

An Exploration of the Effects of Family Team Meetings on Reunification

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Abstract

Family Group Decision Making, also referred to as family unity or family team meetings, are techniques that previous research has indicated to be useful in working to reduce the risk of maltreatment in child protective services. These techniques have been found to be beneficial in both the areas of reducing the risk of removal as well as reunification. This exploratory study, involving closed kinship care cases, was conducted to determine if family team meetings occurred, and if cases having family team meetings had a higher return to parent rate than those cases where family team meetings did not occur. The findings of this study were contrary to previous literature and implications for study limitations were discussed. Future research to examine the effectiveness of family team meetings on preventing removal of children versus the reunification of parents with children should be conducted.

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Introduction/Literature Review

Family Group Decision Making is a family centered, culturally sensitive, technique used with families to develop permanency plans for children who are in foster care or at risk for maltreatment (Ott, 1998). The two most noted models of Family Group Decision Making are referred to as Family Group Conferencing and Family Unity Meetings and each of these models operate from the same basic philosophy: the immediate and extended family are very important and these individuals should be involved in making decisions about the child's well being, placement options, and permanency plans (Ott, 1998). Research indicates that the use of these models, or similar ones, has been an effective approach to lessening substantiated reports or maltreatment and reducing risk factors (Pennell & Burford, 2000). The Cabinet for Health and Family Services, which houses the child protection division of state government for Kentucky, has adopted a similar technique which is referred to as Family Team Meetings (Commonwealth of Kentucky, 2005). Family Team Meetings are requirements for all out of home placement cases currently and follow the same technique of implementation as the Family Group Decision Making model (Commonwealth of Kentucky, 2005). The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of family team meetings on the return rate of children who were placed in kinship/relative placements due to maltreatment in the Green River Service Region of Kentucky (Commonwealth of Kentucky, 2005). Please note the terms *family team meeting*, *family group decision making*, and *family unity* may be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

Family Group Decision Making emphasizes using the strengths of families and their community to make sound decisions on behalf of children. Family Group Decision Making conferences bring together a family, where maltreatment took place or the risk of maltreatment

occurring is assessed to be high, relatives, close friends, and other significant support systems, usually professional services, to develop a plan to keep instances of maltreatment from reoccurring and to stop family violence (Pennell & Burford, 2000). Bringing supports and people with connections to the family in to the decision making process assists in sharing some of the responsibility for set backs and even tragedies. These conferences also allow child welfare workers to not work in isolation and demonstrates for others the difficult situations and judgements that these workers face on a daily basis (Pennell & Burford, 2000). Family Group Decision Making can serve as a vehicle for the integration of child welfare services and other family support or community resources (Pennell & Burford, 2000).

Although a single meeting can require several weeks of planning and coordination by the referring agency, the actual meeting itself consists of only three stages (Ott, 1998). These stages are information sharing, deliberation time (where professionals may or may not be present), and decision making and plan writing (Ott, 1998). It is here that the transition is made from viewing social work as an individualistic approach to more of a community standpoint (Bermack, 2000).

One study performed in the eastern Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador used the family group decision making model to assess what impact this model would have in eliminating or reducing violence against children (Pennell & Burford, 2000). At the beginning of the study, child protection workers, women's groups, police and parole officers, youth advocates and other community partners developed a philosophy that stated that everyone within a family should be safe from abuse and that no one in the family was safe as long as someone was being victimized. It was further stated in the philosophy that perpetrators of violence would be held accountable for their actions and that strategies for stopping maltreatment would come from fostering relationships with extended family members, friends, and other community

partners (Pennell & Burford, 2000).

Over a one year period of time, 32 families were served using the family group decision making model. For these families, 37 conferences were held. This included 32 first time conferences and 5 follow up conferences (Pennell & Burford, 2000). Although the number of conferences may seem small, the actual number of participants in these conferences totaled 472 and the average conference had 13 participants, with a predominant number of participants being family as opposed to service providers (Pennell & Burford, 2000). The results of this study indicated that the family conferences protected children and unified families. 76% of the families in this study indicated that they felt their family was “better off” from having participated in the conferences (Pennell & Burford, 2000). After viewing substantiation rates for the same families involved in the study, it was noted that the substantiation rates as a whole decreased by almost half while overall child protective services activity declined as well.

A similar finding came after research was completed in Adams County Pennsylvania in 2002 through 2004. This county began implementing the Family Group Decision Making model not only with children and youth services but also with juvenile probation services (Vriens, 2005). The county saw a 25% decrease in the out of home placement of children and youth over a two year period while exceeding national standards in the areas of permanency and length of placement in care (Vriens, 2005). Of children in placement for less than 12 months, 88% had no more than two placements and the national standard is 86% (Vriens, 2005). Also 84% of children who were discharged from placements were reunified with their parents in less than 12 months while the national standard is 76% (Vriens, 2005). It was felt that the use of community and family collaborations through the family group decision making meetings made a huge impact in these areas.

A common thread that exists in families who participate in family group decision making conferences is that many times, the children in these families are already placed in the homes of relatives or are on the verge of being placed. This kinship placement is a practice that has become a very important part of the child protection services provided in the United State today (Scannapieco & Hegar, 2002). It is believed that these types of placements have been commonplace for centuries in Oceania and other Pacific rim countries and islands as well as in South Africa (Hegar & Scannapieco, 2000). Kinship placements have also been prolific in the African American culture within the United States for decades (Danzy & Jackson, 1997). It is also policy for the child protective services workers in the state of Kentucky to explore kinship care placement options as soon as possible when a removal situation exists due to maltreatment (Commonwealth of Kentucky, 2005). When children are placed in relative homes the four main categories that require attention are usually financial, services, social support, and education (Scannapieco & Hegar, 2000). Family team meetings can be used to ensure these areas are given proper attention and to problem solve around barriers to getting these needs met. The Kentucky DCBS Policy Manual mandates that family team meetings be used when children are placed outside their parent's home to ensure services to the child and placement as well as assist the parents on reducing risk of harm so that reunification can occur (Commonwealth of Kentucky, 2005).

Method

The research design for this study was exploratory in nature. This study looked at kinship care cases that are closed, both with cases where children were returned to their parents and those where the kinship care relative obtained permanent custody of the child. The cases were examined to determine if family team meetings occurred, per Kentucky child protection

policy, and if cases having family team meetings had a higher return to parent rate than those cases where family team meetings did not occur (Commonwealth of Kentucky, 2005).

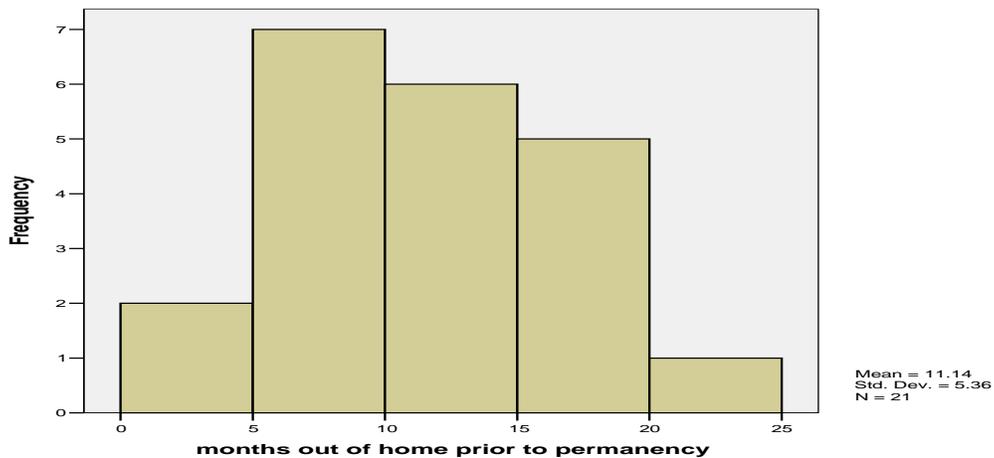
This study was completed using secondary data analysis and the data came from the Kentucky child protective services computer database called TWIST and from the Green River Region Kinship Care Log. The Kinship care log is a document of all kinship care cases that exist since kinship care became a mandated placement option in Kentucky in 2001. There were 256 cases listed on the log and 68 were found to be closed, meaning the child had been returned to the parent or the relative placement had received permanent custody. Of those 68 cases, 25 were randomly chosen to be the sample for this research study. The log also reported if the relative received custody or the child was returned to parent, the relation of the relative to the child, and the county of placement with regard to rural or urban population. Searches in TWIST on each of these cases was conducted and information pulled from the data base included number of children in the family, number of months the children were out of the home before permanency was achieved and the number of family team meetings. Once this data was collected, separate ID numbers were assigned to the cases to ensure confidentiality of the participant cases in the sample.

The data collected was loaded in to an SPSS file (student version). Missing data was denoted in the file as some cases had components that could not be found. Descriptive and Frequency statistics were calculated. These statistics were calculated using all the data in the file and then statistics were calculated with just those cases where the child was returned home and again for just those cases where the relative obtained permanent custody. The mean, median, mode, standard deviation, variance, range, minimum, and maximum of the data set was calculated and reported. A histogram reporting data was also generated.

Results

A descriptive profile of the cases ($n = 25$) was created to show characteristics of the study sample. The number of children in the family ranged from one to five, with an average number of 2.68 and standard deviation of 1.030. The number of months out of home prior to permanency being established ranged from 1 to 24 months, with an average number of months of 11.14 and standard deviation of 5.360. 40% of the children in the sample were placed with the maternal grandparents while 20% of the sample were placed with paternal grandparents and maternal aunt/uncle respectively. 68% of the children in the sample were returned to their parents while 32% achieved permanency by the relative obtaining permanent custody.

In the cases chosen for the sample, 0 family team meetings were held in 72% of the cases. 1 family team meeting was held in 8% of the cases while 2 family team meetings were held in 12% of the cases. Cases that had 3 and 4 meetings each made up the remaining 4% of the cases respectively. 28.6% of the children were out of the home 7 months or less prior to permanency being established while 29.6% were out of the home for 14 or more months prior to establishing permanency. The following histogram illustrates months out of home.



It should be noted that missing data existed in some of the cases, in most instances the missing data was the number of months out of home or the relationship between child and relative caregiver.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this research study was to examine cases to determine if the use of family team meetings had an impact on whether or not children who were placed in relative kinship care homes had a greater rate of return to parent than those cases where family team meetings did not occur. The data from this study indicated that in 72% of the cases reviewed that no family team meetings were held; however, the percent of children in these cases who returned to their parents was 68%. These results indicate that the use of the family team meetings was not instrumental in returning children to their parents. It appears that other factors were involved to make the reunification of children with their parents occur. These results are contrary to the results garnered in the two studies discussed previously in the introductory sections.

This study did show that a larger percent of children are being returned to their parents than having to have alternative permanency arrangements. The study also indicated that permanency was established for 66.7% of the children in 12 or less months. There also appears to be a rather large percent of cases that were not following the Kentucky child protective services mandate of utilizing family team meetings when children are placed out of their parent's home (Commonwealth of Kentucky, 2005).

This study did have several limitations, the first of which was missing data. Some of the data could not be pulled from the case records or kinship care log, which were the only sources of information utilized in this study. Another limitation could have been an original case worker

documentation error in entering case data into the case file that made it impossible for the researcher to locate needed information. An example of this would be that the case worker did not document a family team meeting in the correct place in TWIST so when the researcher ran a search in the case in TWIST, no result was found. Another limitation would be the small sample size. A sample of 25 cases may not have been large enough to establish any external validity. It is believed that this sample is representative of the population of cases based on the fact that random sampling was used.

Conclusion

This study explored whether or not the use of family team meetings was beneficial in helping children who are in kinship relative placements be returned to their parent's home. Although previous research has indicated the use of these meetings has been effective in reducing risk and promoting return rates, the results of this study did not find the same conclusions.

By assessing techniques for effectiveness that are being employed by social workers on a regular basis, the knowledge base of the profession can expand and workers can be assured that they are using the most effective techniques and tools in working with clients. This study sets the stage for further research in the use of family group decision making or family team meetings. Future studies may use larger samples to assess the impact these meetings can have on reunification efforts. This study also leaves open the opportunity to make a distinction between the use of meetings being more beneficial for preventing children being removed from the home than as a strategy for reunification. Another avenue that could be explored would be a difference in reunification rates for those children placed in state foster homes as opposed to the kinship care relative homes.

Although the results of this study were not consistent with previous research, this study did produce valuable statistics on how case work is being completed in the Green River Region of the Kentucky Child Protective Service Division. The reunification of children with parents is occurring and perhaps further research is needed to determine what strategies are assisting in meeting this important goal.

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