

Family Group Conference - a promising intervention in child protection

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The Family Group Conference as a participative, resource-, solution- and real life-oriented procedure gives families in challenging life situations the opportunity to develop and test individual solutions and decisions themselves. In a joint evaluation project of the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts and the Lucerne Childcare Centre (www.fachstellekinder.ch), which has been using the method since 2015, eleven family situations were systematically evaluated and the results presented at a conference in November 2019 (<https://www.hslu.ch/de-ch/soziale-arbeit/agenda/veranstaltungen/2019/11/06/fachtagung-familienrat-2019>).

In this article, the essential framework conditions of the procedure are presented, the current situation in Switzerland is outlined and, finally, the most important results of the evaluation project are presented. In the conclusion, possible applications in child protection by the authorities are outlined.

1 Origin of the Family Council procedure and the current situation in Switzerland

Origin

The Family Group Conference is an intervention procedure which has its origins in New Zealand. It aims at involving the social environment of those persons who need support. Through a standardized procedure, the person affected by a specific situation and his or her familiar and social network, are enabled to develop solutions which are accepted and supported by the focus person and their environment, which thus leads to sustainable changes. The procedure aims to promote resources, enables subsidiary assistance, and thus reduces official measures (Hauri & Rosch, 2018, pp. 677-678). The procedure of FGC was developed in the cultural context of the Maori, who wanted to be more involved in finding solutions for crisis situations and help plan measures - in accordance with their cultural traditions. Since 1989, the Family Council procedure has been enshrined in law in New Zealand and is legally implemented in child and youth welfare situations.

The procedure gives the family the opportunity to develop their own, system-compatible, and custom-fit solutions for the family crisis before official intervention takes place. "The participatory, lifeworld-oriented concern of this help plan procedure was the starting point. The aim was to endow those affected by the decisions of professional authorities with an active role in the decision-making process to strengthen everyday practices and real-life traditions over scientific approaches to reduce the imposition of real-life support cultures following professional help logics" (Früchtel F. & Roth E., 2017, p. 13).

"The family group conference is a thoroughly cooperative, solution-oriented, subsidiary procedure. This opens a real opportunity for people in challenging life situations to actively participate in solving problems and planning assistance together with their relatives and other

people who are important to them, i.e., to take personal responsibility. Social relationships, competences, and strengths of the extended family circle, but also offers of the neighborhood, the circle of friends or professionals are specifically explored and used. These contribute to solutions that are custom-fit, related to the living environment and are, thus, effective in the long term. Children and adolescents in need of protection are explicitly involved in the assistance planning. The procedure is recommended as best practice in the context of participatory measures in the UN Convention on the Rights of Children. Offering family councils already has an activating effect on the people who are directly and indirectly affected and positively influences their will to cooperate". (Quick, 2018, p.201)

In Straub et al. (2017) "a gift from New Zealand to the world, Family Group Conferencing in an international context" it is shown how the procedure spread over the Anglo-American and Northern European countries in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century in Europe (cf. Straub U. in Schäuble B./ Wagner L., 2017, pp. 172-186).

Family Council/ Family Group Conference - a promising approach

"In the meantime, conferencing procedures are in use in educational support, disability support, social psychiatry, care for the elderly and schools. The Family Council is now legally anchored in about a dozen regions and countries around the world. This simplifies its use considerably, since it is a mixture of real-life practice, professional method and legal procedure and thus depends on legitimization in all these spheres. " (Früchtel F. & Roth E., 2017, p. 14).

Current situation in Switzerland

Unlike in the Netherlands, Scandinavia and Germany (Früchtel & Hampe-Grosser, 2010), the family council has not yet been established nationwide in Switzerland. The first pioneers started with family councils in individual regions in 2010, and regional networks were founded in Bern and Zurich. Since 2014, the Bern University of Applied Sciences has been offering a certificate course for family council coordinators, the only one of its kind in Switzerland (www.bfh.ch). Currently, there is hardly any empirical evidence for the effectiveness of this approach available in Switzerland. The evaluation of the Family Council by the Lucerne Childcare Centre and a preliminary study within the framework of a master's module on the Family Council method by the Bern University of Applied Sciences and Arts are the first steps towards systematic data collection and evaluation.

Implementing the procedure in the legal context of child protection in Switzerland

In the legal context of Switzerland, a family council can be used in the clarification procedure, in managing mandates or as measures ordered by the child protection authority (cf. Hauri & Rosch, 2018, pp. 681-684); its use in a voluntary context is also conceivable:

- In the context of an investigation, the person in charge can order a family council or, alternatively the person who controls childcare conditions can arrange a family council after having consulted the family and the authority.
- Secondly, the legal assistant can order a family council as part of his or her official mandate or in consultation with the child protection authority.
- Thirdly, the child protection authority may order a family council as part of a directive (Art. 307 para. 3 CC), instead of a guardianship or as part of an existing guardianship.

A family council can also be used in the context of a withdrawn right of residence with placement (Art. 310 CC).

- In a voluntary context, a family council can be initiated e.g., in school social work or at a family counselling center.

2 Procedure of the family council

Depending on the model, the procedure is divided into four or five phases. It is explicitly stated that the procedure must be "adapted to individual circumstances and not applied rigidly according to a concept" (Hauri & Rosch, 2018, p. 681).

The procedure used in the Lucerne Childcare Unit refers to the five phases mentioned in the guide "Family Council in Practice" (preparation phase, information phase, family phase / family-only phase, decision-making and, implementation and review phase with follow-up advice) (Hilbert, Kubisch-Piesk, Schlizio-Jahnke, 2017, pp. 39-41). The individual phases can be described as follows:

Phase	Time	Contents	Participants
Preparatory phase before the family council is held to prepare the family council with the family concerned	before the family council (1 to 6 weeks before, depending on the situation and needs)	Information about the family council, clarification of the topics, selection, and invitation of guests, fixing of place and date, expansion of the network	commissioning agency, offering agency/coordinating person, parents, children/young people
Information phase on the family council itself including declaration of concern by the commissioning person	on the day of the family council	Declaration of concern, description of the current situation/initial situation, appreciation of what has been achieved/accomplished so far, naming of possible resources, goals of the family council, minimum requirements for a decision, professional offers of support, rules for discussion	commissioning body, offering body/coordinator, participants in the family council, possibly other experts such as therapists, doctors, social pedagogues, etc.
Family phase with a so-called "family-only phase" without specialists, without a commissioning person and without a coordinating person/providing body.	On the day of the family council	discussion of possible solutions, development of agreements, activation of the support of all those involved, inclusion of the network	Family council participants without experts
Decision-making and concretization phase after the family-only phase	on the day of the family council	Presentation of the family decision, approval by the competent authority or	commissioning agency, coordinating person, participants in the family council

with - preliminary - acceptance of the plan by the commissioning agency		new negotiation, documentation of the decision	
Implementation and review phase	with follow-up council after the family council has been held until the follow-up council	Implementation of the agreements, review of the implementation, review of the agreements, changes, if necessary	commissioning body, offering body/ coordinating person, participants in the family council

Table: Overview of phases of the family council procedure

While the information-, family-, decision-making- and concretization- phases take place directly on the date of the family council, the preparation- phase precedes the council and can take varying lengths of time (one to several weeks).

The implementation- and review- phase lasts between six weeks and three months after the family council and ends with the follow-up council.

Explanation of the family council process

Preparation phase:

In the preparatory phase, the mandate is clarified between the commissioning agency/authority and the agency/coordinator offering the service. Following a "multi-eye principle", they jointly consider whether an assignment for a family council can be given. The family is invited to an information meeting, the procedure is presented and then the family decides for or against a family council. Addressing and motivating the family already triggers the first processes in the system. If the family decides in favor of a family group conference, the family council coordinator prepares the family council together with the family (selection of participants, expansion of the circle, date and place of the meeting, information of the participants, confidant for the child, moderator, etc.).

Family group Conference

The meeting is divided into an initial information phase, followed by the family-only phase and finally the decision-making process with the so-called "acceptance of the plan". In the information phase, the coordinator and, if possible, the commissioning body as well as the assembled family are present. The aim is to agree on the procedure and the rules of the meeting, to present the so-called "declaration of concern" of the commissioning agency and to convey to the members of the network, which concerns, and worries are in the room and what questions must be clarified at the end of the meeting and what minimum requirements must be guaranteed in the case of safeguarding the best interests of the child. Specialists such as therapists, doctors, etc. can still be consulted in this initial information phase if necessary. In the family-only time, the family discusses and debates their crisis without a mandating body, without a family council coordinator and without specialists, only with the invited participants, and develops proposals for solutions to the questions mentioned, which are to be answered. In this protected, private atmosphere, the family and its network can become active. The proposals developed are presented in the form of a plan to the coordinator and the commissioning agency in the final concretization and decision-making phase. The plan is then checked by the commissioning body, if necessary specified, adjustments are made and finally the plan is approved.

Implementation and review phase:

In the following six to eight weeks, the agreements are implemented and reviewed and, if necessary, adjusted again in the follow-up council scheduled thereafter.

Core elements of the family group Conference

The following features characterize the concept of the family council:

- There is a declaration of custody
 - There is an extension of the circle in the procedure, i.e., other people from the social environment of the persons concerned take part in the family council, not only the nuclear family
 - There is a private social network time (family-only phase)
 - There is a plan sign-off
 - The professionals involved are solution-abstinent
- (Hauri & Rosch, 2018 p. 681)

A special feature of the procedure is the network expansion in the preparation phase and the so-called family-only phase during the implementation of the family council. The aim of the network expansion is to find people in the family's social environment who can support and help the family in the current crisis, so that the family council does not only take place in the nuclear family. In addition to relatives, these can also be neighbors, colleagues, friends, etc. The people concerned decide for themselves whose presence is important. The invited participants are informed in advance about the procedure, the reason for the meeting and what is expected of them. The coordinator supports the family in finding and formulating the invitation to the family and social support persons.

The family only time, in which the family and their network discuss, consider, develop proposals and their own support plan in the absence of the professionals and the commissioning agency, is another core element of the procedure. In this moment of family only time, the family system and its network are encouraged to create tailor-made and, in the best case, sustainable solutions with the available resources from the network for their own and individual situation. In particular critical crisis situations, an emergency scenario can be agreed on with the family in advance.

The declaration of concern and the acceptance of the plan are of particular importance for the commissioning agency: The declaration of concern is written by the commissioning agency in simple language, in an appreciative and positive attitude, and contains the reason for the council and what the commissioning professional is concerned about, as well as the mandate for the assembled participants of the family council and, in the case of child welfare risks, the minimum requirements in the form of minimum criteria for securing the best interests of the child.

The plan is accepted by the commissioning authorities after the family-only phase and should cover the minimum requirements previously communicated in the declaration of concern and meet all legal and child protection requirements. If the proposals made by the family and any additional arrangements can be approved, the plan is accepted and signed. If the KESB is involved, the plan can be accepted with reservations by the person present and then verified by the overall authority.

In the follow-up council, which takes place about six to eight weeks later, these agreements, which were made in the family council, are checked up on whether they have been implemented.

3 Theoretical backgrounds

The family council is a participatory, lifeworld-oriented procedure and is characterized by a systemic perspective (Früchtel & Roth, 2017, p. 13). It is based on the principle of "helping people to help themselves" and the basic assumption that each person is an expert in his or her own life (Quick, 2018, p. 199 ff.). The concept of empowerment, which is characterized by resource orientation, self-determination and participation of those affected, guides the actions (Hauri & Rosch, 2018, p. 680). Against the background of the systemic view, the family council works self-referentially and only receives a nudge from the outside through the coordinator (Früchtel & Roth, 2017, p. 14). In the latest academic discourse, the relational aspects of the family council have been emphasized: problems are not only understood as deficits, but as valuable opportunities to connect people with each other (p. 14). (Cf. Hauri & Rosch, 2018, pp. 437-438).

Giving responsibility back to the family concerned to develop their own, tailor-made solutions and suggestions for overcoming their difficulties and crises is central and is a guiding principle from the beginning, especially in the "network expansion" and "family-only phase".

The Family Council process aims to empower and enable the people involved, which can be described as a genuine task of welfare/ social work (cf. Def. International Federation of Social Work in Gabriel & Meier 2019, 221). This attitude is also in line with the principles of salutogenesis (Erikson & Lindström 2008, in Gabriel & Meier 2019, 222), which aim to increase people's possibilities for action and positively influence their quality of life. This can be done by strengthening the sense of coherence (SOC) and generalized resistance resources. The illustration links the Family Council process with the theoretical construct of the sense of coherence and shows how the individual steps of the Family Council process make the three areas of the sense of coherence (comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness) tangible and activate the resistance resources. In this way, from the very beginning, the attitude, and the credit of trust can have a positive effect on the entire social system of a family.

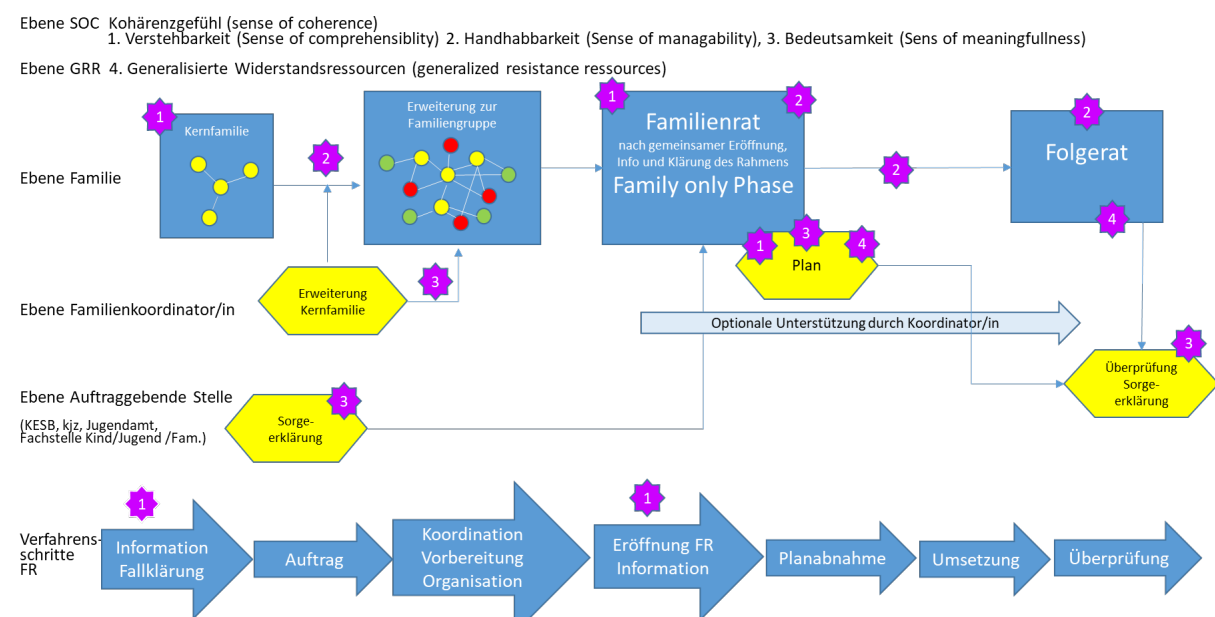


Abbildung: Gabriel in Meier Magistretti, 2019, S.229

4. Results of the evaluation

As part of the evaluation project the data of eleven family situations from 2015 to the end of 2018 were systematically evaluated via questionnaires for parents, coordinators, and commissioning agencies. Structured guideline interviews were conducted with the commissioning agencies in 2018. A document analysis of the declarations of care and of documents of the family council that was held, was carried out.

An accompanying group from the Lucerne Childcare Unit, consisting of professional advisors and members of the KESB, and an accompanying group from the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, consisting of five lecturers with specialist expertise in FGC, acted as echo groups.

The underlying questions of the evaluation focused on the application of the procedure in child protection, the practicability, and the professional development of the Family Council procedure.

Summary of the most important results of the evaluation

The preparatory phase proved to be particularly relevant and important in the evaluation conducted.

In order to motivate and recruit both the commissioning agency and the concerned families, precise information, addressing insecurities, a clear communication and the clarification of responsibilities and roles are needed.

This preparatory phase ended with a joint information meeting of all those involved (commissioning party, family council coordinator and family), after which the family could decide whether or not to consider a family council as a further course of action. Leaving the decision-making competence with the family, was an important factor in reaching the families in the first place and motivating them to take part in an information session. Already with the request and the motivation of the family for an information interview, including the final decision of the family to participate and to start a council, processes were triggered within the family system that had an effect, regardless of whether a family council was eventually carried out or not. For the commissioning agencies, this phase was characterized by frequent contacts with the family and intensive motivational work, so that the relationship with the family was built up and intensified, more background knowledge was generated and the ability to cooperate could be checked by the mandating authority.

Particularly in the implementation phase of the family council procedure at the Lucerne Childcare Centre, with little practical experience and examples to draw on, it seemed important to pick up on issues such as shame and fear in the preparation phase.

The starting points for the family councils were diverse and ranged from parenting problems, behavioral problems and school problems, difficult separations/ divorces having split-up families, visitation rights and residence problems, care bottlenecks and gaps in care in a family, to re-placement questions (Dietrich/ Waldispühl, 2019, pp.27-28). It was not possible to draw up a conclusive list of indicators for situations that are fundamentally suitable or unsuitable for the use of the family council procedure; family councils can basically be carried out in all situations. If there is a need for immediate action in child protection situations, safeguarding the best interests of the child is the priority; a family council can be used later, if necessary, to develop measures and plans after the immediate intervention.

Instead of indicators, prerequisites for a family council could be defined: There should be "joint care" between the parents ("joint care": not in the legal sense of Art. 296 ff. ZGB; but as a common concern), a minimal "network expansion" should be possible, and the parents should signal an openness to wanting to hold a family council. A prior process of consideration and negotiation by all parties involved is necessary.

During the entire process a differentiated description of the division of responsibilities, tasks and roles of commissioners and providers was important and necessary. Differentiated models for this still needs to be developed. A divided supervision of the commissioning party by a head of assignment and the responsibility of the coordinator for the family has proven successful and facilitated the neutrality and solution abstinence of the coordinator towards the family.

The "declaration of care" as an instrument for the authority to formulate his or her own care and minimum standards towards the family was demanding in its application. In principle, the joint preparation with the coordinator was experienced as helpful and supportive. The instrument of the "declaration of care" by the authority can be further developed professionally through helpful standards and the corresponding further training of professionals.

The acceptance of the plan by the commissioning agency after the family-only phase proved to be difficult in some cases. Tired and exhausted families were sometimes no longer able to make improvements and additions. In KESB proceedings (because of the chamber decision of three members), it should therefore be possible for the plan to be accepted flexibly and subsequently after the council.

The time when a family council took place varied from evenings during the week to Saturday mornings. In principle, the professionals interviewed, reported that they were willing to work outside normal working hours, as the number of councils held was manageable. One agency reported that they expected the family to be able to take a ½ day off for this.

After the follow-up council, there were uncertainties on the part of the mandating authority as to how things would continue afterwards and when the fgc- coordinator would withdraw and close the case. It is proved advisable to hand the case over from the coordinator to the commissioning agency. Even after the conclusion of the family council, contacts should be arranged to give the family the opportunity to get in touch and the commissioning agency the opportunity for regular exchange with the family.

(Cf. Dietrich/Waldispühl, 2019, pp.32-44).

Due to the good results, the Fachstelle Kinderbetreuung, Luzern has decided to include the family council as a permanent offer in its catalogue of services.

5 Considerations for the application of the Family Council/Family Group Conference procedure in official child protection services

Is the procedure applicable in official child protection situations? How can protection and safety be ensured in highly contentious family systems during family-only time at the council itself? Are stressed family systems capable of making decisions and of acting? These are questions that authorities ask themselves again and again and find themselves in the area of conflict between responsibility, protection and giving back the responsibility, empowerment

of families and ultimately a (re-)empowerment to cope with their own everyday life and living.

This paradigm shift in working with families is challenging for the professionals, as it means handing back responsibility to the families for their future solutions and plans, especially in view of securing the best interests of the child or child protection. And yet, the evaluation in Central Switzerland on which the article is based and other evaluations in neighboring European countries (Hauri/ Rosch, 2018, pp.690-693) prove that the Family Council procedure is an option and opens up the possibility for families in a wide variety of initial situations to become active again and develop their own, tailor-made solutions. Supported by resources from the family and social environment, solutions can emerge that would only be partially or not at all accessible to professionals.

Trusting families in precarious and stressful situations with this ability and helping them to regain their ability to act and their confidence in their own ability to act is demanding for professionals in official child protection and involves a change of attitude. At the same time, integration into the procedures of official child protection offers an opportunity to find solutions with families that can be more sustainable, more appropriate, possibly unexpected and that in any case bring greater agreement from the families.

Früchtel also points out that the use of the family council requires a leap of faith in the family system, which in most cases releases positive forces. The procedure means a paradigm shift on the part of the professionals, in that the families and their networks are given back their own responsibility. It requires an attitude that the families find their own, tailor-made solutions. It has also been shown that new, unexpected solutions emerge, that would not have occurred to the professionals. (Früchtel et al., 2017; Straub, 2011)

Critical aspects

Situations in which there is a need for immediate action about safeguarding the best interests of the child, as well as highly contentious parental or family conflicts, were assessed in the survey as critical with regard to the implementation of a family council. In these cases, safeguarding the best interests of the child has absolute priority and is considered the primary mandate. In highly contentious situations, it should be discussed what can be done in the event of an escalation and care should be taken in the preparation to ensure a balance of power in the composition of the family council. During the evaluation phase of the Lucerne Childcare Unit, a family council was cancelled because family members were afraid of being exposed to an unfavorable distribution of power. The coordinator must keep this in mind. Vulnerable family members can be provided with key support persons. This is considered essential for children/adolescents, but also for adult family members.

One aspect that was confirmed several times during the evaluation was the perceived shame and the experienced inadequacy to cope with their own problems, which the concerned families expressed, and which inhibited them to imagine disclosing their problems and difficulties in a family and socially extended circle. This seems to be a hurdle using the family council, especially in a culture where difficult issues are tried to be solved in the nuclear family and in the close circle.

Following Frank Früchtel, this article shall be rounded off with the reflection, that relationships that exist based on personal and emotional connection are more sustainable and long-lasting than those that are professional, time-limited, and mission-based. Such personal relationships work from the family and social network.

And finally, people are endowed with a genuine willingness to help, which is triggered as soon as others with whom there is a bond are in an emergency situation, so that a willingness to support and help can generally be expected from the family and social network.

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