

STRENGTHS-BASED DECISION MAKING PROTOCOLS

Building Solutions Together

Parents and Families at the Table

Parents and Families at the Table: Part I

As with the other components of the Partnership for Safety project, Parents at the Table builds on the capacities and resources of families. Utilizing a strengths-based perspective, the Family Team Decision Meetings (FTDM) are designed to make the best placement-related decision possible with a high level of participant feedback and agreement. This multi-disciplinary group should include the family of origin and extended family. It can also include friends and community-based service providers. The assigned CPS worker and their supervisor are also in attendance. The facilitated meeting encourages participants to share and discuss information related to the safety and protection of the children. Family Team Decision Meetings are consistent with the Agency's ongoing efforts to empower and engage families in the change process through a strengths-based approach. The information shared by the parents is especially important, as they usually know more about their situation than anyone else. That is why it is of the utmost importance that the atmosphere created is one of respect.

The Family Independence Agency has statutory responsibility to intervene in situations where children are at risk of harm due to considered or actual abuse or neglect. This FTDM process enhances the Agency's ability to make these crucial placement-related decisions. A facilitator trained in the facilitation process manages the meeting to ensure that all options are considered and that everyone participates in the discussion and ultimate decision. The purpose of the meeting is to determine if services and/or supports can be put into place that would allow the children to remain in the home safely, or, if placement out of the home is necessary, the first priority after the caretaker decision is the decision to make every effort to keep the child in his neighborhood if that is at all possible. Then the priority is to determine the least restrictive and intrusive form of placement. The overall goal of the FTDM is to reach a consensus in developing a plan that supports the family and protects the children. Consensus is a process that occurs through the sharing of ideas and honest discussion of a family's strengths and needs. It is not unanimity. It is willingness by the participants to support the team's decision and plan to keep the children safe. The goal of each meeting is for the group to reach a consensus decision, however if that is not possible, FIA must ultimately make the final decision. The criterion is always safety.

Family Team Decision Meeting Triggers

A CPS Caseworker requests a FTDM for removals when out of home placement for the children is required for their safety and protection. There are two distinct categories for the meetings:

1. Considered Removal: A Caseworker requests a FTDM for those open cases that have reached a level of risk where the children are not considered safe in the home.
The FTDM will be held within twenty-four hours after consultation with the Supervisor
2. Emergency Removal: A Caseworker requests a FTDM when the children have already been placed out of the home on an emergency basis.
The FTDM will be scheduled for the next working day following the removal.

Family Team Decision Meeting Process

While the FTDM is designed to support conversation and participation, the Facilitator of the meeting keeps the participants focused on the purpose of making a placement-related decision for the identified children. The following key elements of the meeting may not occur in a sequential manner in that the development of a consensus decision is a process.

Introductions:

The Facilitator introduces him/herself and explains the purpose of the meeting to all participants.

All participants introduce themselves and their relationship with the family.

The Facilitator reviews the Ground Rules for the FTDM and asks for agreement to the rules.

Ground Rules:

All participants are treated with respect and dignity

Information discussed at the FTDM is sensitive and personal. As such, team members should respect the family's privacy. Due to the nature of the meeting, it may be necessary to share some information with the court

One person speaks at a time and everyone will have the opportunity to speak.

The goal of the meeting is to reach consensus about a decision, however FIA ultimately owns the decision if the group cannot reach consensus.

FIA promotes a safe environment for employees and customers.

The parents are told that we believe they know more about their children than anyone else.

Issue Identification:

The parents may be asked to initiate the discussion by sharing information about their family and their situation/needs

The Facilitator should take note of the family's resources and capabilities. The family's strengths and needs can be recorded on the flipchart paper for the team to see and build on

The assigned caseworker will present the situation from his or her perspective using the Structured Decision Making tools that support their recommendation

Other participants will share information as it pertains to the identified risks and safety concerns

Situation Assessment:

Prior interventions, services and family strengths are identified during this phase of the meeting

All participants are encouraged to speak openly and honestly about the concerns and past successes (Exceptions) of the family

The Facilitator can model the exception finding process:

- *"Can you tell us more how you are able to get the children ready for school?"*
- *"How did working with that counselor make a difference?"*

Brainstorming:

Creativity is encouraged in the development of a plan to keep the children safe.

Ideas should focus on the least restrictive and least intrusive placement options that protect and provide safety.

The family's previous accomplishments related to the safety issues and their needs should be thoroughly explored

If a child is old enough to be present, their ideas should be solicited.

The Facilitator records and summarizes all the ideas generated

Decision:

Through discussion, the ideas generated are reviewed for merit, accessibility and feasibility.

The facilitator can use scaling and other solution-based questions to measure the likelihood of success, and/or the team members' confidence for the suggested ideas

- *To the team, "On a scale from 0 (no chance of succeeding) to 10 (reaching the goal) where does everyone see this plan?"*
- *To the family's support people, "How confident are you that you will be able to watch the children every day?"*
- *To the parent, "What will it take from the people at the table to help you follow-through with this decision?"*
- *To the CSP Worker', "What else can the parent or their supports do to help assure you that the children are safe?"*

All team members are again encouraged to participate in the discussion of the ideas as the facilitator moves the group to a consensus decision.

Any recommended services and resources are carefully reviewed.

Safety Plan/Action Steps:

The facilitator clearly identifies the safety plan decision and specifically outlines the action steps of each of the participants

The plan should be time-limited and measurable

Responsibility is given only to those who are in attendance at the meeting

Parents and Families at the Table: Part II

This second phase of the process occurs if the decision is made for a child to come into the foster care system. The Caregiver Meeting is a more informal meeting between the biological parents and the foster parents to discuss the emotional and physical needs of the child. The Foster Care worker calls this meeting by the child's third day in placement. The primary focus is on developing and maintaining a positive relationship between the biological parents and the foster parents, and to articulating the goal of reunification if that is possible. It is an opportunity for the foster parent to learn from the primary caregiver about the child's needs, likes, dislikes and daily habits or patterns. (*Bringing Families to the Table, March 2002*) The intention of the Caregiver Meeting is to discuss how to best help the child feel comfortable in his or her new environment.

Although unstructured, certain preparations can assist both the biological and the foster parents in creating a positive relationship.

For the Foster Parent:

Before the Caregiver Meeting:

- Ask them how they would like to be introduced; Mr. and Mrs. Smith, or Mr. John and Miss Mary
- Help them identify something positive about the child, i.e., manners, personal hygiene skills, school readiness, etc.
- Ask them to have a few questions prepared for the birth parents, such as: the child's favorite meals, does he have any allergies, what are her favorite TV shows?
- Ask them what information (phone, address, etc. they are willing to share with parent).

At the Caregiver Meeting:

- The Foster Parent can compliment the birth parent by pointing out the strengths and positive attributes of the child.
 - *"You must have done a great job helping your son learn how to cook, he has helped me with every meal"*
 - *"You should be very proud of your daughter, she told me exactly what she has to do for school"*

For the Birth Parent:

Before the Caregiver Meeting:

- Explain the purpose of the meeting is so they can meet the person helping to take care of their child at this time. Also, so the parent can help the foster parent learn more about their child.
- Ask the Birth Parent to have a few things in mind they think the Foster Parent should know about their child.

Be clear about the focus of the meeting. End the meeting by asking both the foster parents and the birth parents how this was helpful and what they think might be the next steps.