



The impact of family group decision-making on preventing removals



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1. Introduction

Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) is a practice approach to working with families involved with the child welfare system. The term “family” is interpreted broadly to include extended family members, friends, neighbors, and others identified by the family as potential sources of support. Family Group Decision-Making itself is an umbrella term used to characterize several practice models that share a common philosophy. It is characterized as a practice which is family-centered, family strengths-oriented, culturally relevant, and community-based while remaining focused on the best interest of the child. It recognizes that families are most knowledgeable about themselves and can make well-informed decisions, and that individuals can find security and a sense of belonging within their families.

1.1. Child and family outcomes associated with FGDM

In 2004, Sundell and Vinnerljung reported that empirical data on “child and family related outcomes after Family Group Conferences [FGDM] have so far been presented in only a few studies, using relatively small samples” (p. 269). In addition, most research on FGDM has focused on the “processes, model fidelity, and client satisfaction” rather than child and family outcomes (Berzin, 2006, p. 1450). Of the research related to child and family outcomes, the findings “are not easily compared due to different methodologies..., different construction of samples and comparison groups, and varying follow-up times” (Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004, p. 269). In large part, this is still true to date; albeit, recently there have been a few large-sample, empirical studies published addressing the efficacy of FGDM on influencing positive child and family outcomes (Chor, McClelland, Weiner, Jordan, & Lyons, 2015).

Recent empirical research regarding the effectiveness of FGDM models on child and family outcomes is inconsistent, but suggests that FGDM has little to no effect on reducing recurrence, but may have an effect on reducing the time spent in foster care as well as increasing the likelihood of establishing desired permanent placements (Berzin, 2006; Berzin, Thomas, & Cohen, 2007; Pennell, Edwards, & Burford, 2010; Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004; Wang et al., 2012; Weigensberg,

Barth, & Guo, 2009). Early empirical research on FGDM models suggested that FGDM had a small to moderate effect on child and family outcomes, but some researchers consider the early findings questionable due to significant methodological limitations (Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004).

More recent findings, however, have been somewhat more robust. A review by Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, and Burford (2003) indicated that the use of FGDM has shown a decrease in children in care, an increase in children placed with relatives, and a high percentage of children maintaining placements. Baumann, Tecci, Ritter, Sheets, and Wittenstrom (2005) and an American Human Association (2003) review of program evaluations found the use of FGDM in several states has shown between 10 and 17% decrease of children in foster care, between 15 and 28% increase of children being placed with relatives, and between 70 and 97% of children maintaining placements.

More recent research also supports some of these benefits in addition to the presence of family-group-type permanency goals. Sheets et al. (2009) found that exits to reunification are increased, and this is especially true for African-American and Hispanic children. Pennell et al. (2010) studied post-removal outcomes such as the type of foster care placement, time in foster care, and where youths are permanently placed. The researchers found that FGDM increased the probability that youths would be placed in “kin foster homes,” would spend less time in foster care, and were more likely to be permanently placed with family or relatives. Wang et al. (2012) found that while FGDM did not decrease youths' time in foster care, FGDM did affect the permanent placement of youth exiting foster care. When families were involved in FGDM processes, youth tended to be reunited with guardians or placed with relatives in many cases. However, more evaluative research is needed to assess long-term outcomes.

Although research over the last several years demonstrates increased methodological sophistication, there are still substantial limitations associated with most prior research on FGDM. The most salient issue is sample size, specifically the number of youths in a sample that have experienced the FGDM model, because currently only relatively small proportions of families under investigation for child maltreatment are offered the opportunity to engage in FGDM meetings (Berzin, 2006). Because of relatively small sample sizes, the lack of statistical

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power might account for some of the non-significant findings of previous research, as well as the small effect sizes (Lambert & Wang, Unpublished results).

Another limitation is that prior research typically did not control for confounding covariates such as age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc. Using a multivariate framework can help reduce threats to statistical conclusions about relationships among variables; this is particularly useful when researchers are interested in a bivariate relationship where theory suggests additional variables affect either the independent or dependent variables (Field, 2009).

1.2. FGDM in Texas

Though there are a number of variations on FGDM, in the investigation stage the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services primarily uses Family Team Meetings (FTMs). In Texas, Family Team Meetings are primarily held during the investigation stage (i.e., prior to the removal of a child), but can also be held in Family Based Safety Services and Conservatorship cases. A Family Team Meeting is designed as a pre-removal quick response to child safety concerns, and is used to ensure the safety of youth and prevent removals by engaging family, community members, and other caregivers in critical decisions related to protecting children, safety, placement, and permanence. The “family team” is vested with a high degree of decision-making authority and responsibility. The hypothesized mechanism in preventing removals is that, because external supports are brought to the family, more people become part of the safety plan to prevent the removal.

Although populous states such as Texas have begun to scale-up the use of FGDM during child maltreatment investigations, relatively little is known about the efficacy of these interventions. In effect, researchers and practitioners need to build an evidence base for the use of FGDM; however, to date, most findings on FGDM have been weakened by the omission of important variables in analyses. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between FGDM and child maltreatment removals while controlling for a number of covariates theorized to impact removal.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants for this research were families who were investigated by Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) Child Protective Services (CPS) between 2004 and 2009. The unit of analysis was not the individual youth, but the investigation case—an investigation case can include a single youth or multiple youths from the same family. In cases where there were two (or more) children in the home, but only one was removed from the home, the investigation case was recorded as a removal (although not all children were removed). The analysis was conducted with 613,180 investigation cases. Table 1 provides sample demographic information.

2.2. Measures and covariates

The data used in this research were obtained as part of an external evaluation from the state child welfare agency. The variables used in this research were age and ethnicity of the oldest child, the total score obtained on the Texas Concept-Guided Risk and Safety Assessment (Baumann et al., 2011), family income, teen parent status, and use of family team meetings. (These were the covariates of interest to CPS, and their importance was subsequently validated by the results.) These are described in more detail below.

2.2.1. Outcome variable

The outcome variable that was used in the analysis was whether or not one or more children were removed as a result of the investigation.

Table 1
Demographic Information.

| | Frequency | Percent | Mean (SD) |
|------------------------|-----------|-------------|------------|
| White | 316,425 | 36.3% | |
| Black | 173,885 | 19.9% | |
| Hispanic | 337,183 | 38.6% | |
| Asian | 5457 | 0.6% | |
| Native American | 1278 | 0.1% | |
| Other Ethnicity | 38,299 | 4.4% | |
| Age (of Oldest Victim) | | Median = 7 | 7.4 (5.1) |
| Household Income | | | |
| \$0–\$10,149 | 215,112 | 33.4% | |
| \$10,150–\$20,549 | 209,877 | 32.6% | |
| \$20,550–\$40,549 | 167,592 | 26.0% | |
| \$40,550–\$62,999 | 38,918 | 6.0% | |
| \$63,000 or more | 13,161 | 2.0% | |
| Teen Parent | | | |
| Yes | 44,908 | 5.1% | |
| No | 829,629 | 94.9% | |
| Total Risk Score | | Median = 14 | 13.8 (5.8) |
| Family Team Meeting | | | |
| Yes | 8682 | 1.4% | |
| No | 604,498 | 98.6% | |
| Removed | | | |
| Yes | 44,049 | 7.2% | |
| No | 569,131 | 92.8% | |

This outcome was dichotomous: investigations resulted in either children being removed from the home or not. Removal was defined as a case in which the child or children were removed from the home and placed in foster care. Non-removal was defined as an unsubstantiated case or a case in which the child or children were not removed.

2.2.2. Covariates

Covariates included in this research were:

- age of the oldest child in the family (when the family is the unit of analysis, CPS captures the age of the oldest child—this is an administrative decision CPS makes)
- ethnicity
- the total score on the Texas Concept Guided Risk and Safety Assessment (Baumann et al., 2011)
- family income (less than \$10,150; \$10,150 – \$20,549; \$20,550 – \$40,549; \$40,550 or more)
- teen parent status (parent was 19 years old or younger at the time of investigation)

2.2.3. Texas Concept-guided risk and safety assessment

The Texas Concept Guided Risk and Safety Assessment (Baumann et al., 2011) is composed of 77 yes-no questions about relatively specific risk features. Three to eight risk features are organized into categories, and categories are combined to form broader risk areas. There are 25 conceptual dimensions of risk: 7 areas and 18 categories (see Baumann et al., 2011). Although there are no formal “norms” for this instrument, the mean and standard deviation of the current sample were 13.8 and 5.8, respectively, with a median score of 14.

2.2.4. Family team meetings

Texas DFPS CPS began conducting family team meetings in the investigation stage in 2006; thus, there are two years of investigation cases in the data set in which there were no FTM's. An FTM is offered to all families, but not all families accept the offer; thus, there is a possible selection bias associated with the families who choose to participate in FTM's versus those who don't. If the family accepts the offer for an FTM, a CPS investigator makes a referral to the CPS FGDM worker. CPS does not have a measure of “fidelity” for FTM.

In order to assess the effects of Family Team Meetings during investigation, a dichotomous variable was created. Families either had

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