



2007

Widening the Circle: The Practice and Evaluation of Family Group Conferencing with Children, Youths, and their Families. Joon Pennell and Gary Anderson (Eds.).

Anne Abramson-Madden
University of California, Berkeley

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Recommended Citation

Abramson-Madden, Anne (2007) "*Widening the Circle: The Practice and Evaluation of Family Group Conferencing with Children, Youths, and their Families.* Joon Pennell and Gary Anderson (Eds.).," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 1 , Article 21.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol34/iss1/21>

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Joan Pennell and Gary Anderson (Eds.), *Widening the Circle: The Practice and Evaluation of Family Group Conferencing with Children, Youths, and their Families*. Washington, DC: NASW Press, 2005. \$49.99 papercover.

Child welfare, like many social service areas, has seen its share of trends. A recent trend in child welfare is centered around the use of the family and community in the child welfare decision making process. These family involvement programs stem from the idea that families are experts on themselves and with their community, can identify resources and supports that may not have been immediately identifiable to the child welfare agency. There are three main types of these programs in use in the United States: these are first, Team Decision-Making as part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Initiative; second, Family Team Conferencing; and third Family Group Conferencing. All of these programs were developed around the idea of family involvement, however they vary in the degree to which they involve families in the decision-making process. For example, in Team Decision-Making the team, which includes family members, community members, and professionals, works together to reach a consensus around decision, whereas in Family Group Conferencing, families make decisions during their own private time away from a larger group that also includes agency staff and community members.

In their book, Joan Pennell and Gary Anderson undertake the challenge of providing a guide to the history, theory, practice, and evaluation of Family Group Conferencing. The authors focus their efforts around Family Group Conferencing as used in child welfare in the United States and Canada. The book is divided into four main sections. The first section details Family Group Conferencing through chapters on preparing for a conference, cultural safety, and community partnerships. The second section provides a guide to policy and practice change with discussions of agency planning, training of staff and key personnel, and how to involve policy and the legislative process. The third section reviews the evaluation of Family Group Conferencing, including how to assess model fidelity, determining short and long term goals for evaluation, and

conducting a cost-benefit analysis of social service programs. The final section, entitled "Reshaping Child Welfare" provides a roadmap to current child welfare services, including handling domestic violence issues, a comparison of the various family involvement programs mentioned above, integrating child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and a review of Family Group Conferencing in the larger child welfare arena.

The book will be useful for anyone who is interested in the use of Family Group Conferencing in the United States and Canada. It is well written and an easy read for both practitioners and academics. The authors provide detailed instructions for the micro and macro practice of Family Group Conferencing including how to prepare for and conduct conferences as well as how to deal with the larger child welfare agency and policy arenas. What makes this book an essential read is the attention to evaluation and placement of Family Group Conferencing within the larger child welfare context. The authors provide a comparison of other family models and discuss the difficulties of evaluating such programs. The authors provide a critical and systematic approach to their subject and the result is a book which should be a required read for anyone interested in the current state of child welfare.

Anne Abramson-Madden, University of California, Berkeley