

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is one of the prescribed methods for Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) in the Child & Family Services Act of Ontario. FGC is a decision-making process for resolving disputes between a children's aid society (CAS) and the family of a child who is (or may be) in need of protection. Funding from the Ministry of Children & Youth Services supports the use of ADR if a court intervention is being considered, is pending, or is in progress.

What is a conference?

A "conference" is a meeting of a child's entire family, family friends, other supporters and CAS which is organized by an independent, neutral FGC Coordinator. Participants voluntarily consent to attend the meeting. The hope is that by having this discussion, the family and support network can develop a plan that is acceptable to the CAS.

There are three parts to a conference:

Information Sharing

The meeting is opened by the family in a way that is meaningful to them. The FGC Coordinator arranges a meeting so the family can hear the CAS concerns for the child's safety. Other professionals and service providers may also be present to give information and tell how they are willing to help. Family members are encouraged to ask questions about what they heard.

Family Private Time

In this phase, all the service providers leave the room. Family members and their support network meet alone to discuss and to develop a plan to keep the child safe. The family private time usually includes a meal. The length of family private time varies.

The Agreed Plan

Now, the CAS worker(s) and other professionals return to hear and talk about the plan developed by the family. The plan must meet the bottom lines of the CAS. If CAS and family are in agreement, then the plan is accepted and may be resourced by the CAS.

What does a FGC Coordinator do?

First, let's be clear about what the FGC Coordinator does NOT do. The FGC Coordinator does not decide what happens. The Coordinator is an impartial person with no decision-making authority. The Coordinator helps the family hear the CAS concerns and opinions about how to keep the child safe. The Coordinator also helps the family decide who attends the conference and prepares everyone on what to expect.

So the family doesn't need a lawyer?

No, that's not true. Parties to court applications who use FGC should have a lawyer review the final plan.

Is there a cost?

No. Costs for the process (e.g., meals, childcare) are paid through ADR-LINK using funds from the Ministry of Children & Youth Services. However, this funding does not include the cost of a lawyer.

What issues can be addressed through FGC?

Many things including conditions of a supervision order, length of a court order, specifics of the service plan to be addressed, the child's placement and/or living arrangements, custody or access, and features of an adoption can be developed through the FGC Coordination process.

When is it NOT possible to use a FGC process?

- if one or more key family member does not agree to FGC or feels forced into it,
- if one or more key party would not feel safe in a family meeting and no protections could be put into place, or
- if there are no supports or extended family to assist in developing a plan.
- if one or more key family member does not agree to FGC or feels forced into it,
- if one or more key party would not feel safe in a family meeting and no protections could be put into place, or
- if there are no supports or extended family to assist in developing a plan.

FGC cannot be used to determine if a child is "in need of protection."

What are the steps in the process?

1. If the referral agent is CAS, discuss the case with your supervisor. Some cases are not amenable to ADR or the referral may be premature. Your agency may have policies around inclusionary and exclusionary criteria. If the referral agent is an Indigenous community member, consult the Band or ADR-Link for your specific community referral contact.
2. Discuss the possibility of ADR with the family and get their agreement to consider ADR.
3. If this is an Indigenous family, regardless of who is making the referral, the Band is to be consulted.
4. Obtain written consent from all key parties, including children 12 and over, to make the referral to ADR- Link. Use your agency or communities own general consent form for this.
5. Complete all sections of the ADR-Link referral form. Submit the completed referral form, OCL notification form and signed consents to ADR-Link.

Why use ADR?

When contested cases go to court, they take a long time to finish and it costs everyone involved a great deal of money, time, and emotional pain. A child(ren) may be left in limbo and not knowing what the future holds for them or how they will see their family. Also, the court process becomes a competition where only one side can "win." When a judge decides the outcome after a trial, someone always walks away unhappy with the outcome and the family has lost the opportunity to develop their own family solution to the problems.



Family Group Conferencing is one type of ADR where the parties can "have their say" and create a family-designed, workable plan for the child.

Is the process fair to the families?

To ensure fairness, these features are in place:

- the FGC Coordinator is an independent professional who does not work for the CAS
- the FGC Coordinator has no power to make decisions about the case
- the FGC Coordinator is not paid by the CAS and the Coordinator assigned to the case is not selected by the CAS
- all FGC Coordinators listed on the ADR-LINK roster are trained and mentored in FGC coordination through the George Hull Centre and carry liability insurance
- any party can end his or her participation in the FGC process at any point
- all parties are encouraged to review any agreed-upon plan with their lawyers

What about Indigenous families?

Whether living on or off reserve, Indigenous families are welcome to use FGC if they and their advocates agree it might help to resolve a dispute with the CAS. However, the development of "Indigenous Approaches/ODR" of ADR in the South Region is ongoing through capacity building initiatives. This service is available for anyone identifying as Indigenous, First Nation, Métis, or Inuit. For more information on "Indigenous Approaches/ODR", please visit our website.

Do children come to the conference?

Yes, childcare is provided. Older children may want to participate in the family meeting. The FGC Coordinator helps you decide who will attend.

How long will the process take?

The FGC Coordinator needs time to consult with all the participants and arrange a time for everyone to get together. Once all participants are assembled together for the meeting, the FGC session could take anywhere from 3-10 hours.

What if the FGC does not end in a plan?

Ask the CAS worker to answer this question.

How do I refer a case for ADR?

Anyone can suggest a case for FGC, including lawyers and family members. However, the referral to ADR-LINK comes from the CAS or the Indigenous community that the child is affiliated with. The referral agent screens the case to see if it qualifies. The referral agent also determines if the key participants agree to consider FGC and notifies the Office of the Child's Lawyer.



What if I'm not happy with the process?

ADR-Link will ask for your opinions and feedback when the FGC process concludes. Let us know your opinions so we can all work to make the system helpful and respectful. Some participants may also want to voice any concerns directly to the FGC Coordinator. If your concern warrants a formal complaint, call ADR-LINK for direction to the appropriate body.

How can I find out more about Family Group Conferencing?

The George Hull Centre has information on its web site.

How does a case qualify for FGC through ADR-LINK?

FGC can be used in many families to address many issues. However, to qualify for the MCYS funding available through ADR-LINK, there must be a clear decision made that a court intervention is being considered, is pending or is in progress. The funding does not cover the use of FGC as a Differential Response. In addition, ADR-LINK only serves the eight children's aid societies and the ten First Nation communities in the South West Region of Ontario.

