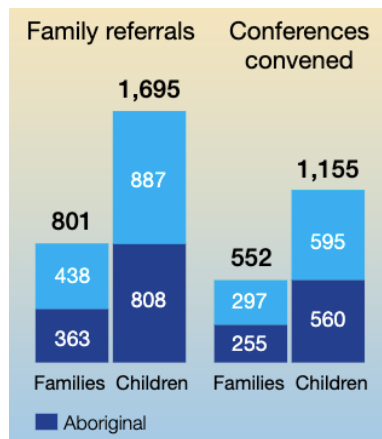


THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**  
—  
Research Centre  
for Children and  
Families

## Family Group Conferencing Evaluation Summary

### FGC Referrals & Held



1 July 2019 – 31 March 2020

Source: DCJ Child & Family Strategy, Policy & Commissioning

*"It is less intrusive, and I think when we come back to our Department and our whole dignity-driven, respectful practice I think part of that is, where we can, handing the decision-making back. Even if it's about how to address an issue, 'You tell us what works best for your family and let us support you to get there'."*  
[Aboriginal caseworker / manager casework]

*"There are times that there is conflict between family and agency, and that part of my role is to strengthen those relationships and to try and create some collaboration there to achieve the outcomes that they would like to achieve from agency and from the family perspective as well."* [Non-Aboriginal facilitator]

### EVALUATION METHODS

The evaluation drew upon multiple types of qualitative and quantitative data.

Workforce surveys were completed with managers casework, caseworkers, and independent facilitators across NSW. A total of 169 valid responses were received from: 85 caseworkers, 49 managers and 35 independent facilitators. Focus groups were conducted with DCJ caseworkers, casework managers and District FGC administrators, as well as Independent Facilitators, with a total of 60 participants.

Family interviews were conducted by telephone, online, and where possible, face-to-face. A key feature of the evaluation was the success in engaging the participation of the Aboriginal caseworkers and facilitators, and Aboriginal family members. Of the 40 interviews held with family members, 31 participants identified as Aboriginal.

Nine conferences were observed, and post conference interviews conducted with facilitators, providing an insight into the process and complexity of hosting FGCs. A review of 54 Referral Information Forms (RIFs) and Family Plans were developed into composite case studies to discern the patterns that contributed to a positive experience for families and those that lead to a less satisfactory experience.

Program data for FGCs held between June 2017 and December 2020 was provided by DCJ, along with extracts of child protection and OOHHC care data, between January 1999 and June 2021, from ChildStory. A unique identifier for each child enabled the FGC Program data to be linked to the data in ChildStory.

DCJ data was examined to estimate the cost of conducting the FGC program, and the indirect cost savings of the FGC program through potentially reduced future demand for services in child protection agencies. Potential benefits of the FGC program may come through reduced contact with the Children's Courts and reduced entries into care.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

#### FGC implementation

Overall, most families and caseworkers viewed FGC as enabling families to actively participate in decision-making about their children's safety and wellbeing. FGC was an opportunity to address past conflict and move forward with positive intentions, allowing family members to demonstrate their genuine care and love for the child at the centre of the FGC and to have this recognised and respected by DCJ. Facilitators and caseworkers both emphasised the importance of family finding as a mechanism to ensure the right people are involved in the FGC.

The proportion of children and young people **not entering** care following FGC has increased from **61.8%** in 2018-19 to **66%** during Q1 to Q3, 2019-20.

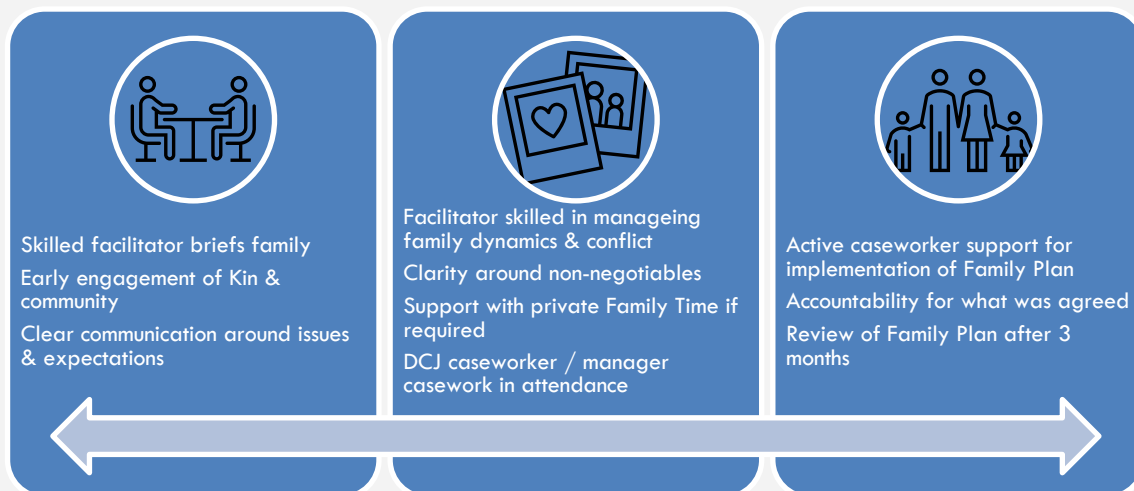
Source: DCJ Child & Family Strategy, Policy & Commissioning

The facilitation of the FGC by an impartial person was considered critical and enabled the respectful communication of the DCJ non-negotiable to families. The skill of the facilitator to mediate difficult relationships between family members and manage conflict is crucial to good outcomes. A good facilitator was described as taking charge of the process from the outset, intervening when necessary to prevent conflict, making sure that all family members have the same information, and understand why they were attending the FGC.

Even if children are not present, it is the role of a facilitator to ensure the children are kept at the centre of the conversation.

*"It's a really good idea to bring photos of the kids, it's a really good idea to remember that even though you're all very upset, or you're scared, or you're worried, just keep coming back to the kids and what do those kids need and put them first." (6).*

The skill and expertise of facilitators, and the quality of facilitations should be routinely monitored and reviewed by Districts to guide assigning of facilitators.



## FGC Outcomes

It was found that the DCJ FGC program appears to be targeted towards families with young children and multiple risk factors for child safety. These families face many challenges and there is evidence from the evaluation that the FGC contributed to improvements in child safety and wellbeing.

The children who were subject to an FGC referral were overall more at risk with a higher number of contacts with the child protection system, from a much younger age. This observation is true for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.

Another finding was a significant reduction in risk of harm substantiation for children whose families had participated in an FGC (almost 61%). Hence, almost 2 out of three children who received the FGC avoided a harm substantiation. This reduction was stronger for non-Aboriginal children (-69%) than for Aboriginal children (-51%). Furthermore, the FGC intervention is also significantly associated with a reduction in the risk of children being removed, albeit this benefit is only observed for non-Aboriginal children. Almost 1 in 2 non-Aboriginal children who received the FGC avoided a removal in the short term.

Lower effectiveness noted for Aboriginal children is most likely associated with the higher levels of disadvantage and intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal families and communities as a result of colonisation and historical policies. This finding emphasises the importance of culturally respectful and safe engagement with Aboriginal families, including engaging community supports such as Aboriginal community-controlled organisations as part of the FGC family support process.

The analysis of the linked administrative data revealed substantial variations across Districts in the uptake of FGCs and the review of Family Plans following an FGC. The significant regional variation in the implementation of FGCs included the proportion of referrals that end up being cancelled and the numbers of convened FGCs that are reviewed. These variations indicate that there may be issues with implementation that need attention.

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## Positive effects

FGCs have assisted in reducing risk for a significant number of children, through family-led decisions, informal supports from their support networks including extended family and formal supports from services. Having families shape the Family Plan, then receiving support from DCJ to implement the Plan contributed to family-inclusive and empowering practice.



## Aboriginal families, communities, children, and young people

For many Aboriginal families, the Stolen Generations and/or a personal history of child removal deeply overshadow the FGC experience and DCJ involvement. Given this fraught history and context, culturally safe practice with families is essential, as they can feel unsafe and vulnerable taking part in this process that asks them to publicly discuss family challenges and dynamics.

Aboriginal facilitators explained how FGCs involving Aboriginal families might take longer than the allocated timeframe to prepare and convene, particularly in terms of finding family in the interests of supporting children's ongoing cultural connections. Additionally, Aboriginal caseworkers and facilitators emphasised the need to recognise important events within Aboriginal communities that might affect timeframes for holding FGCs and family participation in FGCs such as Sorry Business and NAIDOC celebrations.

Aboriginal families viewed Aboriginal facilitators as having unique skills and lived experience that underpinned their provision of culturally safe practice and support. Caseworkers and managers casework acknowledged the importance of culturally competent facilitators, who enable better communication and meaningful connection with Aboriginal families. Connecting Aboriginal families to additional family support including from community-based and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations may be considered as a way of providing additional family support.

Embedding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (the Principle) in FGC practice would prioritise ongoing cultural connections for Aboriginal children. Reaching out to the Kinship network will uphold the key elements of the Principle of Participation, Partnership, Placement and Connection.

*"He sat back and had a chat with us around you know what we should expect and around what the children should expect and what DCJ should offer. So that sort of stuff that we saw, he sat back and had a little bit of a yarn with us and then he left us, and we sort of worked it all out ourselves. But it was good to be able to have him there to ask those questions. Being an Aboriginal man."*  
(Family interview 8)

*"What made it so good. You know what works so well is having the Aboriginal facilitator that understood ... it is a game changer altogether. It's the only game changer that's gonna get the outcomes that are needed."* (Family interview 22)

## Economic evaluation

The economic evaluation estimated the indirect cost savings of the FGC program through potentially reduced future demand for services in child protection agencies. The unit costs for operating the FGC program were quantified and compared with the cost of providing traditional care. Statistical analysis was conducted for the effect of the FGC program on family contact with child protection agencies.

The costs associated with FGC were explored in-depth for a sample of 242 families. Costs were calculated on DCJ's transaction records for the costs of facilitator fees-for-service, venue hire and catering, transport, childcare and services, interpreters, assessments, payroll and estimates of FTE caseworker involvement (referrals and participation), data collection, supervision and training, and office administration. On average, each FGC costs \$7,914. This includes FGC costs of \$3,231 per family, with the majority of those costs being the facilitator fees (around \$2,700), and the cost of DCJ staff time of \$4,683. The complexity of the case, if it involves travel, interpreters, or multiple children subject to the FGC, adds to the cost for some FGCs.

The economic evaluation found that the FGC program was economically viable. The total social benefits of the FGC due to reduced risks of harm substantiations were calculated as high as \$91,032. Of these, \$33,726 are likely due to avoided costs to the NSW Government because of lower future service utilisation and \$57,306 are likely due to greater economic benefits to children because of reduced risk of post traumatic stress disorder. Comparing the total social benefits with the overall costs of delivering an FGC to a family implies that for every dollar spent on the FGC society recoups \$7.2 on average, \$5.5 for Aboriginal families and \$8 on non-Aboriginal families.

## FGC benefits

From the FGC program may come through reduced contact with the Children's Courts, avoidance of incidents involving risk of significant harm, re-reports for risk of significant harm and reduced entries into care.

The benefits of FGC for children and families rest on what happens after the conference. This highlights the importance of the timely and active review of the implementation of Family Plans, including caseworker support to assist families to access the support and resources they need. The benefit of such efforts can have a lifelong impact on the life of the children at the heart of the FGC program.



### For more information

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w <https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families.html>



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