

# Family group conferences:

A report on Family group conference research  
which took place in Iceland, and is part of a nordic  
research on the child perspective

Freydís Jóna Freysteinsdóttir (MSW, PhD)  
and Hervör Alma Árnadóttir (MSW)  
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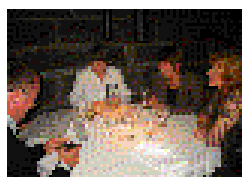
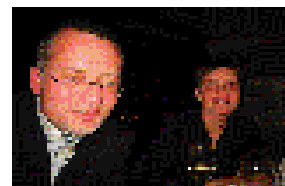
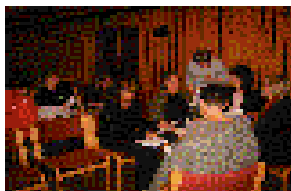
## Introduction

In 2004 the social services in Reykjavík, Iceland joined with the other Nordic countries and participated in Family group conferences research on the child's perspective. A training took place in Reykjavík in the fall the same year, with Eva Naslund and Matz Erkers from Sweden as coordinators. Between 20 and 30 persons received training as FGC workers and five as FGC coordinators. A training manual was translated from Swedish to Icelandic and a brochure was created to introduce the method.

One of the authors of this report, Freydís Jóna Freysteinsdóttir assistant professor in social work at the University of Iceland was asked to conduct this study. Freydís was in a position that was financed by the Social Services in Reykjavík for five years. Similarly to the other Nordic countries, it was planned to include 10 children in the study and conduct four interviews with each of them. An MSW student in Social Work and the other author of this report, Hevör Alma Árnadóttir took the interviews with the first three children and observed the Family group conferences meetings with these families and used the data from the first two interviews with each child and the Family group conferences meetings, for her MSW thesis which she completed in 2006. Freydís was Alma's instructor. Unfortunately, the cases turned out to be only three instead of ten for some reasons.

All the nordic countries used the same guidelines for the interviews and the observations. The reserach questions were the the following: a) How did the children experience FGC? b) How did the children experience FGC as a method/process? c) How if does the FGC method function in practice? In this report, the method and process of the study is only described briefly. The description is based on Alma's master's thesis:

Hervör Alma Árnadóttir. (2006). *Vill einhver hlusta á mig? Rannsókn á fjölskyldusamráði frá sjónarhorni barna*. [Does anyone want to listen to me? A study on family group conference from the child persepective]. Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands. [University of Iceland].



## Method

Three children in the child protection services in Reykjavík, Iceland, were interviewed. The interviews took place in the children's home. Four interviews were taken with each child. The first interview took place within one week before the family group conference meeting. The second interview took place within a month following the family group conference meeting. The third interview took place within one month following the follow up meeting. The fourth interview took place approximately one year from the family group conference meeting (table 1).

Table 1.

Case	First interv.	FGC meeting	Second interv.	Follow up meeting	Third interv.	Fourth interv.
1	Oct. 2005	Nov. 2005	Dec. 2005	Dec. 2005	Feb. 2006	Feb. 2007
2	Jan. 2006	Jan. 2006	Mar. 2006	Mar. 2006	Mai 2006	Apr. 2007
3	Mar.2006	Apr. 2006	May 2006	May 2006	Sep. 2006	May 2007

In the first interview the children were asked to describe their situation, their wishes for the future and what they hoped would change following the family group conference meetings. In the second interview, the children were asked how they had experienced the family group conference meeting. In the third interview, the children were asked how they experienced the follow up meeting. Finally, in the fourth interview the children were asked about changes in their life during the year since the first family group conference meeting took place. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer.

Observations were made during the family group conference meetings. In the meetings, the child's participation was observed specifically and coded. Including how people at the meeting talked to the child and how the child responded to others both verbally and nonverbally.

Extensive guidelines for the interviews (interview questions) were translated for each interview and used in the interviews. Also, general guidelines for the interviewer were translated as well as coding sheets that were used in the interviews, so the children could code specific factors. In addition, an informative agreement were translated, that the parents and the children read and signed.

A permission to conduct this study was received from Persónuvernd (data protection authority) in Iceland and the social services in Reykjavík. There was no previous relationship between the resercher (interviewer and observer) and the children or their families.

## The children's background

The children had either been neglected or showed risk behavior or both. All of them had been involved with child protection services for three or more years. Their cases were all very different from each other. The children were all 13 years old at the time of first interview. One child lived with a foster parent and did not have any siblings. One of the children lived with a mother, a stepfather and three half siblings. The third child lived with both biological parents and a brother that had just come home from a long term treatment home. The relationship with the extended family was rather supportive in two of the families. However one family did not have

any support from their extensive family and in that case, no one from the extended family attended the FGC meeting, but friends and neighbors did.

## **Results**

The results are divided into four chapters. First, the process before the FGC meeting is discussed. Second, the children's experience of the meetings is discussed. Third, the process after the FGC meeting is discussed and finally the view of the children is discussed one year after the FGC meeting.

### **I. The process before the FGC meeting**

The children seemed to have very different views of the child protection services (CPS). One child had a very negative view of CPS, but the other two children had a more positive view of CPS. One child thought that the reason for CPS involvement was troubled communication in the family. Another child thought it was unfair that CPS was involved with the family. One of the children had reported the family to CPS, because it "had had enough":

"I had been having completely enough, I had been having enough for a long time, but I was afraid to call."

### Communication

The children all experienced their conditions as tolerable. They thought however, that the communication with their parents on one hand might be better, and on the other hand with their peers at school. All of the children thought it was more important to improve the communication with their parents than with their friends. It varied among the children, what reason they believed was for negative communication. Among the factors mentioned, were irritability, lack of patience and lack of attention skills, like the following examples demonstrate:

"I am really impatient. I have to get everything now."

"I think the main problem is that I have ADHD. For example if someone throws a wet cloth at me.. I get very irritated...if someone throws crayons at me, I get irritated. Someone is always throwing crayons..."

In one case the communication had been getting better at home:

"We were very irritated at each other [at home]... but that has been getting better the last few months."

The children seemed to want the communication to improve. One child wanted the communication also to be at a deeper level:

“[They should] participate in my studies, participate when I have a broken heart and then maybe talk to me...just be friends, talk with each other, do something together. At least to stand each other. If me and mom go to Kringlan [mall], we are just oooooorrrrr you know. You know what I mean.”

The children were worried about the communication with their teachers. They thought the teachers blamed them when something went wrong:

“The teacher should not discuss my private life, she does not have a clue about my private life.”

### School performance

The children seemed to be worried about their school performance. They thought that their school performance had been going down hill the last school years. They wanted their school performance to improve, but were also thinking about quitting school, when they were finished with their elementary education. Here is a description from one child:

“I am worried about my studies, I have become terrible in school...”

“I will not go to high school...will just work in some store...”

Another child thought that it needed to improve the behavior at school and that the school demands needed to be lower:

“Ummmm, my behavior in school needs to be changed, really just that...don’t know, ummmm, I don’t know, less homework, than I could do something when I am done with my home work. Play soccer.”

The third child really wanted to quit school, or at least wanted to work part time and thought it would help, because the child was very bored in school. However, the child was afraid that it would not be easy to get a job:

“I will never get a job, because I need to give a sheet with information about how I performed in the youth work last summer and it is all bad, bad, bad... I was too lazy to work...I hid the sheet from my dad...I don’t want him to see how bad it was...It was so boring to work there, just terrible to work there...sweap endlessly and pick up endless chickweed that is hart to do.”

### The “wish future”

When the children were asked to imagine their condition/situation in the wish future, the communication at home seemed very important to them, as well as other factors, such as their performance at school. One of the children described the wish future in the following way:

“Everything would be better, you know, my mom and dad would be better friends. Mom would be nicer to me and my older systur and ofcourse the little children and also, I would be doing better at school, I hope, and social life. I don’t have to change that. I am extremely popular there. But ofcourse I would like to have a nice boyfriend and stuff.”

The same child described the communication further with the mother:

“I would have learned to improve my behavior. I am extremely angry with her [mother] and she with me. She get’s angry extremely quickly and we fight every day... I am worried about our mom’s friendship, you should be your mom’s friend.”

Another child talked also about the importance of improving the behavior and the communication with others:

“I would had received an award for good behavior.”

#### Preperation for the FGC meeting

As noted before, the first interview with the child took place a week before the FGC meeting. They described how they had been prepared for the meeting and what they knew about the FGC method. The children did not seem to have been prepared sufficiently. One of the children desribed this in the following way:

“...I have no idea...No, I don’t know what this is about...can we skip this?”

When this child was asked if it had received some information about the method, the child said that it did not remember that it had.

Another child said that it knew little about this, but that the social worker had mentioned it last time the family went to an interview. The child said that it did not like particularly what it heard, but when the child heard that there would be food there, the child was o.k. with it:

“When I heard that there would be food and drink there, I thought it was o.k. I wanted pizza, but I think I would like Subway more.”

The third child said that it did not know a lot, but that the social worker had said that they needed more support and that the social worker was going to try to get someone to help the family, and then suddenly a woman came and was organizing this meeting:

“Very little... very, very little, no one has spoken to me about this. Then suddenly these women came out of the blue, and I knew nothing....I am not thrilled.”

The children’s participation in defining the problem the family was dealing with, and making questions for the FGC meeting seemed to be insufficient. They did not seem

familiar with the questions. One child did not even think that the parents knew about the questions:

“No, I don’t know...I think that mom would tell me if they would be doing something like that. I think they don’t know anything about any questions.”

Another child said that it did not remember well what the questions were about, but that it had been with mother and the social worker when discussing them for the meeting:

“I remember some of them, ..., but not really. I remember what they were build on...no, not the questitons. I have not seen the questions...My and mom do not have a lot of trust, then I would like to write that we needed trust.”

The third child did not have any idea, what was being asked about. The child said that it had not heard anything about, that they should make questions that they would try to answer at the meeting.

All the children knew that a spokelerson would be present at the meeting with them and all of them knew something about the role of the spokelerson:

“Yes, a person that for example if I don’t understand something, then she will explain it to me and I can for example whisper to her something that I want to say.”

“He is supposed to talk for me or something...”

The child did not choose a spokelerson in any case. The parents seemed to have choisen the spokelerson in all cases. One child accepted the parents choice, but was not shure if s/he had chosen another person. Another child was very unsatisfied with the mother’s choice of a spokelerson:

“I do not trust her...I do not accept him...I do not want to have her, I want to have my sister or someone...umm, I don’t want to say that I don’t want to have her, but mom said that she is a little unbiased, but she is more with mom than dad and is moving more towards mom...I don’t trust her.”

The third child said that dad had choisen the spokelerson. This child was very satisfied with the choice and said that this spokelerson would give the family good support and would not betray them:

“...even though he would get a girlfriend, I would still be in touch with us.”

The children did not think they would have a choice about if they should be at the FGC meeting or rnot. One of the children said that s/he had been asked, the other two children did not recalled being asked if they wanted to be at the meeting. All the children were satisfied with the persons who were invided to the meeting. One of the children said that it would not want the mother to come and the mother was not invided.

The children were asked about their view on how they were prepared for the FGC meeting. It seemed that the children had not been much involved in the CPS process in general. Two children described this in the following ways:

“No, I have not been there [CPS] for a long time. I have only been once at the CPS and there was another worker at that time.

#### Expectations regarding the method

The children had different expectations to the FGC meeting. They did not seem to be particularly excited about the meeting, but they did seem to have a hope that positive changes would follow the meeting.

“Yes, I hope so at least. I hope that the relation between me and my mother [will be better] and that I will feel better at home.”

One child seemed to be annoyed when asked this question. The child did not know if the meeting would change anything and seemed to not have enough information about the meeting:

“Don’t know, I don’t even know what this meeting is about.”

Another child said it believed that the meeting would change something, but did not know what it would change:

“Ofcourse, I don’t look forward to it, but I don’t have anxiety for it either.”

#### Changes before the FGC meeting

Two of the children did not experience changes after a decision had been made to have a meeting until the meeting took place.

“Yes, for example, I said often “I love you mom” when we stopped talking to each other, but then she just hanged up on me, and didn’t say anything, didn’t say “I love you”. But now, for example, when we have talked to the social worker few times then she is starting to say “I love you too”, then it exploded again and now we are starting again.”

The children were asked if they liked how they were prepared for the family group conference meeting. One of them said:

...”I would talk more to the teenager, but I can’t make decisions... It is often, when I am making decisions for example. In school, I just sit like and my sister can’t say anything, then she stutter so much.”

The children did not seem to be in a relation with the social worker of the family and did not go to an interview with the social worker alone after the meeting:

“No, it is a long time, since I went last time. I have only gone once to the child protection services and that was another worker.”

Another child said it had only once met the social worker alone.

“No, or yes in 2004 or 2005.”

The third child said:

“...I have talked to her, but not alone... I don't want to.”

## **II. The family group conference**

The FGC meetings were all held in a congregation hall in Reykjavík. The meetings started at in the afternoon and lasted five to six hours. Eleven to seventeen people attended the meetings, including family members, friends and neighbors, professionals and the observer. Each child attended the relevant FGC meeting. There was a break for food at each meeting, and in all cases the children had participated in choosing the meal.

In two cases, the spokespersons took a seat beside the child, but in one case the spokesperson took a seat far from the child and that position was not changed. The atmosphere seemed to be rather dry in the beginning of the meetings. People seemed not to be sure if they should stand or sit, but soon after the meetings started the atmosphere seemed to get lighter and the participants started to look the children in the eye and talk to them. The coordinators expressed in the beginning of the meetings, that they wanted to repeat that the purpose of the meetings was to find out what would be the best for the child and that the questions had been laid out were what should be talked about at the meetings.

The questions at the meetings were all directed at the child's well being and the child's condition. During the observations, it was evident that the coordinators talked directly to the children, but other professionals talked about the child as the third person, as can be seen in the following example:

“...his problem is...the school has worries of...the support teaching grant is finished..no money came with the child...parents of other children have complained a lot... we had to change the class because...the girl [teacher] who has him is lovely...it is not possible any longer to put him in another class... he has one and one nice day... I do know this good side of him also... calls after negative attention... he is very good to me... he is very challenging...”

In one of the meetings a professional called the child a wrong name. The child did not seem to realize that this professional was talking about her/him. The children did not ask in the first part of the meeting. In the second part, when the professionals were gone and the families were alone left (and the observer) to discuss the problems and find solutions, the children's level of participation varied. On one of the meetings, the problems of the family were discussed a lot, and at that meeting, the child participated very much in the discussions and came up with some ideas for solutions. On the other two meetings, the discussion was more directed to the problems related

to the children, and what they were going to do to change their problems. Those two children did not have many answers but did try to say some words:

“...not anymore... I know many who have escaped... I am extremely afraid to come home... terrible... I would not like to be a hair dresser or a cook, everybody would complain.”

In some time periods, a lot of questions were pounding on the children:

“...why do you think it is so boring at school?... You have to be in school... Where do you want to live? ... What do you want to do? ... Why are you threatening? ...”

The questions were directed at the children, but the persons who asked the questions did not necessarily wait for answers. In many cases some grown ups had already answered the questions before the persons who asked the questions had finished talking.

In the third and last section, the children were starting to be irritated and did not seem to know what the others were talking about any longer. They participated very little in the conversation at that point and were not asked to do it either. The families proposals were all accepted with minimal changes. The children all said that the meeting had been very long:

“It was not fun to be on a such a long meeting... The meeting was way too long. There is no fun sitting for five hours and listening to something. I didn't think it would be that long...”

One of the children talked about having problems paying attention to what was said for such a long time:

“Everyone was tired and wanted to get home or something. Me and my sister were starting to flip out.”

#### Participative activity at the meeting

The children thought generally that they did not actively participate in making the plan, and thought that there were mainly the adults that put it together. One of the children was at peace with the plan and thought the plan was good, and include what the family needed to do and say:

“It is just nice”

This child thought that it had not participated in making the plan and said the following when asked who had made the plan:

“mainly mom and dad and our friend or just mom and dad.”

Then the child added:

“I participated a little in making the plan. It was that...”

Another child said that it had not seen the plan at the meeting and said that the family had not discussed it at the meeting.

“We have not talked about it. Do you have a copy of the plan for me?”

The third child said that it had not had anything to do with the plan. The “people” had made it and this child was very unsatisfied with the content of the plan and said:

“It sucks... It is annoying, and I am not going to follow what is in this plan.”

The children all agreed, that their families had discussed the plan little, from the time the plan had been done, during the 5-6 weeks until the second interview. But, it varied, what had been followed through when the plan was reviewed with the participants. The children all had difficulties reviewing what had been put into the plans and what their role had been.

After reading through the plan, it could be heard on their voices that they were disappointed. One child mentioned for example that they had asked at the meeting that they would know beforehand when interviews were booked with a social worker and wanted that the dad that lived at home would be more involved with the child’s matters.

“... but the questions, you know, mom doesn’t tell me everything. For example when I was supposed to go to the social worker at the social services, I was told that morning and I was supposed to be there at noon and she never told my dad about it.”

And then this child added that it didn’t know if it believed in the plan:

“There is nothing happening, that was supposed to happen.”

One of the families seemed to follow the plan specifically in the beginning. Then there was a death in the extended family, so one member who had a big role in the plan lost a person that was strongly connected to her. This made it difficult for her to follow the plan for a while at least:

“Then my niece lost her brother or something.”

The third family had worked at one specific point in the plan, but then a parent was going to order a motorcycle for himself and the child and they planned on practicing motocross together. The child said that the plan was going well.

“We are supposed to go next weekend...we were going to go nearly right now but we just ordered at that time.”

#### The influence of the method on the children’s life

One of the children answered the following, when the child was asked if the FGC meeting had influenced the family:

“...trust, that has come and is better.”

The child didn't know what influence the meeting would have on others, but was sure, that the meeting had influence on him/herself and said:

“It had at least influence on me, I like to make changes and I know that my mother also likes to do it. They said “You have to take the first step, otherwise your mother will do it” ...and I just, yes...”

The other two children were not as sure. One of them didn't know if something had changed following the meeting, but said:

“...no nothing is different ... everything the same, not exactly the same maybe.”

The third child seemed to have difficulties realising what the FGC meeting was about and said that the following:

“I don't know, I know nothing about this”

This child then added that her/his dad had not changed, he just keeps on saying bad words.”

#### The process following the FGC meeting

The FGC meeting seemed to have influenced the children in different ways. They seemed to like the idea that the meeting had been held for their sake.

The children did not think of themselves as participants in doing the plans. They thought that the adults had made the plans. One child was very satisfied with the plan that was created at the FGC meeting and thought that it included what the family needed to do. Another child said that it had not seen the plan since at the meeting and that the family had not discussed the meeting since it was held:

“We have not talked about this at all. Do you have another copy of the plan for me?”

The other two children said that their families had discussed the plans after the FGC meetings very little. One of them did not like the plan at all that the others had made:

“It sucks... it is irritating, I will not follow anything that is on this plan.”

The children read over the plan in the second interview. One child seemed dissatisfied after reading the plan and reviewing it. The child had asked that it would know with further notice when meetings were held at the CPS office, so the child's father that the child was not living with, could also come to the meetings. That did not seem to have happened:

“but the questions, you know, mom doesn't tell me everything. For example, when I was supposed to go to the social worker at the social services, I got the information

the same morning and I was supposed to be there at noon and she did not tell my dad.”

This child added, that it did not have expectations that the plan would work:

“There is nothing happening that was supposed to.”

One of the families seemed to have had followed through with the plan at the beginning. Then a member of the extended family died, that had had a rather big role in the plan and that caused the plan to become disorganized at least for a while.

The third family had worked on one thing according to the plan, that was buying a motor cross bike and exercising motor cross with the child. The child said that the plan was going well.

### The children’s voices after the meeting

The children agreed that the adults usually did not listen to them. Therefore, it didn’t have any impact to try to get into the adult’s conversations. One of the children described the communication with the mother in the following way:

“...she decides for me, for example when I am eating, done with one plate, then she says “yes, now you are full...” like she knows how I feel, but she doesn’t really know. She doesn’t know if I am full or hungry or something. Extremely often she puts words in my mouth.”

Another child said that it was often bossed around. This child said that it had not protested at the meeting, because it would not have mattered anyway:

“...don’t know. They would protest and say “you just have to do this”. This is a controlling family. Dadie’s daughter, it is such a controlling family that she has.”

Then this child added:

“If I say something, they say “no” or something.”

### **III. The followup meeting**

One or two follow up meetings were held with the children. Unlike the FGC meetings, the follow up meetings and the processes related to those meetings seemed to lead to disappointment for the children. The children seemed to expect more changes, than happened from their perspective. The follow up meetings were much shorter than the FGC meetings and the shortest one took only one hour. The children were all satisfied with the family members that were present at the follow up meetings.

“There were nearly only the ones who have the most contact with the family.”

One of the children was not satisfied with the professionals that were present at the meeting and thought that a wrong person had appeared from the school. The school master had been at the meeting, but not the child's teacher. The child expected the teacher to come to the meeting.

The children seemed to participate similarly or less at the follow up meetings compared to the FGC meeting.

"More or less, I don't know, just similarly, maybe rather little."

Again it was heard that the children thought the follow up meetings were long and rather boring and one of them said:

"It was boring to sit at the meeting."

Two of the children said that the changes had taken place in the family after the meeting, but not big changes. The follow up meeting had pushed the family to do things they had for a long time planned to do, like seeing a doctor or do some leisure activities. One of the children said that the communication in the home had improved.

"This is ofcourse very good, because we have not been fighting very much...I am now ofcourse better to my mom and so on, yes, I have been doing well in some ways, the school and something like that."

One of the children said it had left the follow up meeting, because it had been so boring:

"I left, it was so boring...I couldn't stand being there anymore."

After a lot of discussion, it became clear that the child had left the meeting, after a person from the child's school had said something to the child that the child experienced as offensive. The child thought this person had said some things to the child, that the child thought were not correct. Many things in the plan had worked, but the child did not like the plan, but the child had agreed on some things in the plan, in order to get the meeting done. The child thought it would not change things anyway, even though the child would have protested. Another child thought the plan was very boring, but still thought the plan was necessary. The third child thought that no one listened to what he/she had to say, when the plan was reviewed and said:

"Some things can be left out and something...no one listened to me."

One spokesperson did not come to the follow up meeting and the child did not like that. Other spokespersons did not seem to have had strong influence at the meetings. One of the children said that he/she was not sure what the role of the spokesperson was:

"...I didn't even know why she was there and I didn't care if she was or was not there."

#### **IV. The children's view of the method**

The children all thought that it had been worth it to try this method. One of the children was the most negative one regarding professional support, and thought that the family didn't need a support in any form. One of the children criticized the child protection services. The child thought that with the FGC meeting, the family had been more positive, but that positivity had melted away because of a lack of support after the FGC meeting. When the child was asked, what could have been better, it responded:

“We need to be reminded more often...I had a good will, but not mom...like, she was going to write the rules and put them on the refrigerator and we forgot about it, then everything went to...no, I think this is fine... you need ofcourse to put more focus on...like that the social worker monitors what is happening at the home.”

### A belief in family group conferences

Two of the children believed that the family group conferences method was good for their family and answered that they thought it had done good for them.

“I though it was very cool, when we were alone...wow, many things came up.”

“I thought it was very cool how they could come to a conclusion and we had a purpose to gain.”

But the third child said it did not believe in this method and experienced the meeting very negatively. The child was angry og though it had been betrayed.

“I was going to walk out of the meeting when everybody had left...but dad had been furious, and I was going to do it... The psychologist told me that he would not say anything, that I would tell him, but than he told everything at the meeting...I just hate social workers...Everybody hates psychologists because they are so calm, they just talk too slowly.”

This child was upset because it had been promised confidentiality, but it had been broken. The child did not believe that the method had changed anything in the child's life. The researcher ended all the interviews like they started, that the interviews were confidential, and that the researcher was there from the University of Iceland, not working for the child protection services.

## **Discussion**

It seems that the FGC method has not been fully developed yet in Iceland. The children reported some positive experiences, such as attention to their situation. However, some important key rules in FGC were not followed, such as including the child in participating in making questions and making the plan. Furthermore, the children are supposed to choose their spokesperson, not their parents. Professionals need to be prepared for the meetings and asked to talk to the children directly, not about them to others in front of them. That can be a humiliating experience for a child. Other negative experiences include broken confidentiality at a meeting, which made one of the children very upset.

In general, the results of this study imply that the children's perspective is not the main focus when using this method, like it is supposed to, because the children are not included enough in the FGC process. Thus, it is important to work on improvements that guarantee more participation of the children in the FGC process in Iceland.