



Improving child welfare services with family team meetings: A mixed methods analysis of caseworkers' perceived challenges

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ABSTRACT

Various forms of family team meetings have been increasingly employed in child welfare systems to empower families and provide effective individualized services through community partnerships. However, many family team meetings often fail to achieve their intended goals mainly due to ongoing challenges that team members face. Using data from a survey of caseworkers, this study examined dynamic processes of family team meetings to improve child welfare service outcomes, specifically focusing on caseworkers' perceived challenges. Also, responses to an open ended question were reviewed using content analysis to identify similar or different challenges encountered by diverse team members. Survey data were analyzed using path analysis and found that logistical barriers tended to decrease both family and stakeholder engagements, which in turn made child welfare services less accessible, less utilized, and less effective for children and families. Content analysis revealed that caseworkers perceived disagreement/conflict and knowledge deficits about child welfare as common challenges for all team members. This paper concludes with practice implications suggesting ways to minimize challenges identified and maximize the effectiveness of a family team meeting.

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1. Introduction

Various forms of family team meetings have been increasingly employed in child welfare systems in the United States to achieve both normative and instrumental purposes. Normatively, a family team meeting has been emphasized as a useful tool to empower children and families to make decisions that affect their lives (Augsberger, 2014; Morris & Connolly, 2012). Instrumentally, this meeting has been demonstrated to be an effective approach to improve child welfare services and child outcomes through collaborative, family-centered processes. Families and community stakeholders are brought together to develop individualized case plans for children (Berzin, Thomas, & Cohen, 2007; Browne, Puente-Duran, Shlonsky, Thabane, & Verticchio, 2014; Crampton, 2007; Healy, Darlington, & Yellowlees, 2012).

Despite promising benefits of family team meetings, previous studies have reported mixed results about the effectiveness of family team meetings on various outcomes in child welfare (Crampton & Jackson, 2007; Crea, Wildfire, & Usher, 2009; Daro, Budde, Baker, Nesmith, & Harden, 2005; Pennell, Edwards, & Burford, 2010; Weigensberg, Barth, & Guo, 2009). One critical reason for these mixed results is that many

family team meetings face various challenges to engaging families and stakeholders in case planning and achieving planned goals (Berzin et al., 2007; Morris & Connolly, 2012; Vargo et al., 2009). Such challenges include logistical barriers (Marcynyszyn, Maher, Corwin, & Uldricks, 2012), a lack of family participation (Morris & Connolly, 2012), group conflict (Ferguson, 2012), or power dynamics between team members (Healy et al., 2012). More importantly, challenges can exist simultaneously or sequentially during the different phases of a family team meeting and occur for overall or specific team members (McGinty, McCammon, & Koeppe, 2001).

Family team meetings are primarily designed to enhance the integrated delivery of services to meet the complex needs of children and families (Weigensberg et al., 2009). Yet, little empirical research has been conducted to investigate team mechanisms through which certain challenges in different phases of a family team meeting affect child welfare services. Furthermore, there is still a lack of understanding of the challenges encountered by specific groups of members in preparing for and coordinating effective meetings. Filling these gaps can provide useful insights into effectively addressing family and stakeholder challenges in family team meetings.

Using data from a caseworker survey which is part of an evaluation of the Title IV-E Waiver Evaluation Project, this study examines the dynamic processes of family team meetings to improve child welfare service outcomes, specifically focusing on challenges at each phase of the meeting. More specifically, survey data were examined using path analysis to determine how logistical barriers at the phase of preparation

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constrain family and stakeholder engagement and then ultimately affect child welfare service outcomes (i.e., service availability, utilization, and effectiveness). Also, this study examined caseworker responses to an open-ended question using content analysis to identify major challenges of different groups of members (i.e., families and community stakeholders).

2. Family team meeting

For this study, the family team meeting being investigated was primarily rooted in a particular model, Family Team Conference (FTC), although it was slightly modified to fit the specific contexts of the state child welfare system. FTC was originally developed by Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group (CWPPG) and is currently supported by the Center for Community Partnership in Child Welfare of Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP, 2002). This particular model of family team meetings does not rely on a single theory. Rather, it has been developed by incorporating various elements of other approaches and models; thus, FTC is viewed as a practice framework with significant flexibility to effectively respond to the complex needs of child and families involved in the child welfare system (CWPPG, 2001). FTC is particularly grounded in the underlying principles of a wrap-around approach. The wraparound approach is “an individualized, family-driven and youth-guided team planning process” (Bruns et al., 2010, p. 315).

Consistent with the underlying principles of the wraparound approach, CWPPG (2001) suggests that FTC should be implemented with the following elements: (1) individualized and flexible plan, (2) strengths-based approach, (3) integrating formal services with a family’s natural supports, (4) focusing on solutions rather than symptoms, (5) responsiveness to family voices, (6) flexible and responsive services, (7) involving key stakeholders, (8) supporting child and family throughout the life of a case, (9) continued team supports, and (10) family-centered approach. Consequently, FTC is a collaborative, family-centered process to create, implement, and monitor an individualized course of action in flexible and responsive ways. Its primary purpose can be achieved through active family engagement in decision-making and strong partnerships with communities in child protection and services.

FTC shares many principles with other family team models: Family Team-Decision Making (FTDM) developed in New Zealand and Team Decision-Making (TDM) originated from the family-to-family initiative. As Crea and Berzin (2009) argue, FTC, however, has unique features that make it different from other family team models. FTC is different from FTDM in that it is held at critical points in time throughout the life of a case. In FTC, caseworkers usually play a leading role in preparing and coordinating family team meetings although they should work together with families in determining potential members and outcomes of the meetings. On the other hand, in FDGM and TDM, independent coordinators/facilitators who are not caseworkers are usually assigned to organize family team meetings. During the meeting process, FTC does not provide families with private time to create their case plan as FDGM does although FTC allows families to share their *family story* about how they are involved in child welfare. This helps other team members better understand the families’ situations and perspectives.

Different family team meetings share many philosophies and principles as a collaborative, family-centered model to meet the multifaceted needs of children and families in child welfare. On the other hand, they also include different emphases on a certain phase or team engagement strategies. Unfortunately, we still have little understanding of how different family team meetings produce different outcomes. However, previous studies have suggested that there are similar challenges and barriers across different family team meetings as can be seen below.

3. Challenges at the different phases of a family team meeting

3.1. Preparation

Preparation is an initial, but very important phase of a family team meeting, which requires more time and efforts than an actual meeting process (Berzin et al., 2007). Crompton (2007) reviewed the literature on family team meetings and concluded that sufficient time for preparation was one of the significant factors for active member participation by providing comfortable and safe environments. However, logistical barriers often prevent both families and stakeholders from engaging actively in family team meetings. Previous studies have shown that some families do not actively participate in their meeting because they cannot afford transportation or child care costs if they had several children (Marcynyszyn et al., 2012; Vargo et al., 2009). In addition, Munsell, Cook, Kilmer, Vishnevsky, and Strompolis (2011) argue that service providers or other professionals could not actively participate in a family team meeting if it is held at night or during the weekend. The inconsistent attendance of stakeholders may discourage members to build team cohesion and deliver effective services (Munsell et al., 2011).

3.2. Meeting process

Active engagement of both families and stakeholders during the meeting process is essential to provide integrated and individualized services for children and families and promote inclusive decision-making processes (Berzin et al., 2007; Crea et al., 2009; Merkel-Holguin, 2004). The concept of engagement in this study does not indicate the extent to which key members simply attend a family team meeting. Rather, it is defined as members’ active participation in decision-making processes and their collaborative efforts to achieve shared goals (Altman, 2008). Similar to logistical barriers in preparation, ensuring and maintaining family and stakeholder engagement appears to be a significant challenge in implementing family team meetings (Berzin et al., 2007; Vargo et al., 2009). However, these challenges are much more complex to understand due to dynamic interactions within and between two major groups: families and stakeholders.

In family team meetings, families broadly include youth, parents, extended families (e.g., grandparents and relatives) or even their informal supports (e.g., friends and neighbors) (Olson, 2009). Previous studies report that it is more difficult to involve extended families or informal supports in family team meetings because parents are reluctant to share their problems with other family members especially when they have conflict with them (Morris & Connolly, 2012; Olson, 2009; Snyder, Lawrence, & Dodge, 2012). Other significant challenges experienced by family members include stigma, blame, and disrespect by other family members or community stakeholders. Parents are frequently stigmatized and blamed for their children’s situations and are excluded from decision-making, which makes them unwilling to collaborate with other informal and formal partners (Altman, 2008; Berzin et al., 2007; Healy et al., 2012; Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2009). Similarly, Augsberger (2014) found that youth did not have enough opportunities to participate in discussion because it was frequently dominated by adults or professionals. Finally, some studies suggest that family engagement can be influenced by parents’ cognitive (e.g., expectation about change), affective (e.g., fear of failure), and behavioral (e.g., knowledge and skills) characteristics (Kemp et al., 2009; Platt, 2012).

In addition to family engagement, stakeholder engagement is important for successful family team meetings because they are the key players who provide direct services and supports for children and families (Olson, 2009). The stakeholders represent formal supports or professionals, including service providers, court professionals (Court Appointed Special Advocates/Guardian ad Litem [CASA/GAL]), and

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