

# Family Group Conferencing to preserve Families and prevent Child Institutionalization



*Karen Smith Rotabi, Richmond, Virginia (USA)*

Helping families and their kin develop care plans for orphaned and vulnerable children was the objective of the family group conferencing (FGC) training that took place in Guatemala City from July 10-12, 2012.

This family preservation approach for developing strategies to prevent the institutionalization of children emphasizes the strengths of families and their capacity to solve their own problems and develop their own care plans. FGC was originally legislated in New Zealand after protests by indigenous Maori communities against Eurocentric approaches that they viewed as eroding family and tribal connections. The strategy brings together the immediate and extended family of children who are at risk of out of home care. The family meets together, conference style, to discuss and negotiate a plan for the care and protection of the children and adolescents. Most often families negotiate a care plan for the child to remain within the family system safely. Used in Canada, the United States, New Zealand, the Marshall Islands, and elsewhere, FGC has been evaluated as an effective social intervention that preserves and empowers families and ultimately prevents out of home childcare, in many cases.

*Justo Solórzano (l), Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF Guatemala, and Secretary of the Social Welfare Secretariat, Flora Ramos (r), make opening remarks highlighting the importance of family support to achieve child rights in Guatemala.*

The training was a collaborative initiative by the Social Welfare Secretariat (Secretaría de Bienestar Social-referred to by the Spanish acronym SBS), UNICEF Guatemala, and Social Work faculty from Brigham Young University, North Carolina State University, and Virginia Commonwealth University. A FGC orientation training was provided to 41 psychologists and social workers from a range of institutions, including the public child welfare, civil society organizations, and three universities. In the training evaluation, participants indicated that FGC training is particularly relevant in Guatemala where traditional family life lends itself well to the intervention. Also, participants indicated that FGC is also relevant in this country which is currently developing systems of alternative child care, including family support strategies and ultimately preventing the unnecessary placement of children in institutional care. There is also a research component of this project looking at pre and post -test results, focus group results and development of two academic articles based on training results. One of the main objectives of the project was to determine, through the training and focus group discussions, whether or not FGC could be adapted to meet the specific needs and customs of the Guatemalan context. Initial results show that the methodology is an excellent fit. Several participants mentioned that the methodology was very similar to traditional approaches commonly found in Mayan communities.

Joan Pennell, PhD of North Carolina State University was the lead trainer and she brought years of experience in FGC to Guatemala with this 2.5 day orientation to the method. She said, "I was very impressed by how quickly the participants grasped the methodology and identified its potential for their own work with families from diverse communities in Guatemala." Training not only covered core FGC engagement strategies, but also gave participants a hands-on opportunity to practice the method of coordinating a conference. Beginning with family preparation prior to the conference, emphasizing family readiness to engage in a childcare-planning meeting. Because such a family gathering could be highly emotional, the FGC coordinator's role includes preparing key participants for the meeting. Then, when the meeting actually takes place the coordinator's up-front work pays off when

the family takes on the responsibility of actually facilitating the meeting and concluding with a feasible care plan.



*Sully de Ucles acts as Family Group Conferencing Coordinator in the role-play of a family meeting.*

Professor Jini Roby of Brigham Young University spoke of her personal commitment to bringing the training to Guatemala, pointing out her greatest wish to prevent the institutionalization of children and preserve families. As a result, the Center for Family Studies of Brigham Young University provided catalyst funding for the project and other partners, including UNICEF, the SBS and the other university partners, came together to make the training a reality in Guatemala.

Karen Rotabi, PhD of Virginia Commonwealth University said, “It’s really exciting to see the enthusiasm for FGC and the approach to child care planning is such a natural fit to traditional family life in Guatemala.” Also reflecting on the training, Kelley Bunkers, international child protection consultant, said that the “enthusiasm of participants was clearly a vote of confidence and now next steps are being worked to truly support a pilot project.” Guatemalan psychologist, Sully de Ucles will remain engaged with the project and has already developed regular communication with participants and has identified three NGOs and government agencies that want to move forward and implement the methodology in their work with and for children. There is significant enthusiasm by officials, UNICEF and participants to explore possibilities regarding development of a pilot project that includes a strong evidence gathering component.

To learn more about Family Group Conferencing in Guatemala, see:

Rotabi, K. S., Pennell, J., Roby, J. L., & Bunkers, K. M. (2012). Family Group Conferencing as a culturally adaptable intervention: Reforming intercountry adoption in Guatemala.

International Social Work, 55(3), 402-416. doi: 10.1177/0020872812437229

The training manual used in Guatemala is available (in Spanish and English) at:



<http://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/pennell/fdgm/manual/index.htm>