

ABSTRACT

The book provides a compilation of articles on Family Group Conference method. In addition to description of the method, the book also contains a lot of experience-based knowledge on how we have tried to develop the Family Group Conference during the years, how the method came ashore in Finland and became one of the every-day tools of child welfare and social work. The emphasis is on personal experiences of the participating persons, but the historical background and research done on the subject is also presented.

The main thread of the book is a story from “general to individual” or “from far to close”. The first articles cast a glance at a popular custom known among the Maori community on the other side of the world in New Zealand. The modernization of the method and its spreading into the Finnish society has changed the method considerably. In the context of Finnish child welfare the child-centred approach of Family Group Conference is perhaps the clearest difference compared with its starting points. In the tradition of Finnish social work, Family Group Conference is an old phenomenon applied in a new manner. By this we mean that the method brings the child’s nuclear family into view of a wider community, which is the child’s private network. There is no return to the sense of community of the past anymore, but in the conference between relatives and other members of the private network we are looking for solutions appropriate for exactly our time and the family situation in question. The modern small families are very vulnerable and the parents often feel strain. The Family Group Conference is a very emotional method, as it brings out the family’s difficult themes to be discussed. Finding the best possible solution to the child’s life situation and to believe in resources that are found in the child’s private network is in the background of everything.

The book describes how the municipalities’ own active measures are required in how the workers are trained, guided and supported in how to use the method in order to establish the Family Group Conference as a practice. Another important matter is the social workers’ and co-ordinators’ confidence in each other, as well as their perceiving the characteristics of these professional roles as a whole. Strengthening of the role of the co-ordinator through that the task has become more professional has been essential in point of view of development of the method.

The challenge in the Family Group Conference is how to create a dialogical relationship with clients – the child, parents and close persons. Dialogicalness makes possible that the experience of participation is created, but this doesn't happen automatically, using only a certain approach and structure. Starting of the dialogue, and especially the children's experience on participation, requires that a certain participant is not alone saddled with the responsibility of realizing these matters. The co-ordinator and the social worker share the primary responsibility, but also the activities of all persons participating in the Family Group Conference have a big influence on realization of dialogicalness and child's participation. The new Child Welfare Act also makes the pondering on the child's participation and the role of private network a topic of present interest. Family Group Conference provides one tool, with the help of which these principles can be realized in client work practice. Ponderings connected with these matters form the essential content of many articles.

In addition to description of strengths of Family Group Conference and developmental work of good practices, the articles also aim to critically analyze those border conditions that we have to encounter in practical work. The story about the child's advocate (in Finland this person is selected from the private network) and supplementary guardians of a child perhaps provides the most critical point of view. The story is exceptional, because in the process in question there were more challenges than usual. Several practical problems observed in different working processes are compressed into one story, for example how vulnerable the Family Group Conference process and the clients' position can be when the workers change. However, the publication contains also different, more positive experiences. They are nevertheless more common.

Even though in the book the Family Group Conference is described as a method, all the articles emphasize that it is not a question about acting according to a mechanistic, ready model. Family Group Conference is above all a humanistic way of thinking to see a human being with his strengths and weaknesses. By taking other persons into account, Family Group Conference is about to look for wise solutions to problems of human life together.