

# *Reversing the trend: Families resolving and responding to their own problems of living through family group conferencing*

## **An interview with Daniel Bogue**

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This interview explores the principles and practices of family group conferencing, as practiced in Ontario, Canada. The Ontario model draws on the family group conferencing first developed in New Zealand, and brings together practices of family therapy, children's welfare, community organising, and ritual/spiritual concerns. By 'widening the circle' to include extended family members – often in quite protracted and difficult children's welfare cases – family group conferencing allows for more voices to be heard, and families to develop their own solutions. This interview took place in Toronto in April, 2009. David Denborough was the interviewer.

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David: ***You've dedicated many years of your working life to family group conferencing; what's important to you about this practice?***

Daniel: That's an interesting question. First of all, I really got interested in the *idea* of family group conferencing. Whenever I get interested in something new or innovative, it's not just the actual specific activity, or technology, or 'intervention', or way of doing things that interests me. It's also what it *represents*. To me, family group conferencing represents a way of engaging with a number of broader societal concerns.

First of all, one of the principles that family group conferencing is based on involves bringing back the notion of the extended family. It has an 'ancestral' kind of philosophy to it. It honours and involves multi-generational extended families. Over the last hundred years or so, western culture has placed a very high value on the idea of the nuclear family, and I think this has influenced family therapists. So much so, that if we want to refer to the extended family, we have to add in the word 'extended'!

However, here in Toronto, we meet with many first and second generation immigrants who come from families which are not that distant historically from much more 'ancestral' ways of thinking. When you say 'family' to them, they automatically assume you're thinking of grandparents, uncles, cousins, and the community. The ways in which family group conferencing honours multi-generational extended families, and the possibilities this offers for developing culturally appropriate ways of working in multicultural Toronto, is significant to me.

Secondly, family group conferencing is responding to a second trend that has also occurred over the last hundred years or so in western society. During this time, we have professionalised and sometimes even

medicalised certain kinds of problems of living. Interpersonal problems of living that were once primarily responded to within 'natural kinship' groups – family, friends, community, neighbours – are increasingly seen as the domain of professional intervention. Over time, resorting to professional intervention has almost taken preference over families resolving their own problems. What I love about family group conferencing is that it seeks to reverse this trend. It recognises how extended families can be assisted to resolve their own problems. It does this by creating a forum in which the diverse voices of family members are predominant. A plan is developed in that forum and, in this plan, the decisions are made by the family. The professionals work *with* the family – it's not that they're excluded; as a matter of fact, they're included in very significant ways. But they're included in a process that prioritises families resolving and responding to their own problems of living.

David: ***Can you say more about these partnerships between families and professionals and how these plans are developed?***

Daniel: We are commonly using family group conferencing as a response to child protection concerns. In the plan that is developed in the family group conference, the decisions are made by the family but the professionals also have a say, in the sense that they may have legal conditions, child welfare conditions, or protective conditions that must be met by the final plan. These might be certain limitations, or conditions, or instructions based on their assessment. It could be something as simple as: 'Whatever plan you come up with, the biological mother, from our perspective, is still sometimes struggling with her dependency on crack cocaine and that interferes with her ability to parent at a level considered to be sufficient or appropriate. Therefore, she should be never

left in a position where she is the sole responsible person for the care of these children.' Now, the professional is not allowed to say *how* to do that; the family has to address that restriction. This changes the power dynamics in a significant way because a professional is not hired to come up with a plan. The professional is simply hired to use their expertise and make that available to the family. The professionals also have to be accountable for why they propose the particular limitations. They are required to share their reasoning, and the information this is based on, with the family. And then it is the family who make the decisions. This idea is paramount.

David: ***Can you tell how the concept of 'private family time' fits in this process?***

Daniel: Private family time is a core component of Family Group Conferencing because it allows the family to truly take ownership and authorship of the plan that they develop together. When the conference gets to the point where it is time for the plan to be developed, the professionals leave the room. It's a little like the idea of caucusing. If you are a part of a group that is not entitled in a particular context, then meeting separately at times, and then coming together again later, is a way of developing a sense of entitlement as a group.

David: ***With the culture of the professional world so informed by the idea of making decisions on behalf of others, how do you try to turn this around in family group conferencing?***

Daniel: With family group conferencing, the co-ordinators take an active part in this. They are very well trained to pay attention to whenever there's a 'slippage', in other words, when professionals do overstep their role. It's so easy for this to happen. When you're a child welfare worker with a large

caseload, you can feel like you have to take shortcuts. And you get pretty fast at assessing things. So you say, 'I've seen this kind of situation a hundred times; this is what we're going to do'. But the minute you do that, you are actually taking charge of the process. It *might* be a great plan you have come up with, but what we find is that sometimes families come up with *terrific* plans that they own. And, because they feel it's 'their' plan, it has a much better chance of working.

This is where narrative ideas become very relevant. I talk a lot about authorship. The co-ordinator always has to make sure that professionals don't appropriate the plan, i.e. don't re-word the plan so that the family starts to feel they're no longer the authors of it. The way language is used in these plans is critical. The original text of the plan, written by the family, will actually go to court. Sometimes family members have to be helped with the written word because literacy is a problem for a lot of families. But, again, the co-ordinators are trained in doing this in a way that makes sure the authorship of the plan is not taken away from them.

You just have to witness one or two family group conferences, and you see that families come up with effective plans that professionals could never think of. It's amazing. In my experience, this works as long as we do good preparation. In the lead up to a conference, we must get clear about what issues need to be addressed. When it doesn't work, it's often because there was either some issue or some hidden agenda that wasn't made clear at the beginning, so it came out at the end. Then all of a sudden things have to be changed, have to be redone, and this is a much more difficult process.

David: ***This form of partnership must be a different experience for both the families and the workers ...***

Daniel: Yes. Family group conferencing changes the relationship between child welfare and the family. Child welfare workers are usually at the bottom of the pecking order of large social service organisations with oppressive historical factors of their own. They have large caseloads and they're expected to make decisions about children where, if they're too strict, they are then seen as being 'uncaring' people and, if they're not strict enough, and a child gets injured or killed, then they haven't done their job properly and they're to blame. And so they're always walking a tightrope with finite resources. Through family group conferencing, the child welfare workers speak about the dilemmas they are facing, the information they are basing this on. This becomes transparent to families and makes partnerships possible. And the families emerge in an empowered position to develop the plans. Very often, through this process, you get comments from families, who all of a sudden feel a solidarity with child welfare workers, about how hard it must be to have to do this. Workers never usually get that kind of feedback. Creating contexts in which family members and professionals can work in partnership can make a considerable difference to everyone.

David: ***Can you remember one of the first group conferences you participated in?***

Daniel: One of the ones that I always talk about involved a young mother. She was still struggling with her addiction to various kinds of street drugs and had a number of children, all from different fathers. She was also assessed to be intellectually challenged. She was pregnant with another child, and all of her other kids had been taken away from her and were all living in different foster homes. The question was, how to come up with a plan for the current child, as well as the others. The co-ordinator spent the time that was necessary to prepare for the conference and brought together cousins, siblings, and so on.

The woman was the younger of many siblings, and her mother felt frustrated with her. There were a lot of pessimistic views about it at the agency, where the workers felt they were at the end of their ropes, and they were thinking of just putting all the children up for adoption. That kind of situation is often the kind of thing that really prompts families to get together – in some paradoxical ways, the worse a situation is, the more effective family group conferencing becomes!

The family liked the idea of the family group conference and they all came. The conference included two or three of the fathers of these children, one of them a police detective, so they were from all levels of class, and their great-grandmother who was a very strong and elegant woman. The great-grandmother was flown in for this event, and she was clearly the matriarch of this whole family.

So this whole family got together and organised themselves around deciding as a group how they were going to all look after these kids in various sub-family units. And, because they decided this as a whole group, and some of the kids would not be staying together, they had a very elaborate plan about how the kids would continue to have relationships as siblings. Part of all these households' responsibility of taking these kids in with them, then, was to make sure the kids maintained a connection with each other. And they all agreed that the kids had to have a relationship with their mother. She would be part of it all. However, as long as she was struggling with this substance use problem, she wouldn't be left in charge of them. The family had very elaborate plans about how she would be part of the lives of her children.

When the family comes together with a plan, sometimes there are some issues the professionals want the plan to address in a better way. Again, the protocol is they have

to make known their concern, and why. If it's something fairly minor, the family might be able to deal with it on the spot – say, 'Okay, we'll do this without her', or 'Aunt so-and-so can be there when we do that visit', or whatever. But if it's something more complex, then the co-ordinator encourages the family to go back into private family time and deliberate and come back with their own ideas, so they never lose their sense of it being their plan.

The conference lasted all day with the need for several 'private times', because the young mother would sometimes be very upset about things and then she'd fight with her family. However, her great-grandmother basically took charge of her in a very firm, but very compassionate way, telling her, 'Don't worry, we're going to make sure your kids stay in our family and you will always have a relationship with them. But we all know – and we don't have to go into details here in front of these people and embarrass our family – that you do have some serious problems and we can't let these affect the children'. And then that was it! A professional having to address that situation would be in a totally different relationship because of the power aspects. So, it was amazing, it was just amazing to see that happen.

David: ***Can you tell me more about the preparations that go into hosting a family group conference?***

Daniel: To prepare for a family group conference is like preparing for a family reunion. It's a significant event. The co-ordinators are given the time to contact every single person who's going to come, and they work out how it's going to happen. A lot of logistical planning has to happen. A family group conferencing co-ordinator is very committed in supporting the family, but also has to be like somebody who organises a wedding. You have to be really good at working out details. In each of those

minuscule details, there are a million little opportunities to enhance the family members' sense of power and agency. I use the word 'enhance' to make it clear the worker is not at the centre of this process. We have to ensure the family is directing. If you're organising a wedding, then clearly you wouldn't organise anything unless the key people in the whole wedding party were on board with it. So it's essential that family members are involved in all those details, which includes what kind of food, arranging for people to be there for the kids, arranging for transportation, arranging what's the best time for which members of the family to come, and so on. By the time it happens, the family feels that it's really *their* meeting, rather than being called to go to a meeting at the agency. And that's also why all meetings don't happen at the child welfare agency. They happen where families want to be, so they tend to take place in community centres, church basements – places that the family feels is kind of a neutral place. Within the preparations, every opportunity is used to work towards a sense that the family is coming together to figure out what to do about their kids.

David: ***This emphasis on creating contexts which enhance family members' sense of personal agency to collectively care for their children seems very significant to me. Can you say more about this?***

Daniel: There are many considerations about this. For one thing, we don't deny that, as professionals, we have certain expertise, experience or knowledge. We do have this. We have met with many families and children in situations where there are concerns about children's welfare. But in the family group conferencing, as professionals we are trying to share our expertise and experience in ways that enhances the families' sense of personal and collective agency. It's a matter of how we use our expertise.

For instance, a co-ordinator might work with the child welfare worker and supervisor to ensure that the ways in which family members are spoken about do not sound like or possibly connote personal judgement. The co-ordinators are trained to have very sensitive ears about this. It's so easy for professional language to be heard as: 'I'm not a good mother'. We work hard to ensure that this sort of message is not conveyed. Instead, the worker has to be specific about what the issues are. After careful and thoughtful conversations, sometimes the child welfare worker's concern might be phrased as: 'Sheila's struggles with depression and drug use still, at times, interfere with her ability to care for her children'. In this way, great care is taken in how the problem is defined.

David: ***In a number of different ways, you are paying critical attention to language. It sounds like the co-ordinators are somehow mediating a whole language of professionalism and how that will be understood by the family. Can you say more about this?***

Daniel: Language is very important. The problem with professionalism in child welfare is that if there is an area in a parent's life where they are 'not responsible', then it's very easy for professional talk to suddenly cast them as irresponsible in all areas. Of course, no-one is incompetent in all areas of life. So we take care with language so that we are using it to notice and enhance family members' responsibility.

David: ***On another note, can you tell me more about the ritual you use at the beginning of family group conferences and why it's significant?***

Daniel: Family group conferencing began in New Zealand, inspired by Maori models of family and conflict resolution. There were concerns from Maori leaders that their children were losing their sense of

connection with their own family, culture, and spirituality. And so the model of family group conferencing included considerations of family, culture, and spirituality. To start a family group conference with a ritual brings a notion of spirituality to the process. This spirituality is not in a religious institutional sense, but in a sense of honouring and performing the key values and sacredness of the families concerned. The family develops this opening ritual and it sets the atmosphere and tempo for the meeting. Importantly, the ritual makes it clear that this is not a therapy session, nor a meeting with child welfare agency, nor a court session. The ritual elevates the family group conference to a different realm. It signals that this is an important event for the family. In my experience, families love these rituals.

David: ***Can you give me a couple of different examples of rituals that families might develop?***

Daniel: Some of these rituals are as simple as families picking a prayer or a song that has a lot of meaning to them and their family. Children sometimes are part of this, so children might bring a drawing they've done and present it, or sometimes a poem. It's amazing how a member of the family always comes up with something that has some kind of symbolic or spiritual meaning for them. This ritual brings people together, and it reduces the risk of a lot of conflicts that might get in the way of putting together a good plan.

David: ***Speaking of conflicts, how do you prepare for conferences when family members are in significant conflict with one another?***

Daniel: We've had to hold conferences with families where there have been very acrimonious relationships between different family members. We don't actually call these meetings until there's a plan about how the family is going to put that conflict aside in

some ways. This includes forming safety plans for the meeting if necessary. Who attends the conference is whoever the family deems to be a member of the family. So, for example, men who have been abusive might be invited but, if so, then it's the co-ordinator's responsibility to discuss with all family members what needs to happen in order for this to be safe for all concerned. This is a very interesting process, because sometimes professionals feel, 'Well, you can't trust families with that issue, because families sometimes protect the abuser'. In these situations, we follow the Maori notion that the more you widen the circle, the more safety you create. For instance, there have been occasions when a man who has been abusive does attend the conference and what makes this possible is that a safety plan is carefully developed. This might include identifying a support person who accompanies this man. This support person is there to make it possible for the man to have respectful conversations with the rest of the family. In other situations, men who have been abusive are not allowed to come. These decisions are always made by the family members and through careful conversations and consultations by the co-ordinator. In situations where it is decided a father who has been abusive will not attend, then the whole family will discuss and decide how he can be included in other ways. Perhaps the co-ordinator will go and meet with the father and help him write a letter. When this letter is read in the conference it becomes a very important ritual. It could be one of the children who reads the letter from the father, or it could be somebody else who is there to support the father in some way. This becomes an opportunity to really include that person, and because care is taken in the process – obviously he's not going to write a letter that throws gas on the fire. The context is created where he

can make a contribution to the conference even though he is not present. In complex situations, support persons are also used to ensure that particularly vulnerable family members can participate and do not lose their voice in the process.

David: ***Can you say more about the concept of 'widening the circle' that you just mentioned?***

Daniel: This is really a non-Western principle. Within western medicine, you 'treat' the problem by isolating it from any possible 'contextual contaminations'. Whereas, in the family group conferencing approach, if you have a problem, you invite as many people as possible to participate in the solution. We seek to include more voices. We get them to meet together and participate to create more complex solutions.

From what I can gather, this fits very well with the traditional approach of Canadian Aboriginal communities: by widening the circle, the circle can have a way of transforming problems. There are many ways in which this occurs in practice. For instance, once you widen the circle, then the power of any one individual becomes less relevant. If there is one person in the family who has been causing strife, or risking children's safety, then when there are many more family members involved in caring for the children's welfare, the influence of that one person is lessened. Significantly, in our experience, when you widen the circle, women tend to become much more in charge. Every family group conference I've gone to, the grandmothers, the aunts, and the cousins – more so the female ones – find their voices as a group. Widening the circle also seems to allow a much better balance between solutions that put restrictions on actions that are not good, and solutions that emphasise restorative and community building actions.

David: ***This is very interesting to me. Here in Australia there seems to be a tension between a 'children's rights' or 'child-centred approach' which focus on the safety of individual children, and other more family or community-centered approaches which don't separate the safety of individual children from their relationships with their families, communities, cultures. How do those kinds of issues get addressed in your family group conferencing work?***

Daniel: Yes, sometimes it seems as if those two approaches work across the street from each other, yet don't really connect. I have always been interested in finding a way that integrates these two approaches. So it's not an accident that in the Toronto family group conferencing model we developed, some co-ordinators come from both community organising backgrounds, while others come from child welfare backgrounds. And both backgrounds are very useful.

David: ***I'd be interested to hear more about how 'child protection' can go hand-in-hand with 'family protection' and 'community protection' ...***

Daniel: In the English-speaking world, child welfare is grounded in a court system where much child welfare work is linked to evidence-gathering, because you never know when you may end up in court. Even when you're 'helping' the family, you're also investigating to 'protect' the child. Implicit within this model is often the idea that the worker's central role is to protect the child *from* the family. It's quite a different idea to think of how 'child protection', 'family protection', and 'community protection', might work together.

The first step for us is to reach out to family members. Very often, when child welfare gets involved, a lot of extended family members have already become

disconnected from the part of the family that's being investigated. So, for example, you might end up with a child welfare worker isolated with a young single mother, and the two of them trying to kind of get out of this hole. The mother has often already been disconnected and alienated for various reasons from her own family. Very often this means the service provider doesn't see all the potential strength in her extended family. We also use forms of language that invite people to say that there is nobody in their life. Even to this day, I participate in conversations that go along the lines of:

'Well, what about the family?'

'Uh, well, there's just no support people in her family.'

'What do we mean by "support"? I wasn't asking about "support" people, I just mean people! Who is in her family?'

'Well, she has a father but I don't know very much about him. I don't know where he lives ...'

'Why's that?'

'Well, she told me that he was drunk half the time ...'

In these sorts of ways, family members quickly get excluded. What's more, in order to get services, people often have to say that they don't have a family who's there for them. I used to work with kids in treatment homes. In those days, in order to be admitted to a treatment home, because they only responded to children in the most difficult circumstances, the experts first had to declare that their family was incompetent. You had to declare the family was totally terrible in order for the kids to get into these treatment homes. Now, if you want to try to get into a private boarding school, it's very good if your family is well-regarded – that helps you to get into the boarding school. These treatment homes

were like a boarding school for poor kids – except that in the past your ticket in was that the child’s family had to be written off. This was very destructive.

When we started to implement group conferencing with kids in this residential program, we soon found out that they had aunts and uncles and cousins who would say, ‘Well, I knew that there was some problem but, you know, nobody talks about all that’. For example, we’d discover an aunt who was a nurse in Calgary who could take the kid for the summer and this would just change everything. These are such simple things but they involve a change in philosophy.

David: ***Do you have any final reflections on how considerations of ceremony, ancestry, and community, which are inherent in the original Maori model of family group conferencing, continue to influence your work here in Toronto?***

Daniel: For me, family group conferencing is a model that affirms the notion of community. Basically, what we’re doing is bringing a natural community around a child, and valuing this by giving it its proper place or platform. In theatre, the set designer and

director create the right context, story, and atmosphere behind the performance – but then they let go of it, and it’s really the actors who make or break it. Similarly, family group conferencing is about valuing that the family, the kinship network, the community, has something to offer, and then giving it some room.

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