishes for change after the follow-up of the research. One way or another, solutions had been found to their previous, central worries, things had improved, and they considered situation both at home, in school and with friend-relations better than before the first FGC. They were disposed confidently towards the future as well as the realization of the plan, with a little, realistic reservation, though.

As children's and young people's worries had lessened, it's reasonable to believe that the worries of social workers (child protection) had as well lessened in each case. In the follow-up meetings social workers and other professionals saw worrying situations as having calmed down, and they seemed to have rather confident belief in positive progress (summaries for follow-up meetings, observations). Some of them told, though, that they had had only a minor contact with the family during the follow-up time, so to some extent the idea behind their views was "no news, good news".

For some children and young people it was difficult to estimate the significance of FGC (FGC's role) in changes in their lives. Primarily they saw that those changes had happened because people concerned had changed their behavior, and they didn't see the FGC having had any big role as an activator of the changes. They didn't feel that the process had had any remarkable effect on their own behavior either. The other young people instead gave a lot of credit to the FGC. They believed that without FGC positive changes might possible not have happened, not at least to same extent. They saw that the FGC-process had affected all participants and made everyone to try her/his best to improve the situation, including her/himself. From the researcher's perspective, as each process was looked at through all the data available, the significance of FGC showed central and somewhat more important than from the children's or young people's perspective.

2 The children's experiences of the process

A dialogical process and an atmosphere of caring

The central conclusion from the study is, that a child's or a young person's experience in the FGC-process – its significance both in the short run, as a working method, and in the long run, as an activator of changes – is strongly affected by *how and to what extent s/he feels the process dialogical or non-dialogical* and *what kind of an atmosphere there is created in the meetings*. The experience of a dialogical proceeding and the experience of an atmosphere of caring are connected to each other: the atmosphere of caring creates grounds for a dialogical proceeding, and a dialogical approach strengthens the atmosphere of caring (see also Haverinen & Martikainen 2004). The same thing can be said in other words: if a child or a young person gets a feeling that s/he is primarily a source of joy to her/his close people and an important person to professionals working with her/him

(through an atmosphere of caring), and if s/he feels her/himself genuinely party in the process (through a dialogical proceeding), s/he also experiences the process as empowering and significant. If, instead, a child or a young person gets a feeling that s/he is primarily a subject of worry to her/his close people and a task to professionals working with her/him, and if s/he feels as left aside in the process, s/he also experiences the process as frustrating and insignificant.

About the close people

All children and young people felt the inclusion of their close people as welcome and good thing, and in principal they were content with their contribution in the meetings. However, sometimes they considered the way one or many of those close people treated them as annoying or frustrating. In principal the *young people* felt that their close people listened to them, were interested in their views and took those views seriously. In some matters, though, they felt as left alone against the whole adult team so that no-one understood their views or took their suggestions seriously. Talking about her/his own and the family's matters with the close people wasn't difficult in young people's opinion, but at times it was heavy. Some young people felt that talking in the follow-up meeting was somewhat easier than it was in the first FGC.

About the helper

Children's and young people's experiences concerning their helpers varied a lot. One child didn't know after the FGC who his helper had been, and thus he hadn't felt the helper as significant either. Some children and young people felt that the helper hadn't really helped her/him in the meeting. When the helper didn't know about the child's or the young person's own worries and wishes for change, she couldn't make sure that those worries and wishes would come to be discussed in the meeting. In these cases the helper, as a close person to the family (a parent), participated actively but hadn't mentally placed herself by the child's side nor tried to understand the situation particularly from the child's perspective. For the other children and young people instead, the helper was a great support and spokesman during the entire FGC. In these cases the helper stayed beside the child or the young person both concretely, sitting next to and consulting her/him, and figuratively, looking at the situation from her/his point of view.

About children and young people themselves

Although all children and young people didn't participate actively in discussions, in all meetings they were in central position in creating atmosphere. The younger *children* showed both by their presence and by their concrete behavior that the adults participating in the meeting were important and close to them. Even when feeling tired during the long and heavy meeting, they tried to get

attention from adults and maintain positive atmosphere. Also young people showed by their talk and by their presence that the family and close people are important to them. Mostly they participated in discussions in a conciliatory way and wishing understanding from the adult participants both for themselves and for each other. They themselves showed active readiness to work a lot for the common good.

About the preparation phase

All children and young people had strong views and opinions concerning their own and the family's situation, but they were clearly aware of their subordinate position in a process guided and led by adults. The younger *children's* conception of proceeding in the preparation phase as well as of the matters to be resolved in FGC was weak. Their experience of being part in the process was nearly zero. *Young people* instead felt as having been part in the preparation phase either to some extent or strongly, but they saw their position in the forthcoming FGC -meeting a little insecure and depending on adults' will. They wished that in FGC things would finally be thoroughly discussed and that also their views would have weight. Nevertheless they saw that eventually it was adults that had authority concerning matters.

Children's and young people's experiences of being part were connected to age and sex/gender. As a simplification it may be said, that *young women* experienced the preparation phase as a fairly dialogical process. They felt as being centrally part when agreeing on having a FGC in the first place, when agreeing on most central worries to be discussed, and when deciding about which close people and professionals were to be invited. They were hopeful and optimistic while waiting for the forthcoming FGC and saw themselves as a main character in the meeting. The other of them, though, didn't totally trust her possibilities to influence, which was based on her previous experiences in child protection proceedings.

The *young men*, instead, didn't exactly experience the preparation phase as dialogical. The other would have liked to be more involved, but he felt as if the adults had kept things between themselves and that he had been left aside. He had participated in making decisions about certain things or accepted suggestions made by adults, but he didn't have the feeling of being genuinely included in the process. The other had opted out from preparations on his own account, because yet in the preparation phase he didn't consider having a FGC as necessary, and he had a predominantly indifferent attitude towards it. Is it possibly so, that young men don't as easily as young women seek their way to discussions and give a possibility for a dialogical relationship with professionals (social workers) or co-ordinators, or even withdraw from those discussions willing to thus prove their

autonomy in the family and independence from child protection? Or is it so, that young men's way of talk and express their views makes it more difficult for female workers to create a dialogical relationship with them?

The younger *children* were not involved in agreeing on worries or questions, but they got to participate in deciding about which close people were to be invited and also they got to choose their own meals and drinks for the meeting. They hadn't formed any clear conception of what the FGC was about and what was to come ahead, and they didn't exactly see themselves having any particular role in the process. In the interviews children anyhow expressed strong views concerning different matters and told about expectations they had for FGC. In the interviews I got an impression that they would have been ready and willing for a dialogical relationship with adults in the process, but they were not invited to such relationship.

About the meeting

In principal the *young people* felt that FGC was close to what they had expected and a good way to seek for a solution in their situation. In their opinion the results of FGC were more remarkable and more concrete than in the previous meetings arranged by child protection or in the previous close people's efforts to help/interfere. The young people's and their families' situations, things that caused worry, were discussed more profoundly and more openly than before. Some things were discussed in the FGC for the first time so that all concerned were present at the same time and had a possibility to express their views concerning events and situations. The central subjects in the meetings were very important and essential from the *young people's* point of view too. In younger *children's* opinion, instead, the meetings were useless and the plan proved insignificant. In discussions they were left totally aside.

Children's and young people's unanimous critic towards FGC concerned its length. Young people thought that meetings would keep shorter if only the essential subjects were discussed and less important things left out of discussion. Most important to them was, however, that those essential subjects were discussed properly, so from their point of view the length and tiresomeness of meetings was a minor disadvantage compared to its advantages.

Children and young people were very different in how actively, courageously and spontaneously they brought their views, worries and wishes forth in meetings. Also their own experience concerning their participation in discussions and in making a plan varied from total non-participation to determined, active participation. As in the preparation phase, also in the meetings

children's and young people's experiences concerning participation were connected to age and sex/gender.

The *young women* were very active and determined in bringing forth and defending their views. They participated centrally in the discussion and in making the plan, not less than any adult participant in the meeting. They felt as being responsible and capable of assessing what was essential concerning their well-being in the situation. They also brought their views strongly forth with credible argumentation. The *young men*, instead, were clearly more quiet but participated at times, especially as requested, when something was asked from them. To some extent they participated also spontaneously in the discussion. In the interviews they indicated to consider themselves as responsible and capable of assessing their own good as the young women did, but in the meetings they didn't bring their views as actively and determinedly forth. Does the private meeting easily proceed under the same terms as the preparation phase, so that young men, as more unpracticed to verbal expression, with slower and more "searching" way of speaking, easily stay aside in discussions? The younger *children* participated in the meetings only a little if at all. They themselves didn't actively try to participate in discussions, and they were neither particularly persuaded to it by adults.

3 The realization of a child perspective

Definition (see above)

A child perspective is realized in a *process*, when concerned adults create a dialogical relationship with a child/young person and when an atmosphere of caring prevails in encounters with adults and children or young people. A child perspective realizes in a *FGC (meeting)*, when the meeting proceeds on terms of a child/young person too, when the meeting's sentiment is warm, and when the discussion with a child/young person is constructive and negotiative. Then a child/young person feels the atmosphere around her/him as caring and the discussion as dialogical.

About professional talk

From an adult perspective majority of summaries and questions had been written mainly in everyday language and with mentions concerning concrete, "behind interpretations" things too. However, a part of concepts and expressions, the ones possibly established in professional use, were strange for children and young people. Some concepts were also so general, that children and young people didn't understand what they meant in her/his situation. At times also some adults from the private network didn't quite understand what professionals were worried about and what kind of

solutions were sought for. Some concepts, as not explained concretely, remained too distant to make the private network see them relevant.

One important question arisen in this study concerns the way professionals – their summaries – draw a picture from a child/young person, the kind of a mirror professionals offer to her/him. In this study some of the summaries reflected a picture that was burdened by worries and difficulties and gave a depressing image of the child. It seemed that the influence of negative characterizations to a child's emotions and self-concept hadn't been taken into account. Is presentation of this kind of summaries a conscious choice or does it show some lack of judgment? At least it's not founded on a view by which showing trust and seeking for strengths creates more fruitful grounds for empowerment and building on resources than emphasizing (seeing only?) worries and deficiencies.

About hearing children's views and taking those into account

Professionals' **summaries** were very different in how children's and young people's own views concerning adults' worries or their own worries and wishes (brought forth in interviews) showed in them. As a simplification it may be said, that the *young people's* views, worries and wishes showed well in summaries, whereas younger *children's* views, worries and wishes showed very little if at all.

One common concern for children and young people in this study was their close people's mutual relations. Wishes they had didn't concern only (divorced) parents' mutual relationship but also relationships between a parent or parents and other relatives. However, in FGCs close people's relations were never among subjects to be discussed and resolved. Didn't social workers know about quarrelsome or hostile relations between adults and how a child/young person felt about that? Is concentration on a child's/young person's situation understood so that only matters concerning her/his care and bilateral relationships with adults close to her/him are seen as important, that adults' mutual relationships are seen as secondary regarding a child's/young person's wellbeing? Or is it so, that in FGC (or generally in child protection) adults' mutual relationships are seen too difficult to even bring up?

If a child's/young person's clienthood in child protection before FGC has been dialogical, and if (s)he has taken centrally part in identifying and defining reasons for clienthood as well as today's worries, social worker's **questions** concern more probably matters that are important also from a child's/young person's point of view. In this study the *young people* felt like having participated in thinking about questions. They were rather content with the questions, because those focused on

matters that they considered important. The younger *children* instead understood the questions in their own way, not always in the way the social worker had meant. One of them didn't see most of the questions as relevant, because in his opinion the matters the questions focused on were fine already, and because he didn't quite understand all the questions.

The *young people* were quite happy about the **plans** made in FGCs. They felt as having participated in making the plan inconstantly, but rather a lot than a little. Profound discussions and hearing different point of views presented by close people in the private meeting helped them to approve even those decisions they had opposed in the beginning. In some meetings it seemed, that it was easier for a young person to listen to other close people than her/his parents. When the person who took a stand concerning a matter was someone the young person appreciated, outside the immediate family, (s)he could let go her/his wish that (s)he had previously stuck to, and give a chance for other possible solutions. For younger *children* instead the plan made in FGC didn't have much significance. They hadn't taken part in making the plan, (so) in their opinion agreements written down in the plan as well as following the plan wasn't important. One of them didn't even know why the plan had been made.

About close people's contribution

In all FGCs in this study, children's and young people's close people seemed to genuinely strive to show their caring and find the best solutions in a child's or a young person's situation. In meetings they mostly tried to create a positive, forward-looking atmosphere. Children's and young people's matters were discussed seriously, concretely and without hurry, and the general way of talking about children and young people was warm and appreciative. The young people were shown that their views are important, even though their views didn't always influence decisions. Close people also offered their concrete support for children and young people – closer contact and communication including ideas of doing something nice together. In principal the *young people* thought, that close people's (outside immediate family) contribution to discussions and to making a plan was remarkable, and they were mainly content with and sometimes also surprised about close people's active participation. In some meetings, however, while *caring* about a child or a young person was obvious, it didn't always show as an atmosphere of caring to her/him. In these situations children and young people didn't feel themselves comfortable or discussions as dialogical.

In many FGCs close people's importance as mediators appeared to be significant. Whether reasons for (or consequences of) problems was a conflict between a young person and her/his parent or a conflict between divorced parents, close people's involvement in thinking of solutions clarified and

calmed conversation. Close people reasoned with quarrelling parties, and the parties were able to accept that feedback – both criticism and understanding. In these meetings close people talked to the parties courageously, "straight" and as equal, referring for example to their own experiences as a mother or a father. The *young people* were seen both as members of their families and as individuals with their own independent future. In many meetings close people strived to support young people by encouraging their autonomy and independence from their parents' situation.

In many meetings one central element in creating atmosphere of caring and sense of community, was humor. Humor was used to break tension and ease feel, and by humor connection was created also between quarrelling parties. Humor was used by both adults – parents and other close people – and children and young people. It came along in discussion mainly in private meetings, when participants were more relaxed than when professionals were present, but also in the phases of information giving and presentation of the plan someone might lighten the discussion by humor.