

# Family Group Meetings

## Information for legal representatives



### What is a Family Group Meeting?

A Family Group Meeting is held when Child Safety is concerned that a child is at risk of harm, or in need of protection.

The meeting brings together the child, their parents, family members and other people who can give support, and professionals, to talk about what needs to happen to keep the child safe from harm or risk of harm.

The purpose of the meeting is to help the family develop a case plan to safely care for their child.

### How does it work?

In Queensland, the *Child Protection Act 1999* (s51G-51Y) outlines when a Family Group Meeting should occur, who can attend and the timeframes around when a case plan must be documented and approved.

A collaborative family decision making process is applied to the Family Group Meeting. It aims to empower families by participating in, and taking responsibility for, planning and decision making to achieve meaningful and lasting change.

### What is collaborative family decision making?

Collaborative family decision making is a non-adversarial approach acknowledging that families know best about what will, and won't, work for them. Families are supported to build a safety and support network for their child.

### Principles of a Family Group Meeting

- Focus on the safety, belonging and wellbeing needs of the child.
- Listen to the views of the child, family and community, and involve them in planning and decision making.
- Be rigorous and hopeful in identifying a family's strengths and solutions.

The Family Group Meeting is organised and facilitated by a qualified and experienced convenor.

### What happens before the meeting?

The convenor works with the family to identify a location for the meeting that the family feels is safe and neutral, the date and time.

The convenor invites the family, their support network, Child Safety, and other professionals where appropriate, to attend the meeting. The more people that can support the family and help to keep the child safe, the better.

### What happens at the meeting?

The convenor will focus on what is working well in the family, what has everyone worried and what needs to happen to keep the child safe.

Child Safety will talk about the 'non-negotiable' things that need to happen for the child to be safe.

A case plan will be developed at the meeting that meets the unique needs of the family.

It is not a 'one size fits all' approach. It is a family-friendly document that is written in the words of the family.

The case plan will focus on what the family needs to do to address the worries, and achieve meaningful change to meet the child's safety needs. Some actions in the case plan may require the family to be connected to particular support services.

The family will be given private time to talk about what they can do to achieve the goals in the case plan, while also meeting Child Safety's requirements. The family can propose any actions they feel will work for them, as long as it achieves the child protection goals.

Neither the convenor nor the legal representative will be present during private time, unless requested by the family.

The Family Group Meeting will run for as long as the family needs to develop the case plan. This could mean a number of hours, or over several meetings.

Everyone who attends the Family Group Meeting will have an opportunity to provide feedback about the meeting.

## What is the role of the convenor?

The convenor will do a lot of work before the meeting to prepare the family, so they understand the purpose of the meeting and what Child Safety is concerned about. This also helps the family and child to tell their own story at the meeting, and come up with ideas for a case plan that works for them.

The convenor will also gather information to facilitate the meeting, so everyone feels safe, supported and can work together to develop the best plan possible to meet the safety needs of the child.

The convenor is independent and impartial to the meeting process. Their role is to facilitate

the meeting so that the best possible case plan can be developed.

A convenor can be employed by the department, or an external contractor to address any power imbalances between the family and Child Safety. The convenor reports to a regional principal team leader, rather than a child safety service centre manager. The convenor is 'matched' to the needs of the family.

## What is the role of the legal representative?

As the legal representative, you play an important role in supporting your client or representing the child's best interests, protecting their rights and ensuring they have a say about things that are important to them.

If you are a separate representative, or your client wants you to come to the Family Group Meeting, it is better if you can attend in person. Participating in the meeting over the phone can be difficult, particularly if the meeting is held in a community venue. It is also helpful if you can support the family's choice of venue, meeting date and time. This helps the convenor in preparing everyone for the meeting.

You can ask the convenor how long the meeting will take. Contact Legal Aid Queensland, in advance, if you think you will need additional legal aid funding.

You can help prepare your client for the meeting by asking which people from their family and social network can support them. Encourage your client to think about what actions they can take to address the department's concerns.

During private time, it is better if just the family members talk to each other, so they can work out what they need to do to keep their child safe. You should only join in, if they ask you to.

Remember, the purpose of the Family Group Meeting is to help the family to develop a case plan that provides the right support to keep their child safe. Be mindful that it is unhelpful if this process is undermined by your advocacy for your client.

**Who do you talk to?**

If you need to talk to the convenor before they have contacted you, please ask the child safety officer for their name and contact details.

If you have questions about the Family Group Meeting process, or ideas about how to make the meeting work better for your client, please talk to the convenor, before the meeting.

If you have any concerns about Family Group Meeting process that cannot be resolved with the convenor, please talk to the regional principal team leader. The child safety service centre can provide the contact details.