



# Strategies for engaging foster care youth in permanency planning family team conferences



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## ABSTRACT

The present study examines strategies conference facilitators used to engage foster care youth in decision-making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences. Data collection included observations of permanency planning family team conferences, followed by interviews with foster care youth and conference facilitators. Data analysis focused on gaining a deeper understanding of how facilitators incorporate youth into decision-making, with a specific focus on the strategies they employed. Four strategies were identified in the analysis: creating a safe space, encouraging the youth voice, re-balancing power, and establishing a personal connection. The study's policy and practice implications, limitations and areas of further research are presented.

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## 1. Introduction

There are approximately 400,000 children living in foster care in the United States and almost half are adolescents between the ages of 11–21 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [U.S. DHHS], 2012). Each year, more than 20,000 youth emancipate from the foster care system due to age restrictions (U.S. DHHS, 2012). Prospective studies report that foster care youth are at high risk for negative outcomes during the transition to adulthood including poverty, homelessness, incarceration, low educational attainment, unemployment, sexual and physical victimization, and high rates of health and mental health issues (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2005).

Federal legislation recognizes the importance of youth participating in decision-making focused on permanency planning and transitional plans. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106–109) mandates states to involve youth in the design of state independent living programs and developing their individual case plans. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110–351) requires child welfare agencies, during the 90-day period prior to the youth's emancipation, to develop a personalized transition plan as directed by the youth. Although federal policy addresses the importance of including youth in decision making, it does not provide professional guidance to achieve this goal.

### 1.1. Family Team Conferencing

Most states employ some form of Family Team Conferencing approach in their child welfare decision-making procedures (U.S. DHHS, 2013). Common terms include Family Group Decision Making, Family Group Conferences, Family Team Conferencing, Permanency Teaming Process, and Team Decision Making. Family Team Conferencing originated in New Zealand as a response to concerns by indigenous people that the European-based model of child welfare decision-making lacked cultural sensitivity and was leading children and youth to be removed from their cultural communities (Connolly, 2006; Rauktis, McCarthy, Krackhardt, & Cahalane, 2010). In 1989, New Zealand included Family Group Decision Making in their child welfare legislation. Since then, the model has moved to other parts of the world including Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States (Rauktis et al., 2010).

The implementation of Family Team Conferencing around the world led to variations in the New Zealand model that were largely dependent upon the local child welfare system. Despite differences in implementation, there is a general philosophy across the different models (Berzin, Thomas, & Cohen, 2007). Family team decision-making is a strength-based, family and community focused intervention. There is an emphasis on empowering parents to take responsibility for their children and on the rights of children, youth and parents to be involved in the assessment and decision-making focused on child safety, permanency and well-being. Additionally, there is recognition of the need to for decision making to be culturally sensitive.

New York City, the location of the current study, introduced the Improving Outcomes for Children (IOC) child welfare reform initiative in

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2007. An important component of IOC was Family Team Conferencing, piloted in select foster care agencies in 2007 and fully implemented into all foster care agencies in 2009. Family Team Conferencing brings together a team of people, ideally including family members, community members, service providers, advocates and foster care agency staff, to make case related decisions. Children aged 10 and older are invited to attend and participate in the family team conferences (New York City Administration for Children's Services, 2009).

Conferences are held at key decision making points during a child welfare case. A facilitator, with specialized training on the philosophy and structure of the family team conference and skills in facilitation, runs the conference. Facilitators are intended to be a neutral party that guides the team through the structured FTC format, including: 1) introduction, 2) identifying issues, 3) assessing the concerns and strengths, 4) developing ideas, 5) developing a plan, and 6) reviewing the plan (New York City Administration for Children's Services, 2013).

Permanency Planning Family Team Conferences in New York City are held every six months at the foster care agency. Conferences for youth focus on permanency planning goals such as educational attainment, vocational status, housing, health and mental health, life skills, and social support. For youth with a permanency goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement [APPLA] the emphasis is largely on ensuring that youth are developing the life skills, knowledge and supports to assist them in transitioning from living in foster care to independence.

### 1.2. Significance of youth participation

There are significant benefits to having youth participate in decision-making practices. From a children's rights perspective, youth have a legal right to participate in decision-making that impacts their lives (Checkoway, 2011). From an empowerment perspective, youth gain important information about their rights and options, develop decision-making skills, gain a sense of control in the decision making process, and may experience enhanced feeling of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Cashmore, 2011; Checkoway, 2011; Khoury, 2006; Leeson, 2007; McNeish, 1999; O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). From an enlightenment perspective, youth provide up to date, relevant information that may assist decision makers in making better informed decisions (Cashmore, 2011).

There is limited empirical research focused on youth participation in child welfare decision-making, especially from the youth perspective. National and international studies overwhelmingly conclude that foster care youth perceive limited opportunities to participate in making important decisions that significantly impact them (Bessell, 2011; Cashmore, 2002; Freundlich, Avery, & Padgett, 2007; Thomas & O'Kane, 1999). When given the opportunity to participate in meetings and conferences, foster youth report a lack of preparation, a lack of understanding about the issues discussed, a lack of "voice" in the process, and a lack of influence on the decisions made (Cashmore, 2002; Freundlich et al., 2007; Thomas & O'Kane, 1999; Wilson & Conroy, 1999). Youth perceive agency meetings, case conferences and court hearings as formal and intimidating, resulting in feeling confused, bored, frustrated and/or marginalized (Boylan & Ing, 2005; Cashmore, 2002; Saunders & Mace, 2006; Thomas & O'Kane, 1999). Although youth report limited opportunities to participate, they consistently state a desire to be present and have "a voice" in decision-making practices (Boylan & Ing, 2005; Cashmore, 2002, 2011; Saunders & Mace, 2006; Thomas & O'Kane, 1999).

### 1.3. Procedural justice

Procedural justice theory has been used widely over the past three decades to examine perceptions of fairness in bureaucratic decision-making practices (MacCoun, 2005). As such, it offers a useful framework for understanding youths' perceptions and experiences participating in

child welfare decision-making in the context of permanency planning family team conferences. Research suggests that individuals value fairness in decision making procedures over decisions made. Individuals who perceive decision-making procedures to be fair tend to be more satisfied and comply better with the outcome, even when it was not their desired outcome (Tyler, 2000; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Additionally, when people believe they were treated fair and respectfully, feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy may be enhanced (MacCoun, 2005; Tyler, 2006). Research pertaining to youths' perceptions of procedural justice in child welfare decision making is still in its infancy; however, studies that apply procedural justice theories to children and youth in foster care report that they too value procedural fairness (Weisz, Wingrove, Beal, & Faith-Slaker, 2011; Weisz, Wingrove, & Faith-Slaker, 2007).

### 1.4. Framework for research

The current study examines youth participation in permanency planning family team conferences held in two foster care agencies in a large urban area. It explores the strategies conference facilitators employ to engage youth in decision-making. There is limited scholarly research focused on the nature and complexity of youth participation in child welfare decision-making, especially from the youth perspective. The current study fills a gap in the literature by exploring – from the perspective of foster youth and conference facilitators – strategies to engage older youth in decision making focused on permanency and transitional plans. By using procedural justice as the theoretical framework, the study expands this literature to an under examined population.

## 2. Material and methods

The Institutional Review Boards of Columbia University, the New York City Administration for Children's Services, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, and the New York Foundling approved the current study.

### 2.1. Research design

The study employed a focused ethnography design, characterized by short-term field visits, intensive data collection and intensive data analysis (Knoblauch, 2005). The researcher observed permanency planning family team conferences and conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with youth and conference facilitators. Additionally, administrative documents describing the philosophy and structure of the family team conference and facilitator training materials were reviewed.

### 2.2. Recruitment

The sample was drawn from two well-established family service agencies that contract with the New York City Administration for Children's Services to provide foster care services to youth residing in multiple boroughs in New York City. A designated staff member at each site assisted in recruitment of the sample. Each month, the designated staff member emailed the researcher a list of permanency planning conferences involving youth, ages 18–21, scheduled to take place during the month. The list included the date, time and location of the conference, as well as the assigned facilitator. For confidentiality purposes, the list did not include identifying case information. The researcher went to the agency on the scheduled date and time of the conference and waited to see whether the conference would go forward with the youth present. When the youth was present and consented to participate in the study, the researcher observed the conference and conducted post-observation interviews with youth and conference facilitators.

Several conferences attended over a period of seven months were rescheduled, because the youth was not present, or held without the

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