



# **Family Group Conferencing in Youth Inclusion and Support Panels:**

**Empowering Families and Preventing Crime and  
Antisocial Behaviour?**

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## Preface

### *The Research Task*

Towards the end of 2004, we were selected by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB) to conduct an evaluation in five areas of England and Wales in which the Youth Inclusion and Support Panels (YISPs) had successfully bid to pilot the integration of family group conferencing (FGC) within YISP processes. The evaluation, which began in February 2005, was designed to extend and build on our national evaluation of thirteen pilot YISPs, the results of which were published in 2007.

We developed a research design and research methods which mirrored as closely as possible those used in the 2007 national evaluation in order to be able to map the new data about FGC on to those obtained during the national evaluation. The nature of the pilots prevented us from undertaking a rigorous study using methods such as random-controlled trials, nor were we able to secure good enough before-and-after FGC data to provide comparison of different processes. We adopted an action research approach which combined quantitative and qualitative methods and which enabled us to work closely with our sponsors at the YJB and with the pilots throughout the evaluation.

We presented a detailed report of the scoping phase of the evaluation in May 2005, and submitted regular progress and interim reports to the YJB thereafter. In addition, we provided feedback to the pilots at regular meetings convened by the YJB. During these we discussed the challenges we faced in collecting adequate case-level data, and the pilots shared the difficulties they faced locally in implementing FGC and meeting the targets set by the YJB. We were privileged to share the learning journey which the pilots embarked on in 2004 and to observe the tensions and transitions they experienced. In so doing, we were able to enhance our own understanding of the FGC and YISP processes in each pilot and to discern similarities and differences between them.

Inevitably, an evaluation of a new initiative is able to collect a good deal of information about processes and rather less about the outcomes. The formative evaluation provides insights which add to the evidence base about the potential of FGC to enhance YISP practice and points to the issues which need to be considered in any developments in FGC with vulnerable young people at risk of offending and antisocial behaviour. While our summative evaluation must be treated with appropriate caution, it raises important issues in respect of the potential of FGC to enhance outcomes.

The study posed a number of challenges, not least that of managing diverse and often incomplete data sets. Our ability to undertake all the planned analyses was compromised by a lack of robust data on all the variables we had originally specified, but we believe that the study is inevitably richer for the breadth of understanding we have been able to derive from the data available to us.

## ***The Research Team***

The evaluation of FGC drew on the expertise of key members of a multi-disciplinary research team from Newcastle University which was also evaluating the thirteen pilot YISPs. The study was co-ordinated initially within the Newcastle Centre for Family Studies (NCFS) under the direction of Professor Janet Walker, and later transferred to the Institute of Health and Society (IHS) when Professor Walker moved into the Institute in summer 2007. Karen Laing was responsible for profiling the case-study areas and analysing data relating to both YISP and FGC cases in the pilot areas, and Dr Christine Thompson and Dr Graeme Wilson were responsible for undertaking the qualitative enquiries and for interviewing children, young people, families, and their keyworkers and YISP and FGC staff in the case-study areas. All three facilitated the focus groups at the end of the evaluation.

Professor Mike Coombes and Dr Simon Raybould, in the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, orchestrated the management and analyses of the quantitative data returned by the pilots, and considered the generalisability of the findings. Together with the NCFS team, they contributed to the overall design of the evaluation, modifying and refocusing it as the pilots developed their practice and adopted new ways of recording case-level data. In early 2006, Dr Stephen Parkin joined the research team. He contributed to the qualitative elements of the study, conducted interviews with family members, and undertook a preliminary literature review and a preliminary analysis of observational and interview data. He left the team in August 2006 to pursue his academic studies. We offer him our thanks for the important contributions he made while he was an integral member of the research team.

Throughout our evaluation we were supported in our work by Janette Pounder and Jane Tilbrook, who provided administrative oversight and secretarial support, and also transcribed many interviews. They prepared all our reports to the YJB and then painstakingly typed successive drafts of the final report. Michael Ayton, our copy editor, has worked closely with us to ensure that our outputs are both accessible and meaningful. We offer our thanks to all of them.

## ***Acknowledgements***

An evaluation such as this cannot be completed without the co-operation and help of many people. We made many demands on YISP pilot staff and we know that managing the requirements of a national evaluation at the same time as developing a new and complex initiative is far from easy. Staff in all the pilots were enormously helpful and were willing to respond to our unending requests. We are enormously grateful to everyone in all the pilot YISPs for staying cheerful and working all hours to enable us to complete our data collection.

We are especially grateful to FGC co-ordinators and facilitators and to YISP keyworkers for introducing the research to children and families and for securing their willingness to participate in the study. Without their help we would not have been able to hear and report the views of the children and families who experienced FGC as part of their YISP intervention. They also agreed to us observing YISP panels and family group conferences, thus giving us invaluable insights into the world of FGC as it is experienced by professionals and family

members. Our heartfelt thanks go to all the YISP and FGC staff for making this evaluation possible. We hope that it will provide them with useful learning.

Members of the YJB have overseen and supported our work throughout. They managed the needs of the pilots and our needs as researchers with sensitivity and fairness, nudging pilots to provide research data and underlining the importance of the evaluation without being heavy-handed. We know that the lack of data contributed by Dockborough was one factor leading the YJB to withdraw its funding part-way through the evaluation, and we were sorry to lose this pilot from the study. We would like to record our very sincere thanks to the YJB staff, particularly Roger Cullen, Bob Ashford, Nisha Patel, Andy Robinson and Simon Surtees-Goodall, for all their help with and commitment to this study. Our thanks go also to Helen Powell who took the lead in managing our contract with the YJB in the early stages before she left the YJB.

Throughout the pilot period, the YJB was supported by staff seconded to the YJB as project managers to work closely with the FGC pilots, and we are grateful to Julia Hennessy and Kara Davies for working closely with us and keeping a sharp eye on the progress of the pilots, the research and the data collection. Crime Concern was appointed to provide on-the-ground implementation support and training to the pilots. The implementers were well-versed in our research design and did their best to both challenge and support pilots so they could implement FGC effectively and contribute to the research. It was a pleasure to work with Karen Hawkins, Jo Lipscombe and Tim Newton, and we offer our thanks to them for their help.

The YJB established a National Steering Group and a Strategic Group to monitor the progress of the pilots and the evaluation. We provided them with regular updates and used the regular meetings to discuss issues which had emerged, such as concerns about the low numbers of family group conferences, difficulties collecting data, and the challenges the pilots were facing. The groups made sure we considered carefully whether the evaluation could deliver useful data and whether the pilots were meeting their contractual obligations with the YJB. We would like to thank all the members of these groups for asking probing questions about the evaluation and taking a close interest in its progress. In particular, our gratitude is extended to Kevin Walsh, Jewell Jackman-Jones, Jude Belsham, Chris Stanley, and Cathy Ashley. We know that they were often concerned about the relatively low numbers of pilots, the loss of one pilot part-way through, and the detrimental impact these factors would have on our ability to say with any certainty whether FGC adds value to YISP practice.

Although we are unable to attribute outcomes with any degree of certainty, we think that the evidence presented in this report will be of value to policymakers tasked with deciding whether, and how, to promote and extend FGC within preventative programmes in youth justice, and to practitioners who are tasked with ensuring that vulnerable children and young people at risk of offending and antisocial behaviour and their parents receive appropriate, targeted and effective interventions.

A good many people contributed to this evaluation, and we thank them all for their various contributions. Without their help this research could not have been undertaken. However, there is one group of participants whose help has

ensured that we were able to go beyond mere descriptions of processes and outcomes. An evaluation of this kind is much richer when it reflects the experiences of users. The voices of children and young people and their parents, carers, and extended family members are evident throughout this report and their contribution to the study was tremendous. We are truly grateful to all the families who talked to us during the evaluation and completed survey questionnaires. They were prepared to share a great deal of detail about their lives, their worries and fears, and their experiences of agreeing to YISP and FGC intervention. We are grateful too to the many professionals who completed survey questionnaires and to the victims who agreed to talk to us. We have done our best to ensure the anonymity of all research respondents and to report faithfully what they told us. Profiles of the children and young people we interviewed are given in Appendix 2.

### ***This Report***

Our final evaluation report is presented in eight sections.

In Section 1 we outline the development of YISPs and FGC and describe the aims and objectives of the pilots. In the second section we outline our research methods. In Sections 3–6 we present the findings from our observations of YISP and FGC processes, interviews with children and family members, and discussions with YISP staff and others involved in the pilots. Section 7 describes the analyses we undertook using detailed case-level data to delineate the work undertaken by the pilots, and presents the findings from the quantitative and qualitative elements of the study, which attempted to discern the outcomes which might be associated with FGC. In the final section, we summarise and review the findings, consider the policy context within which YISPs and FGC are operating, and put forward the recommendations which flow from the evaluation. There are two appendices: the first provides a fuller description of the data we were able to obtain for the evaluation and the methods we used; the second contains brief profiles of the children and young people in our interview sample.

The report represents the work undertaken between early 2005 and 2007 and does not purport to represent the views of the YJB. As a team, we are in accord about the key messages which can be drawn from the evaluation and our recommendations reflect a shared understanding of the issues, the policy landscape and the challenges for future development of FGC within youth justice.

Emeritus Professor Janet Walker

September 2008



## Addendum

The findings from this evaluation continue to have considerable significance in respect of potential new policies relating to young people at risk of offending and antisocial behaviour.

The Coalition Government elected in May 2010 has made clear commitments to strengthen families and to introduce effective measures to tackle antisocial behaviour and low-level crime, including forms of restorative justice. This study provides important insights and can make a substantial contribution to the Government's deliberations about future policies which aim to support young people to achieve their potential and those which aim to support parents to provide a secure and constructive environment in which to bring up children.

The FGC/YISPs will have changed since we conducted this study but we believe that this report can inform the practice of all those professionals who work with children and young people at risk of offending and antisocial behaviour and who seek to offer early interventions and reduce risk factors.

Emeritus Professor Janet Walker OBE

August 2010

# Executive Summary

## *Introduction*

### **Youth Inclusion and Support Panels**

Between 2005 and 2008 a research team at Newcastle University evaluated the work of five Youth Inclusion and Support Panels (YISPs) that had been selected by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB) to introduce family group conferencing (FGC) into their existing service. With the aims of supporting and strengthening families and dealing effectively with children and young people who commit crime and antisocial behaviour, YISPs had been piloted in thirteen areas in England, beginning in 2003. The YISPs were described as multi-agency planning groups which sought to prevent offending and antisocial behaviour by offering relatively brief, focused voluntary support and interventions to high-risk children (aged 8–13) and their families. The evaluation of these pilots was published in 2007, and the subsequent evaluation of FGC adopted a similar methodology and was undertaken by the same research team.

The national evaluation of YISPs had found that their implementation was slower than expected and variable in style. One of the challenges the YISPs had experienced was how to intervene early enough in the lives of vulnerable children and young people at risk of future offending. Concerns about labelling children were evident, and it had been easier for practitioners to target teenagers who had already been in some kind of trouble. The key aspects of YISP practice which emerged from the national evaluation as significant in terms of achieving positive outcomes for vulnerable children and young people were:

- being able to target high-risk children as early as possible
- undertaking systematic and rigorous assessments of risk and protective factors
- developing a tailored, integrated support plan (ISP) for each child and empowering children and parents to make and sustain changes in behaviour
- engaging young people and their parents/carers in intensive one-to-one work with their keyworker
- delivering preventative services which address all the identified risk factors.

A central theme to emerge from the evaluation was the critical role played by YISP keyworkers, suggesting that the one-to-one relationship with a child and his or her family is the most important factor in securing engagement and promoting positive change in children's behaviour. The research demonstrated the potential for relatively brief and intensive intervention in the lives of children and young people at high risk of offending to make a critical difference, particularly when multi-agency panels are able to harness the commitment and

resources of a wide range of professionals to address the risks at an early stage.

### **Family Group Conferencing**

The YJB was keen to test whether the effectiveness of YISP intervention would be enhanced by increasing the involvement of children and their families in the design and delivery of their ISP through the use of FGC. The hope was that ISPs would be more responsive to children's needs and increase the willingness of young people to co-operate if they and their families were key players in their design and delivery.

The YJB promoted the original New Zealand approach to FGC and encouraged the pilot YISPs to adopt it for use within their YISP processes. The key characteristics of empowering family members to have a voice and to find their own solutions to identified risk factors were underlined, together with an emphasis on restorative justice. Family group conferences were expected to follow clearly defined stages, although the YJB encouraged flexibility in how the conferences were combined with the work of the YISP panels.

Four of the pilots were located in England and the other in Wales. The YISPs in England were tasked with integrating FGC into already established YISPs. The YISP in Wales was newly established, thereby ensuring that FGC became an integrated and central element from the start. While the YJB expected that all children referred to each YISP would be offered a family group conference, there was no expectation that all would accept. In England, children and young people who did not opt to participate in a conference experienced the YISP process that had pre-dated the introduction of the FGC pilot. In Wales, those who refused a family group conference exited the system as the conference was a requirement for offering YISP intervention. In this and in a number of other ways the Welsh pilot was distinctly different, therefore.

### ***The Research Task***

Given the ways in which YISPs and FGC had been implemented prior to the evaluation, it was not possible either to conduct a randomised control trial or to design a rigorous comparative study that would compare processes and outcomes in policy-on (FGC within YISPs) areas with those in policy-off (YISPs without FGC) areas. We opted, therefore, to use the data derived from the national evaluation of YISPs as a baseline and set out to make comparisons between several groups of children and young people:

- children in the FGC pilot YISPs were compared with children involved in the YISPs in the previous national evaluation
- children who experienced FGC within their YISP intervention were compared with those who did not
- children who experienced FGC in each pilot were compared on a pilot-by-pilot basis.

We wanted to ascertain:

- the preventative capacity of FGC within the YISPs, measured by reduction in risk factors

- the most effective way of involving high-risk children and their families in the design and implementation of ISPs
- the most effective ways of mobilising family and community resources to reduce risks and address each child's needs
- the potential restorative impact of FGC within YISPs.

### Research Methods

The evaluation combined quantitative and qualitative methods within an action research framework. Regular feedback was provided to the YJB, to the steering groups and to the pilots themselves so as to enable modifications to be made during the piloting period in the light of emerging findings. During the evaluation we tracked the development of FGC in each pilot, observed family group conferences and YISP panels, and obtained the views of a sample of children and young people, their families, victims, and practitioners, all of whom had attended a conference. In order to determine the potential preventative capacity of FGC within YISP practice we measured the change in risk factors via ONSET assessments administered by YISP keyworkers before, during and at the end of YISP intervention. We asked each pilot to provide detailed information about each young person referred to the YISP, their ONSET scores and the interventions provided by the YISPs.

Establishing the key outcomes associated with FGC and any enhanced effectiveness of YISP intervention presented a considerable challenge for the evaluation, and there were insufficient cases to allow us to undertake the multi-variable statistical modelling we had intended. One pilot experienced prolonged difficulties in the implementation of FGC and the YJB withdrew pilot funding as a result. Another pilot struggled to provide the data we needed and was able to contribute little to the evaluation. Although we received data relating to 3,315 referrals to the pilot YISPs, 674 of these children and young people had not been referred during our evaluation period and 1,251 of these cases related to children and young people outside the YISP age range (most were aged over 13). Multiple gaps in the remaining data meant that just 1,353 cases could be included in our analyses: of these, 365 involved children and young people who had attended a family group conference and 988 children who had received YISP intervention without a family group conference.

It is clear from these figures that the allocation of YISP children and young people to a family group conference was a minority practice in all the English pilots: as a consequence, our quantitative comparative analyses were heavily dependent on the FGC cases from just two pilots. We must urge caution, therefore, in generalising from the quantitative findings of this evaluation. Assessing the value added by FGC was neither easy nor straightforward, but we believe that many useful lessons can be drawn from its implementation within the YISPs, and that some indications of its potential to enhance early intervention are in evidence. The findings presented in the report can be regarded as indicative of what FGC *might* offer if it were to be more closely integrated into YISP processes or combined with other interventions designed to be preventative and to offer early intervention to children and young people at high risk of offending.

### ***Integrating Family Group Conferencing Within the YISPs***

Three of the pilots were located in established Youth Offending Teams (YOTs); one was located in a large national children's charity with responsibility for running YISPs in its area; and the pilot in Wales was established by the local YOT, education authority and social services. While YISP staff in all the pilot areas were very positive about the objectives of YISPs and of FGC, many were wary about offering a family group conference to all the children referred to a YISP, and tended to be selective about the families who might be suitable. Only in the Welsh pilot was FGC a central element in the YISP process, experienced by all the children referred to it. There was also some general uncertainty within the English pilots about when to hold a conference and a lack of clarity about how conferences should fit within YISP processes. The lack of integration of FGC within the YISP led to the early demise of one pilot. Some pilots held a conference before the YISP panel heard the case and others regarded a conference as one intervention alongside others. In Wales, the YISP panel convened shortly after the family group conference had been held and the child and parents were expected to attend both the conference and the panel.

The aspect of integration which proved to be most ambiguous in England related to the role of the YISP panel when families agreed to a family group conference. Some panels appeared to be ill-informed about the FGC element, and we found little evidence of a clear link between the action plans drawn up by families during a family group conference and the ISPs developed by YISP keyworkers in consultation with the YISP panels. One of the YJB's expectations had been that families would be more closely involved in the development of ISPs as a result of FGC, but this was not usually achieved. For the most part, families' own action plans remained separate from ISPs and there was relatively little attempt at integrating them. Since families rarely attended a YISP panel (except in Wales), they were no more likely to play an active part in the development of the ISP if they attended a family group conference than families who did not.

### ***Empowering Families***

A belief in the value of family participation, and the promotion of parental responsibilities, have been central to the concept of FGC, which enshrines the principle of empowering families to address the risks in a child's life. Most of the pilot YISPs appointed one or more co-ordinators (sometimes referred to as convenors) to oversee FGC within the YISPs. Some pilots appointed a co-ordinator to manage the FGC element and one or more facilitators to work with the families and run the conference. Sometimes, families met the co-ordinator and the facilitator. In other pilots, the co-ordinator and the facilitator role was combined.

The evaluation provided strong evidence that children and parents were well-prepared for the conferences and were enthusiastic about the opportunity they afforded for them to meet with key professionals and talk about the difficulties they faced. Indeed, many parents described themselves as having been at their 'wits' end' as a result of the difficulties they had been experiencing when they had been referred to a YISP and were willing to try anything that might help them and their children. We noted that the FGC facilitators generally worked

with mothers during the conference planning stage and often found it difficult to engage directly with fathers, particularly if they no longer lived with their children. Some fathers and extended family members said that they felt somewhat isolated from the process and would have welcomed closer involvement.

### **Engaging Children**

The FGC facilitators spent between five and fifty hours with each family in preparation for a conference. Although children and young people were generally less enthusiastic than their parents about FGC, facilitators were at pains to put children at ease and ensure that their voices could be heard. Family members expected the conference to be informal, non-judgmental and non-threatening. The evidence from interviews with parents, children and extended family members demonstrates that they did feel a sense of empowerment in a meeting which provided a safe, supportive environment.

Some, but not all, children engaged with the process. Those that engaged valued being able to express their own concerns and put their own points of view across to other family members and professionals. Children felt that they had been listened to. Those who found it difficult to engage with the conference were more likely to feel that the conference had been imposed on them: they did not understand the purpose of their being there and they did not like being the centre of attention or talking about problems publicly. Some children had clearly been overwhelmed by the conference and a few had opted to leave before the end. Only in one pilot were children and young people routinely offered an advocate but they were not very impressed with the level of support offered.

Most family members felt empowered to participate – although we observed that fathers seemed less well-prepared and less engaged than mothers – and some were able to instigate significant changes in their lives. Not all the pilots promoted private family time, normally an important aspect of a family group conference, and not all families wanted it anyway. Indeed, most parents were looking for the professionals to offer interventions which would address their child's problems and some were desperate for someone else to take responsibility. Nevertheless, most families left the conference feeling positive: they were relieved that someone was listening to them and was prepared to help them.

### **Developing Family Plans**

While family plans tended to focus on what family members would do to address problems, often emerging as a list of things different family members had to do, parents were usually looking for more than this. Yet few family plans included actions and services to be delivered by agencies represented by professionals at the conference. Indeed, the professional participants often left the conference before the review stage at the end, in which the family plan was discussed and agreed. Moreover, we noted that key professionals (often from social services and education) did not always attend family group conferences although their presence would have been greatly welcomed by the families concerned. Facilitating dialogue between key practitioners and families is an important aspect of empowerment and one which needs to be fostered if FGC is to be further developed in the future.

### ***Promoting Restorative Justice***

Family group conferences are closely associated with the promotion of restorative justice. They provide an opportunity for victims and offenders to meet together and for offenders to make some kind of restitution and apology. The YJB had expected that victim–offender dialogue would constitute the first stage in a family group conference, but this proved to be an element that the YISPs found particularly difficult to implement. Many YISP referrals involved families in which the issues of concern were primarily welfare-oriented – rather than criminal-justice-focused – so FGC co-ordinators struggled to identify appropriate cases for restorative approaches. Very often there was no specific incident triggering a YISP referral and no obvious victim, especially when the children had not yet got into trouble but were simply at high risk of offending in the future. As a result, very few conferences actually involved an identified victim, and those that did tended to involve ‘corporate’ victims, such as local shopkeepers or security staff. Victim–offender dialogue was somewhat awkward on these occasions, and not all the victims stayed for the entire conference.

Our observations indicated that the conferences were rarely restorative, and the evidence suggests that more thought needs to be given to finding ways of embracing restorative justice effectively in FGC when it forms part of an early intervention programme. It is possible that restorative approaches could galvanise professional and community support for young people at high risk of offending, particularly since it is clear from the evaluation that children and families rarely took account of the impact of the child’s behaviour on others, for example in school or in the community.

### ***Implementing Family Plans***

Most families left the family group conference with a family plan and most were hopeful that it would work. In our follow-up contacts with families a few weeks after attendance at a conference and then again several months later, however, only a few families reported that the plan had been a catalyst for positive change. Overall, family members demonstrated little ownership of the plan and many had found it difficult to make the plan work. Not all the promises made had been kept, and there appeared to be very little monitoring. Some six to nine months after the conference, although most parents reported that they had tried to implement the family plan, less than half described it as working well and over half said that the professional help they had been promised had not been forthcoming. Children clearly felt let down by family members and by professionals who failed to deliver what had been promised.

#### **Making Family Plans Work**

When the family plans had worked, families were positive about what had been achieved and the changes they had made. It was evident from these cases that family plans do have the capacity to enhance ISPs and to address a wider range of risk factors, particularly those relating to family functioning and family relationships. The evidence suggests that, if there could be greater linkage between the family plan and the ISP, the comprehensiveness of a tailored package of support could be strengthened. As it was, families usually ended up with two documents which were not integrated and their initial enthusiasm for

FGC began to wane when the intensive effort of YISP and FGC staff prior to the conference fell away afterwards.

An important part of the FGC process is that of undertaking regular reviews to ascertain whether the family plan is working well and how it might need to be modified. Any review process has to be meaningful, regular and empowering for the family. When keyworkers regarded the family plan as 'family business', families quickly became disillusioned. Families who went to a family group conference were almost always willing and eager to address the problems that had been identified but their energy and resources were not always harnessed. As a result, their commitment to change dwindled and momentum was lost. We suggested that YISPs need to find a way of integrating family plans drawn up in a family group conference and ISPs drawn up by keyworkers in consultation with the YISP panels into one document which has meaning for everyone, which can be monitored and reviewed regularly, and which enables family members and professionals to be called to account.

### ***Making a Difference***

Although the FGC was valued by most families the key objective was to improve outcomes for children and young people.

#### **The Potential of YISPs**

An important objective of the previous national evaluation of YISPs was to assess whether YISP interventions made a difference in children's lives and if so how, and, in particular, whether they might have the propensity to prevent or reduce antisocial and criminal behaviour. We took the changes recorded in assessments (using ONSET scores) as our main indicator of outcomes and found the following:

- the higher the child's starting risk score the greater the probable level of risk reduction following YISP intervention
- older children and young people were less likely to experience a large risk reduction
- the child's gender and the level of deprivation in the home neighbourhood were not statistically related to risk reduction levels.

We concluded that YISPs would have the greatest effect if they were to be targeted at the highest-risk children. The qualitative data indicated that the majority of children and parents were well-satisfied with the support YISPs provided. Some children and young people had made considerable effort to stay out of trouble, while others continued to live on the fringes of criminality. Being listened to had been an important trigger for change, as had learning new skills and making new friends. It was clear that the younger children were when the YISP first intervened, the greater the chance that early intervention would have a positive impact. It was clear also that tackling a range of risk factors was more effective than focusing on one in isolation.

#### **The Potential of FGC**

In the current study we endeavoured to assess the extent to which FGC could enhance the outcomes we had identified in the national evaluation.



Unfortunately the quantitative data available were limited and so we built statistical models to identify whether FGC had any distinctive influence on the outcomes for children and young people. The core of the modelling was the prediction of change in ONSET scores, taking account of factors such as age, gender, and whether the child had a statement of special educational needs (SEN). We also took account of the levels of deprivation in each child's home locality.

Our analyses showed that the FGC/YISP pilots were slightly less successful in achieving reductions in ONSET scores than the pilots in the original national evaluation. However, the children and young people who attended a family group conference as part of their YISP involvement achieved a greater reduction in risk scores than those in the FGC/YISP pilots who did not. While this can be regarded as a positive result in terms of the potential of FGC to enhance YISP practice, it is important to remember that statistical models cannot establish a causal link – they are indicative only.

### **The Perspectives of Family Members**

Our surveys of and interviews with family members enabled us to take a closer look at the ability of FGC to add value to YISP intervention. Overall, families were positive about the FGC process and most parents felt that their child's behaviour had improved. The positive changes were often modest, but practitioners emphasised the importance of recording and celebrating small achievements and incremental improvements.

Children often felt better about their lives in the weeks following a family group conference, but FGC is not a magic wand (as some parents had hoped it would be) and does not eradicate all the difficulties all of the time. Although most of the children and young people could point to one or more positive changes in their lives, they nevertheless tended to say that FGC had made no 'real' difference to them, or that the positive impacts had been short-lived. It seems that the family group conference had been beneficial for most children at the time but the benefits were somewhat inconsequential within the context of their everyday lives in the longer term.

Parents expressed similar views, and, some months after attending a family group conference, some parents described it as having been a waste of time, either because hoped-for transformations had not materialised or because agencies had reneged on their offers of support and had failed to deliver promised interventions. Nevertheless, parents valued having had someone to talk to: family group conferences had promoted open discussion and were associated with feelings of relief that service providers were willing to listen to parents who were struggling to cope with problem behaviours. Getting things out in the open appeared to have a cathartic effect, which in itself could have a positive impact on family relationships.

Most families pointed to some progress, suggesting that the FGC component of YISP intervention is capable of delivering incremental changes at the level of personal relationships in the home, in school and in the neighbourhood. Families tended to be looking for a greater magnitude of change, however, and so tended to be disappointed that, after such careful preparation for the family group conference, the beneficial impacts were rather muted.

## **Professional Perspectives**

The YISP and FGC staff, on the other hand, were delighted about any improvements, however small, and generally had far fewer and more realistic expectations about what FGC and YISPs could achieve. They pointed to outcomes such as improved family relations, the repair or re-establishment of relationships between family members (notably those between children and non-resident fathers), and the increased willingness of families to engage with professionals and take some responsibility for promoting change.

The evidence suggests that family group conferences can act as a critical catalyst for change. Although short-term outcomes were seemingly very positive for some families, practitioners tended not to be confident about the long-term stability of any of the outcomes. They were particularly sceptical when parents lacked the commitment to change or when family circumstances were themselves unstable.

## ***The Potential for Enhancing YISP Practice: Conclusions and Recommendations***

Previous research relating to FGC has identified issues which fall into three broad themes: issues connected with implementation; issues relating to FGC processes; and issues concerned with outcomes. These themes capture the key areas of interest emerging from this evaluation and provide a useful framework within which to summarise the key findings and recommendations.

### **Implementation Issues**

#### *Model Integrity*

The pilots adapted the New Zealand model of FGC to suit their own approach to YISP practice. Some used independent FGC co-ordinators/facilitators and others did not. In some areas the role of the YISP keyworker and FGC facilitator was merged, although this merging of roles is generally regarded as constituting poor practice. The practitioners and families appeared to like this model, however, and it provided important continuity in relationships between practitioners and the families concerned. We therefore recommend the following:

- the pros and cons of integrated roles should be further explored if FGC is to be fully integrated within preventative programmes, including YISP practice
- mechanisms should be put in place to ensure effective transition of support for families from the FGC facilitator to the keyworker if the roles are kept separate.

#### *Implementing a New Approach*

Implementing FGC took time and perseverance. Building support among professionals and within communities, and providing training for practitioners, are essential prerequisites for the sustainability of FGC. Pilots felt under pressure to meet YJB targets, and most implemented FGC before all the necessary building blocks were in place. We recommend:

- more time and more support should be given to implementing a new programme and training practitioners to ensure that the programme meets policy intent
- sufficient lead-in time should be planned into the pilot timetable, and targets should be realistic and achievable
- more consideration should be given to how best to target younger children (under thirteen) who are at high risk of offending, before they commit offences and become involved in antisocial behaviour.

#### *The Power of Choice*

Practitioners in all but one pilot tended to be selective about which families were offered a family group conference, and not all felt able to sell the idea to their colleagues and to families. There was no clear consensus about whether all families should be allowed to choose whether to opt for a conference, yet our evidence suggests that the vast majority of families who were offered a conference were enthusiastic and reacted positively. Children and young people were less keen, however. We therefore recommend the following:

- further consideration should be given to whether all children referred for YISP intervention should routinely be offered a family group conference
- clear information should be given to all families on which they can base choices, rather than professionals making choices on their behalf
- if FGC is to be offered selectively, the criteria for selection should be clear and unambiguous.

#### *Restorative Justice*

The pilots did not manage to embrace restorative justice effectively and it remained a marginal activity. We offer the following recommendations:

- more thought needs to be given to enhancing the use of restorative justice approaches with children and young people on the edge of criminality
- the definition of 'victim' needs to be clarified and victims should be more thoroughly prepared in advance of the conference
- more thought should be given to reducing the potential for confusion amongst conference participants if victims who are practitioners attend in dual roles
- the desired outcomes for both victims and offenders attending a family group conference need to be clearly understood and monitored.

### **Issues Relating to FGC Processes**

#### *Promoting Family Empowerment*

Family empowerment requires a shift in the power relationship between professionals and family members. While most family members felt well-prepared for the conference, the evidence from the evaluation suggests that:

- face-to-face preparation is important for all family members, and FGC facilitators should pay more attention to the beneficial role fathers can play in a family group conference
- professionals nominated by the family as key players should be adequately prepared for and committed to attending a conference and other review meetings.

#### *Structuring the Conference*

The study has shown that the conference usually provided a safe and supportive environment for sharing information and decision-making. Nevertheless, some families found it difficult to use private family time constructively, and some facilitators did not always encourage families to work on their own. We noted a number of tensions and challenges here and the resulting family plans were often ambiguous. The recommendations that flow from the evidence are as follows:

- all stages of the conference should be accorded equal importance and more preparation may be needed for some families to benefit from private family time
- the level of control wielded by the FGC facilitator in respect of family time and the development of a family plan needs to be considered carefully
- all participants should be present in the final stage of the conference so that everyone is signed up to the family plan and clear about the expectations placed on them
- if advocates are to be used to support children and young people, they need to be appropriately trained and independent of the family and the YISP; if advocates are not used, more thought needs to be given to ways of encouraging children to participate more fully.

#### *Taking Ownership of the Family Plan*

The evidence suggests that extended family members were rarely motivated to offer additional support to the family, and parents and children sometimes distanced themselves from the family plan, which was often discarded after the conference. In the light of this evidence the following steps might be taken to enhance the usefulness of family plans:

- family plans should be written so that they are specific, meaningful, achievable and capable of being regularly reviewed
- more consideration should be given to ensuring that family plans and ISPs developed via YISP panels are integrated into one working document in order to: make it easier for families to use the plans; improve the fit between resources available within the family and resources provided by external agencies; ensure that the document is flexible and can be modified after reviews; and define more clearly the relationship between FGC and the work of the YISP panel so as to avoid panels becoming redundant or effort being duplicated.

## **Issues Relating to Outcomes**

### *Reducing the Risk of Offending and Antisocial Behaviour*

The study indicates that FGC did not increase the involvement of children and families in the design and delivery of ISPs as had been hoped, and there is little evidence to suggest that it enhanced the YISP process as such. Some families felt let down after the conference when little had changed and family members and agencies failed to follow through on commitments they had made.

Delineating outcomes associated with FGC and with YISP intervention has been difficult and we must be very cautious about any claims made relating to the effectiveness of the pilots. There is some evidence that children and young people who attended a family group conference achieved a greater reduction in risk factors than those who did not, but the overall effectiveness of YISP intervention depends largely on the willingness of parents and children to accept support and be willing to change. While families and practitioners tended to be positive about the FGC experience, it is difficult to discern specific outcomes which were achieved as a result, particularly in the longer term. While soft measures of effectiveness are important indicators, they do not provide sufficient evidence on which to base policy decisions. This leads us to offer the following recommendations:

- agencies and practitioners in the youth justice field need to consider what outcome measures they will employ to assess the effectiveness of various programmes and interventions and ensure that they are able to collect the appropriate data at the case level for analysis both internally and via external evaluations
- if ONSET is to be used as an assessment tool, all elements of the suite of instruments should be utilised and ONSET scores recorded. Similarly, if other assessment tools are used, they too should be linked to outcomes and be used to guide the contents of ISPs and family plans
- if FGC is to be used effectively and if outcomes are to be improved, more thought needs to be given to finding ways of harnessing the resources and support of extended family members and to integrating the inputs of families and professionals to meet desired outcomes.

### **Promoting Positive Practice**

The introduction of FGC within the YISPs was both novel and far-reaching. We captured the experiences of the YISP and FGC staff and children and families during the formative years of FGC, and while this does not allow us to be robust about specific outcomes associated with FGC, we have noted elements of practice which can be enhanced:

- the skills of FGC facilitators and YISP keyworkers are critical to family empowerment and these practitioners need to have enough time to devote to each child/family
- family group conferences have the potential to provide a valuable lifeline to families with children at high risk of offending and the opportunity to engage directly with key professionals; these professionals need to be committed to the FGC processes and able to give time to them

- regular reviews and careful monitoring of family plans and ISPs are essential: responsibility for doing these needs to be agreed and families need to be clear about who will support them to make agreed changes
- implementing new initiatives, such as FGC, requires models of working to be clearly articulated, guidelines to be tight and consistent, and targets to be achievable.

One of the challenges all YISPs have faced has been how to intervene early enough in the lives of children who are at high risk of future offending. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the potential for developing FGC is considerable. The promotion of a culture shift in which services for children and for adults 'think family' could be enhanced if FGC is better integrated in programmes which offer support for parents of children involved in or at risk of offending and for the children or young people themselves. The FGC model displays a visible commitment to involving children, young people and their families in planning crime prevention interventions and participating in and reviewing all aspects of delivery. Harnessing this opportunity presented challenges to the YISPs participating in the FGC pilots, but the potential benefits of embracing FGC into youth justice programmes which promote early intervention and prevention could be considerable.

# 1 Supporting Families and Preventing Crime

Prevention and early intervention have been at the heart of modern youth justice policies as successive governments have sought strategies to deter young people from embarking on a life of crime. The key to preventing young people from becoming offenders or engaging in antisocial behaviour lies in being able to target those who are most at risk. Moreover, tackling the whole cluster of risk factors that impact on a child's behaviour is likely to be more effective than simply addressing individual risks. The research evidence suggests that it is never too early to intervene and support children who might be at risk of becoming offenders, and never too late to work with adolescents (Sutton et al., 2004).

Tackling youth crime is a key objective of most governments. Finding innovative ways to do this has been at the forefront of reforms in youth justice for many years and is likely to remain so. This report considers an innovative and pioneering programme which was tested between 2004 and 2007, examines the evidence relating to its effectiveness and discusses the implications for future policies and practices in youth justice.

The strategy of giving children the best possible start in life and opportunities to reach their full potential is located in the firm belief that if the quality of life of all children, particularly those who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged, can be improved, this would lead to a reduction in crime involving children and young people and create a safer society. This belief has underpinned the development of many new programmes, including the establishment of Youth Inclusion and Support Panels (YISPs), and new ways of working, such as family group conferencing (FGC) which are the subject of this report. Although these new approaches have developed and changed since they were first initiated, the learning derived from them remains highly relevant to the development of similar programmes in the future. In this first section, we describe the policy context within which YISPs and FGC were established and describe their specific characteristics and the contributions they were expected to make to preventing crime and antisocial behaviour in children and young people.

## ***The Policy Context within which YISPs Were Established***

The provision of high-quality services for children and their families has been regarded as an essential building block in promoting better outcomes for young people. Health and social care services have undergone extensive change and new investments have been made in youth justice. The overriding theme has been one of encouraging young people to be actively involved in their communities and able to influence decision-making. Specific emphasis has been placed on young people:

- being empowered, having things to do and places to go
- becoming active citizens, able to make a contribution to their communities

- being supported in making choices through information, guidance and advice
- being able to achieve through targeted support.

As a result of the recognition that families play a critical role in the healthy development of children and young people, emphasis has been placed not only on reshaping children's services but also on providing better support for parents so that they can provide better support for their children. Ensuring that parents are able to take responsibility for their children's health, well-being and development is regarded as particularly important in preventing children and young people from becoming involved in crime and antisocial behaviour.

In 1996, the Audit Commission had argued that resources should be used more effectively to reduce the amount of crime committed by young people through preventative services which would improve parenting skills, and which would target the children and young people at greatest risk of becoming offenders (Audit Commission, 1996). Youth justice agencies have become important partners in the delivery of services which focus on early prevention of antisocial and criminal behaviour and which strive to provide support for parents. The emphasis is increasingly on multi-agency approaches which tackle the various risks associated with offending (Edwards and Coles, 2002). Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) are responsible for delivering and co-ordinating a multi-agency response to young offenders, and their strategy is to act early, quickly and effectively and to assess and confront offending behaviour holistically through early, targeted interventions.

### ***Prevention and Early Intervention***

In setting up its prevention strategy, the YJB indicated that four key areas required attention. It pointed to the need for:

- effective targeting to allow for early identification of those at high risk and the provision of supportive interventions for them
- greater intensity of intervention for those who are first- and second-time offenders
- recognition that school absence is a key factor which impacts on crime and antisocial behaviour
- prevention strategies to ensure a focus on detection and deterrence of youth crime.

### **Youth Inclusion and Support Panels**

The YJB adopted a twin track approach within its crime prevention strategy: the first track related to crime prevention with high-risk children and young people to reduce the risks, and the second to post-crime reduction and active intervention with young people who had begun to offend. Central to the first track were YISPs, which were designed to identify and support children and young people aged 8–13 at high risk of offending and antisocial behaviour *before* they enter the youth justice system (YJB and CYPUP, 2002). The YISPs were described as multi-agency planning groups which seek to prevent offending and antisocial



behaviour by offering voluntary support and interventions for high-risk children and their families.

By 2003–4 YISPs were expected to be a priority service in all areas of England. The focus was firmly on prevention, early intervention and multi-agency co-operation. Using a matrix of the risk and protective factors which may lead young people into, or protect them from, crime, the YISPs were tasked with constructing a personally tailored package of support and interventions, summarised in an ISP designed to facilitate the kind of provision which will prevent the young person moving further towards crime. Central to the concept was the role of keyworkers, who were responsible for assessing risk and co-ordinating and monitoring the package of interventions.

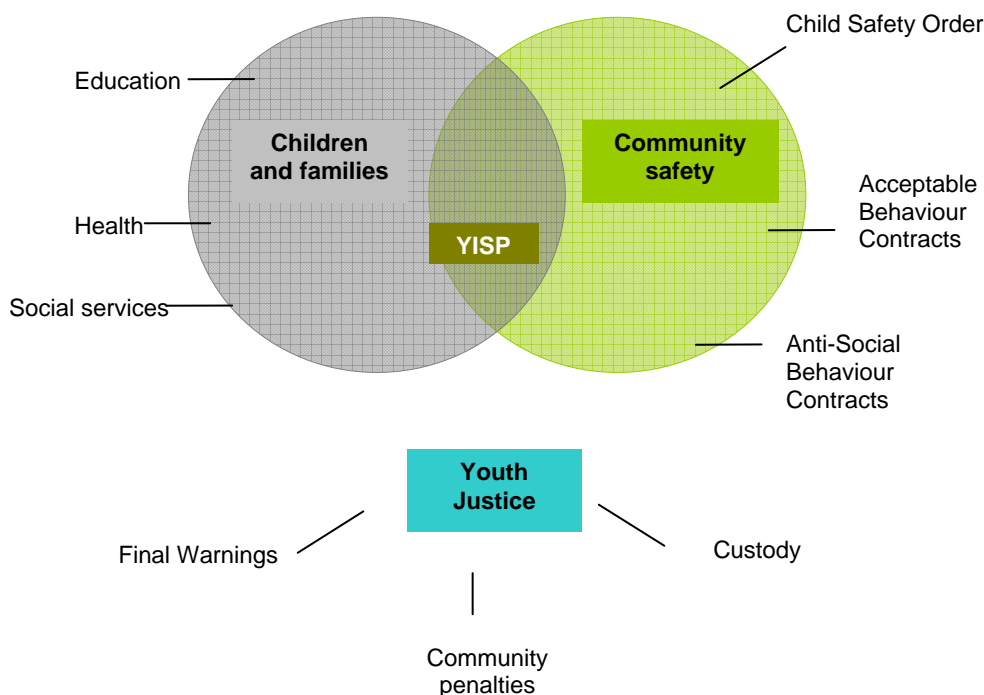
The YISPs were designed to ensure that children at risk of offending or reoffending and their families received the support of mainstream public services at the earliest opportunity. The key elements of YISPs were as follows:

- information exchange, multi-agency involvement and local accountability across statutory and voluntary sectors
- efficient and effective processes for early identification, referral, assessment and tracking of high-risk children and young people aged 8–13
- a systematic approach to comprehensive assessment (using a specially designed tool, ONSET, as a mandatory assessment tool in the pilot areas)
- multi-agency panel meetings
- the provision of integrated support services tailored to individual needs through an ISP
- voluntary involvement and creative participation of children and their families at all stages of the process
- the participation and involvement of community volunteers
- an emphasis on restorative justice
- FGC
- dedicated keyworkers to work with children and families and co-ordinate multi-agency intervention.

The YISPs were designed to support children who had failed to access mainstream services in the past, particularly those with complex needs who may have fallen through the gaps between services. Involvement in YISPs was voluntary: children and their families were asked to consent to referral and assessment for consideration by a panel, and to co-operate with proposals for the delivery of services through an ISP. Indeed, one of the core principles of YISPs was that children and their parents/carers should be involved as much as possible in each stage of the process. At the centre of YISPs was the multi-agency panel whose main task was to ensure that children and families received, at the earliest opportunity, mainstream services and complementary interventions delivered by voluntary and community groups. The YJB characterised the strategic location of YISPs (Figure 1.1) as being on the cusp

of services for children and families, community safety and youth justice (YJB, 2005).

**Figure 1.1: Strategic location of YISPs (source: YJB, 2005)**



The objectives of the YISP panels were identified by the YJB as being to:

- prevent children referred to the YISP from becoming involved, or further involved, in offending and antisocial behaviour
- reduce the risk factors and increase the protective factors for children who are involved, or at risk of becoming further involved, in offending and antisocial behaviour
- ensure that children assessed as high-risk by the YISP are in full-time education
- ensure that children and their families are satisfied by the YISP intervention, and that they receive services at the earliest opportunity.

A number of important benefits of the YISP approach were identified. These being that it:

- holds public services accountable for the delivery of their services
- ensures that preventing youth crime is at the centre of mainstream public services' responsibility
- responds to public and political concerns about 'hidden' offending and antisocial behaviour

- ensures that children at risk and their families receive services at the earliest opportunity
- provides a single point of referral and agency response to youth crime and antisocial behaviour
- provides a mechanism for exchanging information on individual risk factors and problem behaviour
- reduces demands on public services providers for acute and crisis intervention or services
- reduces the number of children entering the criminal justice system and potentially becoming persistent offenders.

In 2003, a team of researchers at Newcastle University was commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills<sup>1</sup> to evaluate thirteen pilot YISPs. Our remit was to conduct an evaluation which examined the implementation and operation of YISPs, various models of practice, and their outputs, activities and outcomes. While we were engaged in that evaluation, the YJB decided to extend the remit for YISPs by introducing FGC as a key component in five pilot areas.

#### **Embracing Family Group Conferencing**

The YJB was keen to evaluate whether the effectiveness of YISPs would be enhanced by increasing the involvement of children and their families in the design and delivery of the ISP through the use of FGC. In an Invest to Save bid in 2003, the YJB claimed:

*Transferring the principles and concepts of family group conferencing into the new local multi-agency partnerships framework of the YISPs will be an innovative application which has not previously been tested.*

(YJB, 2003)

The YJB's objectives for the development of FGC within YISPs were threefold:

1. To reduce crime by diverting highest-risk children in five pilot areas from offending.
2. To ensure that highest-risk children and their families receive targeted support from public and other service providers at the earliest opportunity.
3. To evaluate the enhanced effectiveness of using family group conferencing in conjunction with YISPs to divert highest-risk children from offending.

In the Invest to Save bid, the YJB described the potential benefits of FGC for children and families as including the following:

- a greater opportunity to be creators and designers of ISPs, rather than consumers who feel plans are imposed on them by agencies

<sup>1</sup> Renamed the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in July 2007 and the Department for Education in May 2010.

- the development of ISPs that are more responsive to the needs and interests of children and their families
- an increased chance that children will co-operate with an ISP voluntarily if they have had a major involvement in its design
- an improved take-up of services for more children and families
- a reduced risk that cases will be closed early.

Although FGC had been widely used within the child welfare and youth justice arenas, little was known about its efficacy in *preventing* offending and antisocial behaviour. The YJB acknowledged that the success of the YISP programme would be dependent upon the co-operation of children and their families with ISPs, a factor which emerged as critical in the national evaluation of YISPs. The YJB's expectation was that the introduction of a FGC component within YISPs would ensure that children and their families would be more actively engaged in generating solutions and that ISPs would be more responsive to each child's specific needs and interests.

The FGC approach was envisaged by the YJB as an additional element within the YISP process, highly relevant to the target group of high-risk children between the ages of 8 and 13 who were exposed to at least four of the risk factors associated with predicting future offending. In other words, the family group conference would be an added dimension which would have the potential to increase the effectiveness of YISPs because families would be empowered to make their own plans for the child and to tackle the risk factors, thereby increasing the chances that children referred to the YISPs would engage fully with the process of assessment, the identification of appropriate service provision and the delivery of the ISP.

In February 2004, the YJB invited each existing YISP to become one of five pilots for the introduction of FGC. In order to be selected as pilot sites, YISPs were asked to demonstrate that they met a number of criteria. They needed, amongst other things, to have:

- an effective and fully operational YISP, conforming to YJB guidance
- a fully developed operational plan for an effective FGC/YISP combined model
- a proven track record for delivering outcomes, with effective management and agency partnerships.

The five pilot sites were selected by the YJB prior to us being commissioned, following a tendering process, to undertake the evaluation of FGC within these five areas.<sup>2</sup> One of the pilots involved two adjacent local authorities which intended to operate a joint FGC pilot. However, it became clear during our

<sup>2</sup> In order to protect the confidentiality of pilots it is YJB policy not to name them in reports. We have therefore created pseudonyms. Moreover, we have refrained from providing information about them which could lead to them being identifiable.

scoping work with the pilots that there were a number of variations between the two sites and we found it helpful to consider them separately during our analyses, particularly where the variations could have influenced processes and outcomes. This pilot is referred to in the report as Coburgh and the two sites which it comprised as Westburgh and Eastburgh. The other four pilots are referred to as Midshire, Welshboro, Riverborough and Dockborough. As our pseudonyms imply, one of the pilots was located in a shire county and one was located in Wales. We describe the characteristics of these pilots in Section 3.

### ***The Family Group Conferencing Process***

The YJB described FGC in the following terms:

- an inclusive planning process for families based on a ‘family strengths’ model which identifies the potential within the family to support themselves
- the philosophy behind the model draws on the commitment of the family and child to make changes, rather than an ‘agency/professional imposition model’ which frequently fails and breaks down
- an opportunity for victims to contribute to the process and create a safe space for them to articulate their experiences
- recognition of the importance of allowing a voice for the child and victims within a forum which is empowering and healing in nature without further marginalising the child
- a strong commitment to empowering children and their families to take authorship and thereby ownership of the support plan and thereby improve the likelihood of success in terms of addressing the needs of the child
- improved levels of trust and communication both within families and between families and agency professionals (YJB, 2003).

These characteristics provided a context for the evaluation, and we return to them during the presentation of our findings. They are strongly associated with the original FGC model, which was developed in New Zealand and which has been modified and adapted for use in youth justice interventions.

### **The Origin of Family Group Conferencing**

Family group conferences were first introduced in New Zealand in 1989 with the aim of ‘making things better’ for young people in need of protection and those involved in criminal behaviour and their victims (Morris and Maxwell, 1998). There had been considerable debate in New Zealand about the way in which decisions regarding children and young people should be taken by the State, particularly those relating to the care and protection of abused and neglected children.

The Maori people had contested the removal of children from parental care and advanced the view that decisions must be taken in consultation with the families involved, including extended family members and wider kinship networks. Furthermore, they argued that if parents were to be held responsible for their children’s behaviour, more support services for families should be made available. The debate led to an agreement in New Zealand that: families should

be involved in decisions about children in partnership with the State; families should be empowered to deal responsibly with their children's offending or other problematic behaviour; and the power of professionals should be restricted. At the same time, the State recognised its responsibility to provide services and support children and their families in ways which are culturally appropriate and accessible. Following the traditional Maori model of collective responsibility, young people, their families and friends, and victims were encouraged to come together to decide how best to tackle offending behaviour. The key mechanism for implementing this approach has been the family group conference.

In the early years of FGC in New Zealand, the emphasis was on addressing concerns about child welfare rather than juvenile offending, but a growing dissatisfaction with conventional youth justice processes and the emergence of the victims' movement extended FGC into the youth justice arena and emphasised the importance of restorative processes. The YJB clearly intended that the pilot YISPs would implement FGC in close alignment with the New Zealand model described above. The key characteristics of this model are as follows:

- families must be present at the family group conference and should determine the process and procedures to be followed, who should be invited to attend, and the venue
- family members and the identified child should be active participants in the conference
- children should have a voice
- families should be empowered to find their own solutions to the issues which are causing concern
- victims should have an opportunity to participate in conferences
- the process should be restorative
- professionals are expected to support the families through the provision of services which fit with each family's plan.

The New Zealand model was founded on the belief that all families have strengths and family members are more likely to consent to action plans which they develop themselves than to those imposed on them. A clear set of values and assumptions underpin FGC (Hudson *et al.*, 1996). These include:

- respecting the integrity of the family
- focusing on strengthening families and community supports
- sharing power and creating opportunities for parents to feel responsible for their children
- showing sensitivity to and respect for each family's culture
- providing opportunities for victims of crime to be involved in receiving redress.

FGC denotes an important shift away from professional decision-making to a conscious attempt to collaborate with families as the decision-makers, which is

in line with the principles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Family group conferences enable family members and wider kin to contribute to the resolution of private family issues and public concerns. A critical issue for FGC practice is ensuring the balance between the public and private dimensions of family life. Families become a vital resource on which professionals can draw and the model is based on the belief that empowering families creates the conditions in which children can recover from adverse situations and grow and thrive. In this sense, FGC acknowledges families as being competent to make decisions (rather than viewing them as dysfunctional or deficient) and aims to enhance effective family functioning and affirm cultural values and identities.

One of the most important elements of FGC within the criminal justice arena is the potential for healing and the restoration of social harmony through the involvement of victims (Maxwell and Morris, 1996). Restorative justice is concerned with the broader relationships between offenders, victims and communities. If offenders are brought face to face with those who have suffered as a result of their behaviour there is an expectation that they will understand its consequences and be more willing to make amends for their wrongdoing. The YJB was keen that restorative justice should be a central feature of FGC within the YISP context, but, as we shall see, the pilots struggled to implement this component, primarily because YISPs encouraged referrals relating to children and young people before they were officially identified as having committed offences. The extent to which FGC within the YISP process was restorative is discussed later in the report.

#### **Steps in the Process**

The FGC process normally involves a number of steps: the referral; preparation for the family group conference; the conference itself; and the review of the plan agreed. Each of these steps needs to be carefully planned. Within the conference itself, there is usually a clearly defined process. The YJB described four stages:

1. Victim–offender dialogue – involving the victim either attending the conference or being represented at it.
2. Information giving and sharing by professionals and service providers.
3. Family time – for the family to talk in private and develop a family plan.
4. Discussion about and approval of the family plan with the professionals present.

Inevitably, as restorative justice and FGC approaches have been developed in different jurisdictions and cultures, the original New Zealand model has been adapted to meet specific circumstances. In some jurisdictions, the conferences are managed by the police; in others, the conferences are run by courts or social welfare agencies. Not all forms of FGC being practised around the world conform with the principles underlying the restorative justice approach used originally in New Zealand. Nevertheless, the YISP pilots were given clear guidance about the FGC model to be adopted, which was based on the original New Zealand approach, and about the way in which the conferences should be structured and facilitated.

The YJB was influenced by the research on family group conferences which had conformed to the original model (Morris, 1996). This research showed that:

- victims were willing and able to participate in restorative justice processes
- a significant majority of victims felt positive about the process and were satisfied with the outcomes
- offenders were held accountable
- reconviction rates were no worse and may have been better than for court-based samples
- factors in the restorative justice process may have been linked to a lower probability of reconviction
- about half of the children and young people reported that they were actively involved in the conference
- more than two-thirds of family members reported that they were involved and identified themselves as decision-makers
- families preferred the process of FGC to the court process
- levels of satisfaction with the process and the outcomes were high.

Overall, the results from previous research relating to FGC have been largely positive. The research has indicated that dissatisfaction occurs when promised interventions and services are not delivered, usually as a result of failure on the part of professionals rather than on the part of young people and their families. In general, however, the indications from the New Zealand experience are that FGC is a useful strategy for addressing concerns about youth offending and antisocial behaviour. It is important to note here, however, that in New Zealand FGC is used primarily with young people aged 14 to 17 and much less often with younger children in the YISP age range.

The challenge for the pilot YISPs was to implement FGC according to the New Zealand model with younger children, most of whom may not have come to the attention of the criminal justice system when referred to the YISPs. The model prescribed by the YJB appeared to be one which had been used mainly with older children who were already identified as offenders. The YJB did not provide any specific rationale for its use with younger children, but it recognised that restorative justice and the associated terminology would need to be sensitively adapted to the YISP context and that implementing FGC would inevitably present certain challenges.

#### **An Innovative Approach**

The YJB took the original FGC model and extended it to contribute to its preventative and early intervention agendas, believing that situating FGC within the YISPs, which sit within a multi-agency partnership framework, would reduce the number of children becoming involved in offending or antisocial behaviour and entering the criminal justice system, and increase the satisfaction rates of children and families involved with a YISP intervention. The YJB did not stipulate how FGC should be linked with the YISP process, but encouraged



flexibility to suit local needs, suggesting that pilots could introduce family group conferences at several different stages:

- the family group conference could be held prior to the YISP panel – in this model the panel’s task would be to ratify the family’s ISP and identify the resources needed, an authority for developing the plan would rest with the participants of the conference
- the family group conference could be held at the YISP panel meeting – in this model, the panel would effectively become the conference and the panel meeting would be run according to FGC principles
- the family group conference could be held after the YISP panel – in this model the panel would allocate resources in the normal way, enabling the family to decide how to use them during the conference and the authority for approving the ISP would then rest with the conference participants and not the panel.

During the study we examined which of these models each pilot adopted and attempted to ascertain the implications of their choices. We also took account of other studies relating to FGC and sought to understand how our evaluation extended the existing knowledge base.

The overall aim of FGC within the crime prevention arena is to increase the effectiveness of interventions such as YISPs in diverting high-risk children from offending by mobilising the direct involvement and participation of children, young people and their families in the design and review of ISPs. We set out to examine the extent to which the pilots were achieving this aim and then gathered information that could demonstrate whether there were any discernible changes in the lives of the children and young people referred to a family group conference within the YISP context.

In the next section, we outline briefly our approach to the evaluation, discuss the factors which influenced the methods we employed, describe the kinds of data we were able to collect, and consider the limitations of the study.

## 2 Evaluating the Enhanced Effectiveness of YISPs

In the first section we noted the policy context within which both YISPs and FGC were introduced and described the YJB's expectations of what these new interventions would achieve to prevent crime and antisocial behaviour within the 8–13 age range. In this section we outline our approach to the evaluation of FGC within the YISP process and discuss the limitations of the data. A more detailed discussion of the data we were able to collect can be found in Appendix 1.

### *The National Evaluation of YISPs*

The starting point for the design of our evaluation of family group conferences was the earlier national evaluation of YISPs (Walker *et al.* 2007b). We argued that in order to assess the value added by offering FGC within the YISP process it would be helpful to use the data gathered during our national evaluation of the 13 YISP pilots for comparison and to build on the findings from that study. It is important to note, however, that not all the FGC pilots had been involved in the evaluation of YISPs. There had been no YISP in Wales prior to the establishment of the Welshboro FGC pilot and, of the other four pilots, only one had participated in the earlier evaluation. Nevertheless, we believed that the YISP dataset available from that evaluation could provide a useful baseline from which to study the introduction of FGC in the YISP process.

We had delineated a number of elements of promising practice in the pilot YISPs and so could determine the extent to which these were evident in the FGC/YISP pilot areas. During the national evaluation we had obtained both quantitative and qualitative data via two complementary strands: a quantitative micro-level element, including a study of costs, and a qualitative element in four case-study areas which involved interviews with children, young people and practitioners and observations of YISP panels in action. These datasets had yielded a wealth of information about YISP processes and the challenges associated with this kind of preventative intervention.

We had agreed to take a light touch to the YISP evaluation and to use data captured by a management information system (YISPMIS) designed for the YJB by consultants for use in the YISP pilots. Unfortunately, YISPMIS proved to be far more problematic than helpful, both for the pilots and for the evaluation, and there were numerous, frequently insurmountable, problems regarding entry and extraction of the data. During the national evaluation of YISPs, we received data relating to 2,235 YISP referrals between February 2003 and October 2005, but many of the children referred fell outside the YISP age range of 8–13, leaving us with just 1,642 usable records, many of which had significant gaps in the data recorded.

Our multiple assessments of generalisability indicated that the social conditions across the pilots combined were substantially more challenging than those faced in most of the country as a whole. In this sense, the 13 YISP pilots were a

tough testing ground for the implementation of YISPs and we concluded that a more general roll-out across the country might be less challenging.

Our findings related to a new initiative in its early stages, enabling us to consider only the potential YISPs have to play a major role in reducing juvenile crime. The findings about the outcomes of YISP intervention, discussed in our final report (Walker *et al.*, 2007b), must be read with a high degree of caution, however, because we simply did not know what the longer-term outcomes might be or whether YISP interventions work in preventing children from becoming involved in antisocial behaviour and criminal activities.

Nevertheless, there were some promising messages and we have reflected on and referred to these as we have analysed the data from this current study of FGC. Importantly, the national evaluation highlighted the difficulties many agencies face when tasked with implementing a new initiative: the delays in getting new approaches accepted and established; the often unrealistic expectations about target numbers; the challenges inherent in multi-agency partnership working; and the importance of grounding new programmes within existing structures and local conditions while simultaneously responding to a wider national agenda for change in the delivery of children's services, particularly those focused on prevention and early intervention. These difficulties and issues re-emerged when the pilot YISPs attempted to introduce FGC.

### ***Our Approach to the Evaluation of Family Group Conferencing***

We extended the action-research approach we had used during the national evaluation of YISPs to the new evaluation of FGC. We were aware that a key problem faced by any evaluation of a particular initiative such as YISPs or FGC is the tendency for outcomes to result from a myriad of influences. Moreover, the history that precedes the introduction of a new initiative is a crucial determinant of how it functions and how local people respond to it (McCarthy *et al.*, 2002). In this study, as in our national evaluation of YISPs, it was essential to understand how YISPs targeted children and young people, assessed their risk and protective factors, developed ISPs and delivered multi-agency interventions. In addition, it was important to consider how children were selected for FGC, the nature and impact of the conference itself, and the interface between the FGC process/experience and the work of the YISP panels.

It was not possible to develop an experimental design in either the previous YISP evaluation or the evaluation of FGC. When we started the national evaluation of YISPs they were already being rolled out across the pilot areas and across other non-pilot areas, rendering it impossible to locate a control group of children and young people at risk of offending and antisocial behaviour in the pilot areas themselves or elsewhere. Nor was it possible to match areas for comparative purposes, or to undertake a before-and-after study. Because YISPs were targeting children and young people *prior* to their becoming involved in criminal activities it would have been difficult to determine a comparator sample unless all children in a given population were assessed

routinely to ascertain their levels of risk and then only some of those deemed to be at high-risk were offered YISP intervention and others were not.

The national evaluation of YISPs comprised an intensive, in-depth study which was conducted in a short timeframe. We adopted the same approach for the evaluation of FGC within the YISPs and developed a similar research design. In the early stages, formative approaches helped us to define the intervention (FGC) and these then enabled us to examine the extent to which it worked as intended. We developed a number of research objectives, delineated the tasks we would need to fulfil, formulated a range of research questions, and indicated the data sources to be used. We refined the detail during an early scoping phase and during the evaluation itself. The scoping study was conducted from February to April 2005. Data for the full evaluation were collected between May 2005 and March 2007. Although we had attempted to undertake a costs study in our national evaluation of YISPs, we concluded that the reliability of the data we could garner was problematic and advised that a costs study would be most unlikely to be helpful in the study of FGC. Our recommendation was accepted by the YJB and, as a result, no costs element was attempted in this current evaluation.

### *The Scoping Study*

We presented the findings from our scoping exercise to the YJB in April 2005. We had visited each of the five pilots and gained a more thorough understanding of the ways in which FGC was being integrated within each YISP. In only one pilot (Welshboro) was the YISP being developed alongside the FGC pilot. During these visits we identified a number of concerns and tensions which influenced our research design. In its ISB bid, the YJB had outlined the targets each of the five FGC/YISPs would be expected to achieve. These were to:

- convene, over three years, family group conferences for 200 of the highest-risk children in their area
- undertake 80 family group conferences per year during 2005–6 and 2006–7 and 40 conferences in 2004–5, to allow for the setting up and development of the project and the training of staff
- divert 10 per cent of the children who receive FGC from offending.

We were particularly concerned that some pilots were offering the FGC component to children outside the YISP age range of 8–13, primarily to ensure that they would reach the throughput targets set by the YJB. The YJB clarified that only children who fell into the original YISP age range would be included in the evaluation and confirmed to the pilots that the YISP/FGC model was designed to be an early intervention specifically with children aged 8–13 at high risk of offending or antisocial behaviour. During the scoping period all the pilots expressed concerns about achieving these targets. We shared these concerns, particularly as pilots were adamant that they would not sacrifice quality for quantity. From the data we received, it is clear that none of them reached the target set for conferences in the 8–13 age range, and this has had implications for the evaluation, which we discuss later.

The scoping study enabled us to refine our research methods, particularly as it was clear that there were many differences between the five pilots. While these differences were potentially interesting, we needed there to be sufficient similarities in order for us to make comparisons across different models of FGC/YISP. Nevertheless, the pilots were all using the same assessment procedures, and they were all following the New Zealand model of FGC, at least in principle. A suite of assessment tools, called ONSET, had been designed for the YISP pilots and the use of these assessment tools was important for us as they had provided one of the key measures of change in our national evaluation of YISPs and one we planned to employ in this study.

The ONSET assessment package designed for use in the YISPs endeavoured to measure change in risk and protective factors pertaining to four key domains in a child's life: school, family, community and self. In order to fit with the YISP process, ONSET included: a referral form (which can aid verification of suitability for YISP intervention); a pro-forma for parental and child consent; a standardised assessment form; a self-assessment questionnaire for children, entitled *Over To You*; a self-assessment *Over To You* questionnaire for parents/carers; a mid-way review; and a closure review. The nature of the ONSET suite is discussed more fully in our national evaluation of YISPs (Walker *et al.*, 2007a).

The assessment was designed to stand alone as a working tool for practitioners, but its primary use was in measuring and assessing outcomes. A thorough assessment of the levels of risk in each domain when the child is first referred enabled risk scores to be monitored over time, specifically during formal review and case-closure assessments, and changes to be analysed. As we discovered, however, not all pilots used the full ONSET tools. Few of them were using the mid-term review, which was unfortunate since this would have enabled us (and the pilots) to track changes in risk over time during the YISP involvement.

The differences between the pilots were considerable and it was clear that we would not be able to capture the significance of all of the variations. We decided to look at those which we hypothesised would impact on the evaluation: social and institutional contexts; processes for integrating FGC with the YISP; the role of FGC co-ordinators and conference convenors; the types of cases referred; the use of restorative justice; and the numbers of children involved. In addition, it became clear that the relationship between the family group conference and the YISP panel varied considerably between the pilots. Some panels considered cases prior to the conference taking place, while others were not involved until after the conference. In one pilot a mixed process was in operation, with some cases going direct to a conference and others going to a panel first. Some panels ratified the family plan, others rarely considered it when drawing up the ISP. We return to these process issues and discuss their implications in the next section.

Another significant variation between pilots related to the role and involvement of the FGC co-ordinator and the conference convenor or facilitator. In two pilots, the conferences were facilitated by external agencies and one of these used independent chairpersons to run the conferences. In the other three pilots, all

aspects of the process were delivered in-house. The implementation and monitoring of the ISP were the responsibility of YISP keyworkers in three pilots, while a lead agency nominated by the YISP panel took these responsibilities in one pilot and the FGC convenor carried them in the Welsh pilot, where no YISP keyworkers were employed. Indeed, children and families in Welshboro had a very different kind of experience from those in other pilots because the Welshboro FGC team was responsible for all aspects of the YISP intervention, thus retaining a continuous involvement with children and families from referral to the YISP through the conference and on to case closure. Moreover, this was the only pilot in which children and families attended the YISP panel as well as attending the family group conference.

### ***Revised Research Objectives***

As a result of our scoping study we reconfirmed that the evaluation would place emphasis on ascertaining the extent to which the effectiveness of YISP intervention could be said to be enhanced by incorporating an FGC element, using data obtained during the national evaluation of YISPs alongside new data from the FGC pilots. Our research objectives were fourfold. We wished to enhance knowledge about:

- the preventative capacity of FGC/YISPs to reduce the numbers of highest-risk children becoming involved in offending and antisocial behaviour, through the reduction of risk factors
- the most effective ways of mobilising family and community resources to reduce the risks and address the needs of the child and the family
- the most effective ways of involving high-risk children and their families in the design and implementation of ISPs
- the potential restorative impact of FGC used in the context of YISPs.

In achieving our objectives, we expected to make comparisons between:

- the pilot FGC/YISPs and the YISPs involved in the national evaluation
- children who received FGC within their YISP package and those who did not
- children who received FGC, on a pilot-by-pilot basis.

We intended to:

- utilise data sets and research tools developed for the national evaluation of YISPs to ensure that the research methodology for the FGC study was linked with the methodology used in the YISP evaluation
- focus specifically on determining the key elements of effective FGC practice and the core components which contribute to their effective integration within YISPs
- use both quantitative and qualitative methods in all the pilots, and adopt a case-study approach using more in-depth qualitative methods in two pilots
- reflect Home Office and YJB standards for evaluation.

## **Research Methods**

We designed the evaluation so that quantitative methods would provide the 'hard' evidence and qualitative methods would enable us to capture the 'softer' evidence about processes and outcomes which are not amenable to measurement. We worked closely with the stakeholders and provided frequent written and verbal feedback which was used to modify the pilots during the evaluation period. The evaluation included both formative and summative elements. We tracked the development of FGC in each pilot through observations, discussions with pilot managers and scrutiny of documents and reports prepared by the pilots for the YJB. Observations of family group conferences, exit surveys with participants and in-depth interviews with family members and FGC/YISP staff enabled us: to discern whether and how family and community resources were harnessed and how these related to the risk factors that had been identified; and to determine the mechanisms which could be used to engage family members in the development and execution of ISPs.

Exit surveys administered at the end of each family group conference, observations and in-depth interviews enabled us to consider whether and how restorative justice approaches were used within family group conferences and to discern whether they were perceived by participants as being effective in helping young people to face the consequences of their actions.

In order to determine the preventative capacity of FGC within YISP practice we needed to have robust measures relating to changes in risk factors. The primary tool for assessing outcomes was the repeat ONSET measures, in order to detect:

- changes in a child/young person's risk factors, before, during and after FGC/YISP intervention
- changes in a child/young person's behaviour, as perceived by the child, the parents and the keyworker
- parental and family changes as perceived by the family and the YISP keyworker.

Qualitative interviews with family members and FGC managers and YISP workers in two case-study pilots were designed to explore perceptions of what elements of FGC/YISP practice work best, for whom, and in what circumstances. We attempted, wherever possible, to make comparisons between children who received FGC and those who did not, recognising that the two groups could not be rigorously matched in any way and that there were likely to be inherent differences, therefore, between the children in the two groups. We attempted to assess the nature of these differences wherever possible, but it is necessary to be cautious about the comparisons we make between the two sets of children.

During the evaluation, we undertook the following activities in each pilot:

- observation of at least two YISP panels in action

- observation of at least two family group conferences
- the collection of management information at the case level on all referrals to each pilot YISP between January 2005 and December 2006
- an exit survey of participants of conferences held between June 2005 and December 2006
- a follow-up survey nine months after the family group conference had taken place, of all those children and family members who consented to further research contact at the time of the exit survey
- the use of satisfaction and other outcome measures (with children, family members and victims), incorporated into the exit and follow-up surveys and interviews.

In addition to the above activities, in two case-study pilots we also undertook:

- interviews with children and family members at two points in time, which we refer to as Time 1 and Time 2 (Time 1, shortly after a family group conference had taken place; Time 2, six months after the conference had taken place)
- interviews with victims (at Time 1) and professionals (at Time 2)
- focus groups with YISP staff, family group conference facilitators and other key staff at the end of the evaluation and after analyses had been completed
- observation of relevant meetings held by the YISPs.

In essence, there were three key elements in the evaluation:

1. The collection and analysis of quantitative data relating to children referred to the pilots.
2. Two surveys of family group conference participants: the first immediately on exiting the conference, and the second nine months after the conference.
3. In-depth qualitative work including observations and interviews with conference participants.

We summarise below the nature of the data obtained for each element and the data limitations (see Appendix 1 for a more detailed discussion).

### ***Collection and Analysis of Baseline Quantitative Micro-level Data***

The focus for the quantitative data analysis was on comparing the outcomes for children and young people who experienced a family group conference as part of their YISP intervention with the outcomes of those who did not. As we have noted already, the ongoing development of YISPs and FGC across the country made it impossible to set up a robust experimental research design. We planned, therefore to include a before-and-after study of FGC within the five pilots. We wanted to collect retrospective case-level data for each child/young person who had received intervention from each pilot YISP in the 12 month period prior to the introduction of FGC and make comparisons with prospective



case-level data for each child/young person who received YISP intervention from each pilot YISP over a 24 month period after FGC had been implemented.

The pilots were not able to supply data retrospectively, so we had to rely on a prospective study within the five pilots over a two-year period. We asked the pilots to supply case-level data about each child, their family circumstances, offending history, levels of risk as identified by ONSET assessments, the ISP, services delivered, and compliance with them. We wanted to identify and measure the likelihood of selection bias which would make FGC cases distinctive from non-FGC cases, but the relatively low numbers of FGC cases rendered this increasingly difficult to achieve.

Establishing the key outcomes of FGC and the enhanced effectiveness of the YISP intervention presented the biggest challenge for the evaluation, partly because there was little opportunity to follow children's progress once YISP intervention had ceased without a longer period for the evaluation. We decided to focus on reduction in risk as a key outcome measure, using the data from the ONSET suite of instruments. We were hopeful that we could undertake statistical modelling in order to try to separate out the influence on outcomes of a wide range of contextual factors. Unfortunately, there were insufficient numbers of cases for the kind of multi-variate modelling we had planned. Not only were pilots dealing with far fewer cases than they had expected and the numbers being referred for FGC remained low, but Dockborough had to be dropped from the evaluation in January 2006. The Dockborough pilot had experienced prolonged difficulties in implementing FGC within its YISPs and there was little integration between the FGC element and the work of the panels, which appeared to run independently. A continued lack of progress during 2005 led the YJB to withdraw funding from the pilot, thus reducing the number of pilots in the study from five to four.

Despite this setback for the evaluation, we were able to undertake more straightforward analyses in which selected outcome measures could be tabulated against specific factors, such as a child's age, which could be expected to shape the response not only to YISP and FGC interventions but to any intervention of this kind. In the end, our primary strategy for the analysis of the case-level data centred on comparing cases referred to each YISP during the study period in which a family group conference had taken place with those cases in which a conference was not held.

We received information in a variety of mediums and formats, and checked all the incoming data manually before prioritising them into four categories: verificatory data about the child; outcome information relating to ONSET assessments; potential explanatory factors, such as the characteristics of the child; and process information relating to the referral or the family group conference itself.

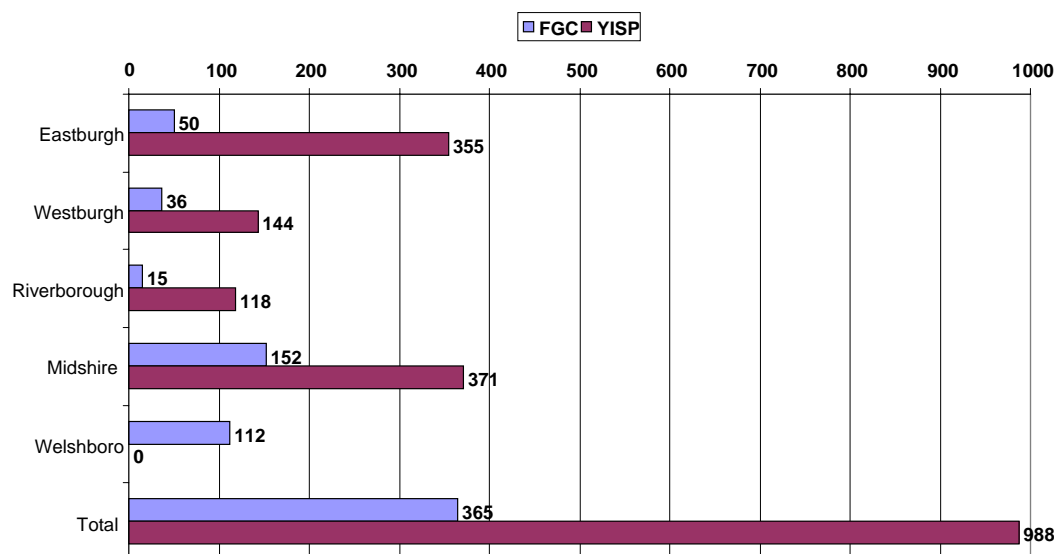
Despite the best efforts of pilot staff, who worked tirelessly to remedy deficiencies in the data sets, and our own painstaking review of every item of information available, we were able to include only 1,353 cases in the evaluation out of a possible 3,315 cases identifiable in the data we received. We could include only those cases:

- which were referred in the study period January 2005–December 2006 and were accepted by the YISPs for intervention
- in which the child was aged 8–13 at the time of referral to the YISP.

Some 674 cases in the database were not referred during the research period and 1,251 cases related to children and young people out of the YISP age range (most were older than 13). Some cases fell into both ineligible categories. In addition, over 1,000 referrals had been rejected by the YISPs and multiple gaps in the data meant that we had to reject other cases from the evaluation. The loss of 1,962 cases in total was disappointing, but the exclusion of most of them has less to do with missing data than with cases falling outside the scope of the evaluation because they were not referred during the study period or were not in the age-range or both. The numbers of cases in scope varied markedly between pilots (Figure 2.1).

Very broadly, the pilots which provided the most data tended to have the highest proportion of out-of-scope cases, particularly in respect of the ages of the children referred: over half of the Eastburgh cases were not in the 8–13 age range. Nevertheless, the total number of cases in scope is much as we had predicted from reviewing monthly monitoring forms, so we began our in-depth analyses with the kind of quantitative sample we had always expected. It is not appropriate, therefore, to over-emphasise the loss of the cases which were out of scope. What is disappointing is that relatively few of the in-scope cases involved a family group conference, far fewer than the YJB had anticipated.

**Figure 2.1: Number of pilot cases in-scope for the evaluation**



We can make several very important observations from Figure 2.1:

- allocation to a family group conference was a minority practice in all the pilots, except in Welshboro
- our analyses were inevitably dominated by YISP cases in which there was no family group conference
- our analyses of cases involving a family group conference depended greatly on those from Midshire and Welshboro (but our modelling could not include

Welshboro cases because there were no non-FGC YISP cases there). Our analyses of non-FGC YISP cases depended heavily on cases from Midshire and Eastburgh.

Figure 2.1 also gives a visual impression of the varying conversion rates across the English pilots. Some pilots were more likely than others to put cases forward for a family group conference:

- 27 per cent (365 out of 1,353) of YISP cases overall had a family group conference
- 29 per cent of YISP cases in Midshire had a family group conference
- 20 per cent of YISP cases in Westburgh had a family group conference
- 12 per cent of YISP cases in Eastburgh had a family group conference
- 11 per cent of YISP cases in Riverborough had a family group conference.

These figures are particularly important because the YJB had made it clear that all children and young people referred to the YISPs should be offered a family group conference (as they were in Wales). Clearly, this vision was not achieved.

Although we requested the same level of case data as was required for the national evaluation of YISPs, there was inadequate data on some of the key characteristics of cases which we had wanted to analyse. Only Eastburgh, for example, consistently recorded usable data on the reasons for the case referral. Data on the services offered to and taken up by children and young people were also patchy: one pilot provided information on paper only; another pilot recorded data in free-text format but with 35 per cent of the data missing. Information about other aspects of the pilots' processes was quite often not recorded. We report on other characteristics of the cases in the MIS records as we present the findings from our analyses in the following sections of the report, and we discuss the implications of the statistics for the future integration of FGC within YISPs. Nevertheless, the limitations associated with missing data should not be underestimated.

### **Survey Data**

All the conference participants were given information about the evaluation via glossy leaflets during their preparation for the conference. Separate leaflets were prepared for children and young people, parents, victims and professionals in each of the pilots. At the end of each conference, the FGC staff were asked to administer an exit questionnaire to each participant. We wanted to obtain initial self-reports from a range of perspectives on: the participants' preparation for the conference; their understanding of its purpose; their experiences during the conference and their thoughts on the content; their level of participation; and their expectations of what would happen next.

The exit survey was designed to provide a baseline for a follow-up survey some nine months later and a consent form for this was attached. Participants in the two case-study pilots were also invited to talk about their experiences with a member of the research team.

We do not know how many exit questionnaires were distributed, but we received 1,201 completed exit questionnaires: 433 from Coburgh,<sup>3</sup> 382 from Midshire, 287 from Welshboro, 80 from Riverborough, and 19 from Dockborough before it was withdrawn as a pilot. Of these:

- 194 were completed by the children referred to the YISP
- 64 were completed by siblings
- 221 were completed by parents/carers
- 111 were completed by other family members, and friends and neighbours of the family
- 9 were completed by victims
- 602 were completed by professionals.

Some 88 per cent of parents/carers and 83 per cent of children gave consent for the follow-up survey, and 65 per cent of parents and 75 per cent of children in the case-study pilots agreed to be interviewed by a member of the research team. Although we were content with the numbers of completed questionnaires available for analysis, we are unable to calculate the response rate. We have no record of how many questionnaires were distributed by FGC staff: we know that some FGC participants left the conference before the end (so would not have received an exit questionnaire); some participants preferred to take the questionnaire away with them and may not have returned it; and others were not given questionnaires because FGC staff forgot to administer them or had forgotten to take them to the conference venue.

The parents/carers, children and family members who agreed to the follow-up survey were recontacted nine months later. Towards the end of the study, we sent follow-up questionnaires after only three months so that we could include more people prior to the end of our data collection period. We have taken account of these time variations in our analyses. Unfortunately, the contact details were not always fully recorded and we did not include Dockborough cases, so the numbers of follow-up questionnaires sent out was smaller than we had hoped. Moreover, we did not include children whose parents had not given their consent. In total, we sent out 401 follow-up questionnaires (see Table A.1.10 Appendix 1) out of a possible 500. We had lost 20 per cent of those who consented to a follow-up survey for the reasons described above.

Our overall response rate was 25 per cent, although Welshboro achieved a response rate of 35 per cent. In total, we received 100 completed follow-up questionnaires: 41 from parents/carers; 34 from children; and 25 from family members and friends. While we were somewhat disappointed not to achieve a higher response rate, we were well aware that postal surveys of this nature rarely attract a high percentage of respondents. Moreover, many families would have ceased YISP involvement and their lives would have moved on, rendering our survey less meaningful than it would have been when they exited a family

<sup>3</sup> NB Coburgh consisted of questionnaires from Westburgh and Eastburgh.

group conference. The responses received, nevertheless provided useful information about how FGC was perceived in retrospect.

In addition, pilots had asked us to devise an exit questionnaire that they could distribute to participants at the end of review conferences. Midshire, Welshboro and Coburgh used this questionnaire, and 42 completed questionnaires were received by the research team. They were designed to capture perceptions about YISP intervention and about satisfaction with involvement in the YISPs in the period following the family group conference.

### ***Qualitative Data Sets***

We wanted to supplement the quantitative data with a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of families and professionals engaged in the FGC process and the pilot YISPs. Although we undertook qualitative enquiry across all the pilots, we focused specifically on Midshire and Coburgh.

#### **Observations**

An essential ingredient of the qualitative evaluation was first-hand observation of family group conferences and YISP panels in action between mid-2005 and December 2006. We were keen to discover whether the panels were working similarly to those in the national evaluation of the YISPs and how the introduction of an FGC element impacted on their work. In our observations of family group conferences, we set out to determine: the levels of child and family participation; the role played by the conference facilitator;<sup>4</sup> the decision-making processes and the development of a family plan; the adherence to FGC objectives and principles of practice; and the observable reactions to the conference on the part of the child and family members. Overall, we undertook: ten observations of family group conferences; nine observations of YISP panels; and two observations of family group conference review meetings.

#### **Focus Groups**

At the end of the evaluation, after we had analysed all the data, we conducted three focus groups, one each in Midshire, Westburgh and Eastburgh. These were attended by local YISP workers, FGC facilitators and co-ordinators, senior YOT staff, a data collection manager and a restorative justice worker. In total, 19 people attended.

We used the opportunity to raise key themes that had emerged during the evaluation and encouraged the participants to reflect on their own experience of the pilots and make recommendations for the future development of FGC. The discussions from the focus groups are included, as appropriate, in the final section of this report.

<sup>4</sup> Pilots used different terms to describe the person running a family group conference. These included: FGC facilitator; FGC convenor; and FGC chairperson.

### **In-depth Interviews**

Our aim was to draw a sample of up to 12 families in each of two pilots. We selected Midshire and Coburgh<sup>5</sup>, both of which were operating FGC within the context of fully functioning YISPs. They offered contrasting geographical locations, management structures and processes. Although we had hoped that our selection of families would be conceptually and theoretically driven, taking into account a range of variables such as the age of the child, risk factor scores, family structure and ethnicity, we were constrained by the numbers of consenting families who were available for interview when we contacted them, but we did ensure that we included children across the 8–13 age range from a variety of family structures and with different kinds of offending histories (see Appendix 2 for a brief profile of each family).

At Time 1, shortly after the conference had taken place, we completed interviews with 45 individuals from 13 families in Midshire, and with 48 individuals from 15 families in Coburgh, thus exceeding our target of 12 families in each area. The Time 1 interviews focused on the participants' experiences of referral to the YISP and the FGC, their preparation for the conference and their feelings about the conference itself. We were particularly interested in the involvements of victims and attempts at restorative justice, but very few victims were involved in the conferences.

At Time 2, some six months after the conference had taken place, we were able to re-interview 18 members of eight of the Midshire families and 31 members of 11 families in Coburgh. It proved to be impossible to re-interview all of the Time 1 subjects, for a variety of reasons: some families withdrew their consent; others repeatedly failed to keep appointments with the researchers; and some family members were ill or simply uncontactable despite repeated efforts. At Time 2, therefore, we had 'lost' nine families (out of 28 at Time 1) from our original sample.

At Time 2, we focused on what had happened since the family attended the family group conference, the services and support offered to the family and the perceived outcomes of the conference and of YISP intervention. These interviews offered family members a chance to reflect on the processes, interventions and perceived outcomes and to make their own predictions for the future in terms of the child's involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour. At Time 2, we also interviewed each child's YISP keyworker to explore their perception of the child's progress and their prognosis for the child's future.

Although we cannot claim that our interview sample is representative of the children and families experiencing FGC, we have been able to derive greater insight into the FGC processes and potential outcomes than is available from purely quantitative data sets. We included some validated measures during our interviews with family members in order to introduce a greater element of rigour in the indicators of change. During Time 1 and Time 2 interviews with children and young people we asked them to complete the Strengths and Difficulties

<sup>5</sup> Families from Westburgh and Eastburgh were included.

Questionnaire (SDQ). This resulted in 20 SDQs completed at Time 1 and 14 completed at Time 2. In our interviews with parents at Time 1 and Time 2 we used the Family Assessment Device (FAD) to measure areas of family functioning, problem-solving and communication. At Time 1, 23 parents completed the FAD and 17 of them completed it again at Time 2. In addition, at Time 2 Coburgh sent us 10 user satisfaction questionnaires completed by parents and 13 completed by children and young people.

We also offered children a disposable camera at Time 1 and invited them to record aspects of their daily lives which we could then discuss at the Time 2 interviews. The aim was to encourage each child to keep a visual record of their life while they were involved with the YISP. Children were given a copy of their photos to keep. We have used this device in other studies to provide a focus for interview discussions, particularly with young children. We gave out 38 cameras at Time 1 and processed 19 of the films returned to us prior to the Time 2 interview.

In summary, then, our interviews consisted of: Time 1 interviews with 93 family group conference participants (including 3 with victims); Time 2 interviews with 49 of these participants; and 17 interviews with YISP staff.

#### **Data Analyses**

Analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken by two of the three researchers who undertook interviews and observations. Details of the analysis process are given in Appendix 1.

Throughout this report we present verbatim many of the comments made by the subjects in our interview sample. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed and we have endeavoured to select extracts which illustrate the key themes that emerged from our analyses and to present the data in a balanced way.

#### ***Exploring Effectiveness***

We planned to bring all the quantitative and qualitative data together from the study as a whole in order to address broader questions about the outcomes of FGC and to consider whether the effectiveness of YISP intervention was enhanced by FGC and, if so, in what ways. Unfortunately, we were not able to undertake an impact study which could have enabled us to consider the direct impact of FGC in the lives of the children and young people referred to the YISPs. By combining our quantitative and qualitative findings we were able, nevertheless, to address broader questions about the effectiveness of the intervention. In this context, then, we mined our data in order to discover whether:

- family support had been mobilised
- mainstream (and other) services had been used
- families had felt motivated to engage with the FGC process and ISP implementation
- the ISP had been responsive to the family's needs

- children and young people had been deterred from crime and antisocial behaviour
- school attendance and performance had improved
- risk factors had decreased
- the families were able to seek appropriate support
- involvement in FGC had enhanced the YISP process for those who experienced it.

We also endeavoured to ascertain whether FGC:

- had been delivered according to the specification devised by the YJB
- appears to be a suitable intervention for use within the YISP context
- might need to be modified further in the light of the evaluation.

Ultimately, we hoped to compare short-term outcomes achieved by children and young people who attended a family group conference with those achieved by children and young people who did not attend, in order to determine what is perceived to work best, for whom and in what circumstances. We were not, however, able to do this in a rigorously controlled way and so do not have a true counterfactual measure. We recognised at the end of the scoping phase that assessing the value added by FGC would not be easy or straightforward and might be impossible other than in purely qualitative terms.

Many of the risks we identified at the beginning of the study plagued the evaluation throughout: variability between the pilots; slow/late implementation of the FGC initiative; low throughput of cases; a high proportion of referrals falling outside the eligible YISP age-group; difficulties with recording and extracting data; and pilots expressing confusion and concerns about the YJB's expectations and the FGC model to be implemented. In the event, the quantitative dataset available for the evaluation was considerably more limited than had been anticipated. The loss of Dockborough was unforeseen and had damaging consequences for a study with so few pilots. The selection by the YJB of a pilot in Wales meant that no previous data relating to YISP activity was available and the Welsh pilot was somewhat different from those in England.

The inability of most pilots to provide the data we needed in formats we could utilise was a serious problem for the pilots and for the evaluation team and there are lessons to be learned about the readiness of pilots to contribute to complex national evaluations when they are selected to implement new initiatives. If evaluations are to be rigorous and robust, then more thought needs to be given to the support and resources required by pilots in order to deliver research data fully and on time. Despite many frustrations for everyone concerned, the considerable efforts of pilot staff and members of the research team resulted in an evaluation which has provided important insights into FGC within the preventative agenda in youth justice.



## **Contextualisation**

Issues of generalisability and representativeness are always key aspects of this kind of evaluation. The original intention had been to provide a contextual element which identified variations between pilot areas in terms of factors such as socio-demographic structure, crime rates, deprivation levels, educational performance, and other related policy activities.

One key reason for measuring these attributes in the communities in which the pilots were located was to assess how representative they are of the rest of the country. The pilots had been selected to provide a reasonable cross-section of the country, with a clear emphasis on areas where youth crime and antisocial behaviour were more problematic. When Dockborough ceased to be a pilot, this severely reduced the potential representativeness of the remaining small number of pilots. Subsequently, the low number of cases about which data were provided for the research by some pilots – particularly Riverborough – meant that the case data available for analysis could not possibly be seen as representative of the country as a whole. The database is not the product of an area-stratified sample which can then be seen as broadly representative of variations across the country. In reality, a substantial proportion of the cases we have been able to use in our various analyses comes from one of the pilots. As a result, we determined that there would be no value in contextualising the pilots as part of a discussion around the generalisability of the research findings.

Another reason for contextualisation of the pilot areas was to discuss how representative the cases were of the ‘population at risk’ in that area. Here the problem was that we had no knowledge of this population at risk, other than the cases which had been selected in practice. Referral routes are known to have varied between the pilots, so general assumptions could not be made about the population at risk in each pilot area. Some pilots were particularly concerned with children experiencing schooling problems, whereas others kept their focus on children involved in crime or antisocial behaviour. As a result, measures of school-related problems may be central to understanding one area’s level of problems but less relevant to other pilots. A more fundamental problem was that the focus on early intervention meant that, by definition, many children and young people who made up the population at risk could not be reflected in statistics on crime or other problems because they had not yet committed an offence for which data could be collected.

If the potential caseload was knowable with a reasonable degree of precision, data on that population at risk in each area could be used in comparisons between it and the actual cases (e.g. to see if the cases in any pilot were disproportionately drawn from ethnic minority groups, given the ethnic make-up of that area’s population at risk). This means, for example, that if one pilot had a higher proportion of high-risk cases than the others, it cannot be determined how far this is due to a distinctive feature of that pilot’s referral practices and how far it was due to the area’s level of risk. These considerations led us to conclude that there was no value in attempting contextualisation at the area level. Moreover, because we agreed not to identify the pilots, we would have been severely hampered in just how much contextualisation we could have

done anyway: we clearly could not provide descriptions or maps of each area as we did in the national evaluation of YISPs, without it being possible to identify the areas of the country in which the FGC/YISP pilots were located.

The one form of contextualisation which was both possible and appropriate in this evaluation was at the case level. The neighbourhood characteristics of the home neighbourhood of each case have been brought into the quantitative analyses, and have been tested for significance in explaining outcomes in Section 7.

In the remainder of this report we describe and discuss the findings that emerged from our evaluation and set out the lessons learned and the implications for the future integration of FGC within the YISP context. The findings need to be treated with some caution, particularly those relating to the quantitative analyses, because the data we have obtained are less robust than we had hoped and two of the pilots were able to contribute very little, despite their best efforts. The findings should be regarded as indicative of what FGC *might* offer within YISP processes if it were to be more closely integrated into interventions which are designed to be preventative and to offer early intervention to those children and young people at high risk of offending and antisocial behaviour. In the following sections we address the questions posed about the added-value of FGC within the YISP context. In Section 3 we look specifically at how FGC was introduced to and integrated within the YISP process in the pilot areas.

### 3 Integrating Family Group Conferencing within the YISPs

In the previous section, we outlined the approach we took to the national evaluation of the FGC/YISP pilots and noted the limitations of the study. We focused on developing an understanding of the ways in which FGC was introduced and integrated with YISP processes and the factors which might promote the most effective practice. We took the data obtained during our previous national evaluation of 13 pilot YISPs as our baseline and looked to see how the introduction of FGC enhanced YISP processes and achievements. In this section, we describe the models of FGC adopted by the FGC/YISP pilots and the ways in which they introduced FGC, and make comparisons with the previous YISP pilots as appropriate.

The YJB had always envisaged that FGC and restorative justice approaches would be integral to the new YISPs. Nevertheless, during the national evaluation of YISPs, only one of the thirteen pilots offered an approach which involved children and their families in family group conferences. While the other pilots rarely involved children and families directly in panel meetings either, the pilot which included FGC always ensured that children and their families were central players in the YISP process. In our final report, however, we noted that the family group conferences had seemingly taken the place of the YISP panel in that particular pilot and many of the wider networking activities and the commitment of resources made during panel meetings appeared to have been lost (Walker *et al.*, 2007b). We suggested that involving children and families in YISP panel meetings and developing a model of FGC which has the ability to enhance YISP processes rather than take over from or substitute for them remained a challenge – one which the five FGC pilots subsequently took up.

As part of our scoping activities for this evaluation we sought to understand the ways in which the FGC pilots were integrating family group conferences within the YISP context. As we noted in Section 1, the YJB had not been prescriptive about how the FGC element should be integrated, preferring to encourage local flexibility. It became clear that the pilots had adopted different approaches to the introduction of family group conferences and we speculated that the variations in practice would influence the experiences of those involved and the outcomes of YISP intervention. We draw from our observations of the YISP panels and interviews with YISP and FGC staff, parents and children to consider the challenges these models presented for the development of FGC within a preventative and early intervention context.

#### ***The Pilots***

At the beginning of the evaluation, we visited all the pilots selected by the YJB in order to gain a better picture of the FGC model being adopted. We describe each pilot individually below. We have included a description of Dockborough

even though we were not able to include it in the analysis of FGC elsewhere in the report.

### **Dockborough**

Dockborough was the only FGC pilot that had been one of the original 13 YISP pilots in our national evaluation. It had developed as part of the remit of a YOT Early Intervention Team and there were two YISP panels, one serving the north and the other serving the south of Dockborough, aligned with social services boundaries. The YISP panels were chaired by the respective district social services managers, and each panel met monthly. Referrals to the YISP had remained low throughout our previous evaluation and the majority came from education. Somewhat unusually, there were no dedicated YISP keyworkers in Dockborough and professionals in a variety of agencies could be designated as lead workers to implement and monitor the ISPs.

FGC was viewed as an additional resource for the YISP, which had a strong child welfare approach, partly because social services were so closely involved. The FGC co-ordinator was based in the court service, which was also unusual. The main referral sources were social services, education, health and youth workers and many referrals were related to welfare and child protection concerns rather than to criminal justice issues. The link between the FGC process and the YISP appeared to be tenuous and this situation continued well into our evaluation period. The conferences had been outsourced to a local welfare agency, primarily to enable effective matching of FGC facilitators in terms of race and culture and to recruit and train local people. The family group conference facilitators in Dockborough had a similar remit to that of independent chairs in the Riverborough pilot.

In the first year of FGC implementation Dockborough faced a number of challenges:

- there were low numbers of referrals (many of those they received were child welfare cases)
- the YISP and the FGC programme lacked a clear identity
- there was little integration of FGC into the YISP
- the agency commissioned to facilitate FGCs was proving to be an expensive option
- there were apparent confusions about how FGC would ultimately fit into existing structures.

These challenges persisted, and Dockborough was withdrawn as a pilot by the YJB some six months into the evaluation. We would suggest that the model of FGC that Dockborough had adopted and the outsourcing of its family group conferences were critical factors in its early demise, despite the commitment to FGC demonstrated by the staff involved.

### **Riverborough**

The Riverborough YISP was established in 2004 and consisted of five panels corresponding with the boundaries of local Connexions offices where YISP workers were based and most panels were held. The lead agency was the YOT,

but each panel had its own funding streams and the YISP keyworkers were mostly seconded from a range of agencies. Management arrangements seemed somewhat complex since YISP workers were not fully accountable to the YOT or to the YISP administration and had a diverse skills base, rendering it difficult to impose quality standards for their YISP work.

The target group for YISP referrals in Riverborough was young people aged 8 to 17, some of whom had received a final warning from the police. In addition, every young person considered by the antisocial behaviour division had to be referred to the YISP. The main referral sources were the YOT, education, social services and the police and each YISP keyworker was expected to handle about 50 referrals per year. Although Riverborough had experienced a slow start in referrals to the YISP, there was optimism that referrals would increase. Cases were kept open for a maximum of six months with a review at three months. We were told, however, that because some of the children and young people referred were experiencing multiple problems, re-referrals were commonplace.

The FGC element was driven by the YOT and serviced by a Parenting Support Programme co-ordinator, an FGC co-ordinator and 10 independent conference chairs from a range of professional backgrounds who were employed on a sessional basis by a charity experienced in delivering restorative justice interventions. In the early stages of the pilot, Riverborough was building its FGC activities on the referrals which were being received for the YISP Parenting Support programme as well as referrals from the YISP administrator. If a family group conference was considered appropriate, the FGC co-ordinator undertook the preliminary work with the family and developed an information pack for the independent chairperson while the YISP keyworker undertook the ONSET assessment. It was then the task of the independent chairperson to prepare the family for the conference and to facilitate it. The family plan drawn up at the conference was then passed to the FGC co-ordinator and sent to the YISP panel for ratification and allocation to a YISP keyworker or a Parenting Support Programme keyworker for implementation.

In the early stages of the pilot we were aware that Riverborough had experienced problems relating to the recruitment of the independent chairs and delays in receiving referrals from the YISPs. There were also ongoing concerns about information-sharing and in relation to agreeing priorities between agencies. Some YISP keyworkers were reluctant to introduce the possibility of a family group conference until the family was well engaged with YISP. Moreover, over 130 languages are spoken in Riverborough as a result of its multi-ethnic population, so there were a number of specific cultural challenges to be overcome by the YISP.

During the early months of the evaluation only a few conferences were held for children in the 8–13 YISP age range and the FGC staff were still trying to persuade YISP colleagues to allow them to intervene earlier. Riverborough was aiming to hold a family group conference within 12 weeks of referral but this target was not always met. In fact, Riverborough continued to face a number of problems with the implementation of the FGC pilot throughout the evaluation period, which were exacerbated by staffing difficulties and massive

reorganisation in the delivery of children's services. Although a number of dedicated staff attempted to refocus the FGC pilot, Riverborough did not manage to contribute as much usable data for the evaluation as staff, and we, had hoped and expected.

### **Coburgh**

The Coburgh FGC pilot involved two quite separate local authorities and two separate YISPs. While they had collaborated to bid for FGC pilot status, to a large extent each of the two YISPs ran their respective FGC pilot in their own way. We found it easier to treat them as separate FGC pilots, therefore, at various points in the evaluation, and we refer to them as Eastburgh and Westburgh when we do so.

In Eastburgh, three YISP panels had been developed, each covering two local authority ward areas. Each panel met at six-weekly intervals and was chaired by the YISP manager. The target group for Eastburgh YISP was children and young people aged between 8 and 16 but some 60 per cent of referrals in the early stages of the pilot involved young people who were older. The main referral sources were the police and the education welfare service. As in Riverborough, many of the young people referred to the YISP had received a final warning.

The YISP in Westburgh covered five neighbourhood management areas and consisted of four YISP keyworkers and four panels, each of which met monthly. Referrals to the Westburgh YISP related only to children within the YISP age range and the majority were received from education.

The FGC process was developed by the Eastburgh YOT, which had previous experience in restorative justice and community reparation schemes. Although the FGC pilot developed common standards to be used across Westburgh and Eastburgh, there were significant differences in implementation. In Eastburgh, the FGC process was being fully integrated into the YISP procedures, while in Westburgh FGC staff struggled in the early stages to embed conferencing within the YISP. Some YISP keyworkers in Westburgh were anxious about introducing FGC when the YISP programme itself was only just being developed. Some professionals were reluctant to buy into and own the new FGC programme, worried that family group conferences might undermine or reduce the important early intervention work the YISP keyworkers were trying to establish.

Referrals were therefore slow in the early stages of the pilot. At first, referrals for a family group conference in Westburgh often did not materialise until after the YISP panel had drawn up an ISP, whereas in Eastburgh cases were considered for referral to a conference at a much earlier stage and before the YISP panel had considered them. Moreover, after the conference, the original FGC facilitator in Eastburgh handed the case back to the YISP keyworker while the FGC facilitator in Westburgh maintained some responsibility for undertaking reviews. This overlapping of responsibilities, which was a feature also of the Welshboro and Midshire pilots, is an issue we return to in Section 6.

We noted that the split-site arrangements in Coburgh presented a particular tension and, with two distinctly different YISPs, it was difficult for the FGC pilot to be established uniformly, especially as the age range of the target group varied, as did the referral routes. Both Eastburgh and Westburgh experienced

delays in recruiting FGC staff and getting the pilot off the ground and Westburgh also faced changes in key personnel during the pilot. The YISP cases were often kept open for long periods of time (up to a year) and it was often difficult to engage mainstream services, thus putting pressure on YISP keyworkers to offer one-to-one services for children. In retrospect, it would almost certainly have been easier for the two pilot sites if they had been run independently. The attempt to combine their efforts in order to meet the requirements set by the YJB for FGC pilot status was bold but problematic, and tensions were evident all the way through the evaluation period. We have met similar tensions in the evaluation of other initiatives and there are some valuable lessons to be learned about the challenges inherent in trying to launch and pilot a new initiative across local authority boundaries when existing structures and processes are significantly different.

### **Midshire**

The lead agency for the YISP in Midshire was a large children's voluntary organisation offering a county-wide service via four YISP panels, each of which met monthly. The target population was confined to the YISP age range and the main referral service was education. Self-referrals to the YISP were said to be higher in Midshire than in other pilots.

Midshire appeared to have established a model YISP which conformed closely to YJB management guidelines. The FGC element was fully integrated into the YISP process from the start of the pilot and six police officers and four restorative justice workers had been trained to deliver family group conferences and to undertake victim-offender mediation. The pilot was well staffed and a comprehensive training programme was in place. The FGC process was straightforward and Midshire had sufficient resources to appoint child advocates to help the children referred to FGC to participate in the conference. This was a feature unique to the Midshire pilot. The FGC co-ordinator chaired the conferences and the family plan was taken to the next available YISP panel for ratification and incorporation into an ISP. A YISP keyworker then took responsibility for implementing the ISP.

Part-way through the evaluation, Midshire YISP decided to change the process to enable FGC staff to continue to work with the child and the family beyond the family group conference. The FGC and YISP keyworkers effectively became one and the same. This was similar to the process developed in Welshboro, and it raised questions because it appeared to contravene some of the more traditional conventions about the importance of FGC facilitators remaining independent. The reason for the change related to a number of factors: the capacity of the YISP and FGC teams; the difficulties faced by key staff working across districts both in respect of the time spent travelling and of the building of networks; and the expansion of YISP panels as part of the core vision for the prevention of youth crime in the county. In addition, the YISP and FGC staff felt that it was very important for them to work as a team and to ensure that the FGC process was carefully and integrally embedded within the YISP programme. Midshire had a fully integrated FGC/YISP in operation early in the piloting process and maintained its strong position throughout the evaluation, providing the template for our quantitative data collection.

## **Welshboro**

There were no YISPs in Wales prior to the FGC pilot. However, FGC had been operating since 1998 in Welshboro as part of a programme to prevent truancy and school exclusion, in the belief that children who do not attend school are more likely to commit crime. The YOT, social services and education had collaborated to introduce FGC and the majority of referrals were coming from education. The new FGC/YISP pilot was built on this initiative and it meant that all children referred to the pilot were given conferences, there being no separate YISP referral route. Although Welshboro had seven years of previous experience in running family group conferences for children and young people aged 11–16, it needed to establish a YISP and to refocus its activities on children in a younger age range.

The pilot targeted children aged 8–13 who were living or going to school in certain electoral wards. The FGC manager was supported by three FGC convenors and a number of Modern Apprentices (MAs) aged 18–22. The MAs were a unique feature of the Welshboro pilot. The Modern Apprentices scheme was launched in conjunction with a local college and the apprentices were enrolled on a NVQ3 in Youth Justice, which involved a practice placement for four days each week for two years. Four MAs were placed with the FGC pilot and worked closely with the young people during the daytime and weekday evenings. The allocation of an MA was usually written into the ISP and specific targets were set. The MAs were involved in leisure and sport activities with the children and young people, helped with schoolwork, and acted as mentors. They played an active part in developing ISPs and attended YISP panels when appropriate. The MAs, who were often enrolled on other skills training courses (e.g. counselling courses), were supervised by the FGC manager and the YISP keyworkers.

In Welshboro, children and their families were expected to attend the YISP panel after they had attended a family group conference. The panels were chaired by an educational psychologist or a senior educationalist, primarily because most referrals came from education. Following the panel, the FGC convenor became the child's keyworker and maintained responsibility for implementing the ISP and monitoring progress. Formal reviews were held and families were invited to attend them. Indeed, the direct participation of children and families in the conference and in the YISP panel was far greater in Welshboro than in any other pilot.

Because there was no separate referral route into YISPs except via the FGC referral, Welshboro was operating a pilot in which all families referred to the newly established YISP were prepared for a conference. If a child or family did not wish to participate in a conference they would exit the YISP. Unlike in other pilots, Welshboro had considerable experience of running FGCs, but not YISPs. The primary challenge was to shift the focus away from school-based and welfare issues towards tackling the risks associated with offending, and to encourage a broader range of referrals consistent with YISP practice.

### ***The YISP Panels***

The five FGC/YISP pilots presented many variations in FGC practice, and all except Welshboro were evolving ways of integrating a FGC process into pre-



existing YISP procedures. For the most part the YISPs were fairly well established by the time the FGC pilots became operational, and they needed to decide how to incorporate a distinctly new and rather different element. The relationship of the FGC work to the work of the YISP panels needed to be clarified and was not straightforward in most of the pilots. The YJB had issued clear guidelines about the role, remit and structure of YISP panels but had left the mode of integration of FGC for each individual pilot to decide. Nevertheless, despite the clear guidance, we noted in our national evaluation of YISPs that panels varied within and between the pilots. When establishing panels, the YISPs were advised to consider a number of factors, including: the catchment area to be served; the anticipated workload; the roles and responsibilities of panel members; how children and families would be involved in decision-making; the strength and efficacy of relevant local strategic partnerships; and information exchange and confidentiality (YJB, 2005).

The YJB argued that, because of the specific remit of YISPs, certain agencies should form the core membership of every panel, with additional specialist and other agencies invited to join according to local circumstances. The core agencies were YOTs, the police, social services, health (CAMHS), and schools/education. Other specific agencies were likely to include the youth service, housing, Connexions, and a range of voluntary and community groups. Gathering representatives from the key agencies who had sufficient seniority to commit resources emerged as an important challenge for the pilot YISPs involved in the previous national evaluation. The pilots also had to strike a balance between keeping the panels effective and ensuring that panels were not unwieldy, thereby discouraging full participation.

Not all the pilot YISPs found it easy to engage police representatives; some struggled to involve teachers; and some found that social services representatives were not always regular and constructive participants. The YISP staff in some pilots felt that other agencies did not always pull their weight and often expected the YISPs to undertake much of the necessary intervention with the child and family. We noted that some panels were reluctant to close cases and that a dominant caring ethos, evident in all the YISP panels we observed, could be a double-edged sword: panel members would become increasingly 'involved' in the cases and, as a result, lose sight of the focus of YISPs on early intervention and the prevention of crime and antisocial behaviour, adopting a more welfare-oriented approach to long-term care and support.

We concluded that it takes time and effort to build effective panels, secure commitment and foster a shared vision. Panel members were not always realistic about what YISP intervention could achieve and we pointed to the danger that YISP keyworkers may become long-term caseworkers because other agencies fail to offer much-needed services to the kinds of children and young people referred to YISPs. Nevertheless, we observed considerable dedication among panel members and a strong belief that early intervention can keep children and young people out of the criminal justice system.

#### **Securing Attendance by Professionals**

In the evaluation of FGC/YISPs, we observed nine YISP panels in the four pilots that remained operational throughout the evaluation period. The size and

composition of these panels were very similar to those observed during the previous national evaluation: the panels varied in size between 7 and 18 members and YISP keyworkers were usually in attendance. Indeed, the YISP and YOT staff often accounted for just under half of the total number of attendees at a panel meeting. None of the four pilots included community representatives on its panels. This is in keeping with most of the previous YISP pilots. Only a very few of them had included local community members on their panels, but those that had were certain that they had added considerable value and made an important contribution to discussions.

Education staff, drawn from the education welfare service, Behaviour and Emotional Support Teams (BESTs), behaviour support services, pupil referral units and educational psychology services, usually attended panel meetings. Only in Welshboro, however, did we observe a panel attended by a teacher from a local school. The police attended two panels we observed, but normally sent information about the children if they were not able to attend. Health services were represented in two pilots but only in Westburgh did a representative of social services regularly attend a panel meeting. It would appear that the FGC/YISP pilots had been particularly successful in ensuring representatives from education as panel members, but, as in many of the previous 13 YISPs, the attendance of social services was variable and minimal. The lack of representatives from social services was regarded as a major concern across all the YISP panels, particularly as their expertise was considered vital to the development of ISPs.

It seemed clear that, in general, the FGC/YISP pilots were experiencing all the same kinds of challenges as those we detected in the previous national evaluation. The failure of social services to attend panels regularly was regarded by YISP staff as 'a massive, massive issue'. Even though many YISP cases fell below social services' thresholds, keyworkers regarded it as important for social services to offer professional advice, help and support in panel discussions – to act as a 'sounding board':

*The main concern is the total lack of commitment from social services. I think, in the last year, they may have attended four [monthly panel meetings] and it's not good enough because all the young people were working with are those at highest risk. A lot of them go through to child protection and we do need representation here. All the other agencies are there, and I really think that's the downfall [for the panel].*

(YISP co-ordinator)

By contrast, the education welfare service was usually represented at panels but YISP staff would have liked school staff such as Year Heads to attend as well, although they acknowledged that this may be an unrealistic expectation. There was a general acceptance that the times of day at which panels were held might have posed problems for teachers, yet many of the cases discussed by the panels centred on educational issues:

*Education welfare come, but there could be issues in the school. The young person could be getting loads of detentions so it might be more appropriate for the teacher [to come] ... somebody who's had the one-to-one contact with the child.*

(YISP keyworker)

Panels in this study experienced the same frustrations as those in the previous national study relating to the input of mental health professionals, particularly when their geographical boundaries were not coterminous with YOT catchment areas, rendering information exchange problematic. The YISP workers in our case-study pilots were disappointed that CAMHS staff rarely attended panels. One YISP keyworker explained:

*I come across so many of my young people and you work with them every week over several months and you know there's something there and nothing gets done about it. It's very, very sad ... one young person I knew was on the autistic spectrum ... he just seemed lost in the system and nobody was recognising that he had needs.*

The YISP staff were very positive about the contributions made by other agencies such as antisocial behaviour units and housing departments, however. We noted that in all the FGC/YISP pilots, representatives of local antisocial behaviour units were regarded as core panel members and that their attendance was regular. In three of the FGC/YISP pilots, representatives from drug and alcohol services attended panel meetings, and members of other agencies such as Connexions, Sure Start, Youth Services and local voluntary organisations occasionally attended. We received comments such as the following:

*The links we've made with the ASB unit have been fantastic.*

(YISP keyworker)

*Housing are very good. Housing are super, super. We're very lucky ... if we work with the family and repairs are needed and you go in and say 'I've asked for this to be done, that to be done and it hasn't [happened]' ... they [the housing representatives] go to panel and ... it's done!*

(YISP keyworker)

Nevertheless, YISP keyworkers frequently pointed out during our previous evaluation of YISPs that some panel members were more likely to offer information than to offer services. Nevertheless, YISP keyworkers were of the view that panel attendance encouraged colleagues in other agencies to 'go the extra mile'. They described cases in which the housing department had held off a decision to evict a family when it had learned about difficulties such as a child having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). There was a clear consensus in both evaluations that panel membership encouraged agencies to be more tolerant and more caring in their approach to families in which children are at high risk of offending.

What was evident from our discussions with YISP staff in the FGC/YISP pilots is the extent to which they valued colleagues from a range of agencies attending panel meetings and contributing to ISPs. One YISP keyworker observed that he would like to see more agencies represented and mentioned professionals such as school nurses and youth workers. In our national evaluation of YISPs we heard similar comments.

The panels were regarded by YISP staff as a central component of YISP intervention, promoting enhanced multi-agency working and enabling professionals to make a combined effort to support the children who are referred to YISPs. The YISP keyworkers pointed to several benefits associated with panels, such as better information-sharing, advice, support and guidance, two-way accountability and fast-tracking of referrals:

*[The panel] is very good for information-sharing ... you possibly get access to information that you wouldn't [otherwise get]. And because you get the consent from the family to exchange information with other services ... panels are great for getting a contact and you get a name...*

(YISP keyworker)

Several examples were cited of the way in which information about sensitive issues such as domestic violence in the home could add to the information gleaned through the ONSET assessment and help panel deliberations about appropriate interventions. Moreover, some panel members could give professional advice about these issues and offer support for the family. One YISP keyworker told us:

*If you feel you're floundering, the panel's there ... and, sometimes, some really unique ideas can come out of the panel.*

Several keyworkers regarded the panel as a 'back-up' if things were not working out in interventions with the child. Equally, panels provided a mechanism for challenging agencies which failed to deliver services:

*If things aren't working out correctly then it's your time to say to the agency, 'Look, you haven't done this. Can you chase this up for me, please' ... And it's also about the agency saying to the keyworker, 'You haven't done this. Why?' ... The value of the panel is to ensure that the families and young people are getting the services they need and making these services accountable. Also, for these services to make YISP accountable and the family group conference accountable.*

(YISP co-ordinator)

Part of the accountability referred to by keyworkers related to fast-tracking referrals when children had to wait a long time to receive help. Panels could highlight delays and ask panel members to speed things up. One YISP keyworker commented:

*... just mentioning it [non-response] can actually hurry things along a little bit.*

Some agencies, however, had long waiting lists and even YISP panel intervention could not speed up referrals. A Connexions personal adviser had to

admit at one panel that there was nothing that could be done to bring forward a referral for a young girl who had been referred to a YISP. These situations highlighted the excess demand for some services and gaps in provision. Of particular concern for many YISP keyworkers was the apparent inability of mainstream services to offer early intervention within a preventative agenda:

*Social services are absolutely jam-packed with everything ... How do you tell a family that's in crisis, with loads of concerns and everything, nobody helping them, that we're sorry but we're going to close [the case] on them?*

(YISP keyworker)

One YISP keyworker explained how he had kept a case open until the situation in the home had become so difficult that he could refer the family to social services because it now met their criteria:

*We kept it [the case] open because we felt that the family group conference hadn't really resolved anything because of mum's weakness ... This is one of the cases that we sat on for a long time ... We were going to panel and we weren't getting any help from panel... there was nothing anybody could offer ... yet they knew the situation in the house was very poor. We knew the kids were actively getting involved in things, especially Natalie, that she shouldn't be ... And then it eventually got to the situation where I had really big concerns.*

This keyworker and others were frustrated that no support was available at the beginning when things were starting to go wrong for a child and that care packages did not come on stream until difficulties and risks had escalated.

In our national evaluation we drew attention to one of the key challenges facing multi-agency YISP panels: the danger they become 'talking shops'. This is particularly problematic when panel members resist offering any interventions or services themselves and deflect children to other services. Although the panels in the FGC/YISP study appeared to act as a catalyst for some agencies to take action, we noted the same tendency for statutory agencies to refrain from offering support directly. There still appeared to be a tension between selecting core panel members who were able to commit resources and the willingness of mainstream services to engage with children referred to YISPs. Moreover, few panel members had actually made referrals to the YISPs themselves.

One mechanism for encouraging social workers and other mainstream professionals to attend panels was to require them to attend when they had made a referral to the YISP. From our limited observations, we noted that if social services had referred a child to the YISP, a representative from social services was more likely to attend the panel as a referrer than as a routine member of the panel. Two of the pilots (Riverborough and Welshboro) required those who referred cases to the YISP to attend the panel meeting when the case was being discussed. The quality of the information these professionals were able to provide in the meeting was high and they could guide the discussion about which interventions might be effective. For example, at a panel meeting in Welshboro, a panel member suggested that a buddy scheme might be appropriate for the child in question and the referrer was able to point out

that this had been tried previously and had not been effective. In another case, in which the child had been referred because of serious problems at school which had resulted in exclusion, the teacher was able to explain the pattern of attendance and exclusions to the panel members.

### **The Role of YISP Staff**

Most of the FGC/YISP panels had developed their own way of working. Most were chaired by the YISP co-ordinator or a YOT manager, but in Riverborough and Welshboro we observed panels which were chaired by members of other agencies, such as Connexions. Some panels recorded formal minutes of their meetings, while others relied on YISP staff to record key action points. The agendas were similar to those in the national YISP evaluation, consisting of discussions about new cases, the development and ratification of ISPs, case reviews and consideration of case closures. In Welshboro, where families attended panel meetings, the meetings inevitably lasted longer.

In all the panels we observed across the pilots, the YISP keyworkers played a central role in the proceedings, often presenting information and draft ISPs for discussion. Some reports were presented in written form and others were presented orally. Only in one of the pilots were some cases brought to the panel without a draft ISP having been prepared in advance. These seemed to be particularly complex cases in which the YISP keyworkers admitted to struggling to know what interventions to suggest.

The YISP keyworkers told us that they saw their role at panels as being to introduce cases, present ISPs and family plans (if a family group conference had taken place), and discuss reviews and case closures. One of them told us:

*My role at panel is to give updates on cases that I'm running with, to take ISPs to panel, to relate back to panel any plans that have been put together by the family as a result of a family group conference.*

Most YISP co-ordinators were of the firm view that YISP keyworkers should attend panels:

*These people are doing the work, they know the families, they know the issues, they can speak in public, they can speak professionally to other agencies, they need to see faces and ... present their own information.*

(YISP co-ordinator)

Another YISP co-ordinator was a little more ambivalent, however:

*I have mixed feelings, to be honest with you. I think the keyworker should be bringing the plan [ISP] to panel and the plan should be discussed at panel ... However, when we've got full cases and we're discussing sixty young people in two hours, I feel sometimes it would benefit if I just had the plans and we could just check them off in a checklist.*

This co-ordinator was concerned that attendance at panel meetings was time-consuming for keyworkers and that it was important, therefore, to 'avoid the same old issues' coming up each time a case was reviewed. We noted that

Eastburgh had begun to limit 'updates' to very complex cases in which the keyworker needed support and advice.

Some FGC co-ordinators believed that panel members would like them to attend panels to contribute to the information-sharing, but they were well aware of the importance of remaining neutral, although they usually shared information with YISP keyworkers. Of course, in Welshboro and, latterly, in Midshire, the role of FGC co-ordinator and YISP keyworker were combined and so the FGC co-ordinators did indeed attend panels.

### ***The Relationship Between Family Group Conferences and YISP Panels***

We wanted to establish how the FGC initiative was affecting the YISP panel process and how the work of the panels influenced family group conferences, particularly as the panels themselves were regarded by the YJB as being central to YISP intervention. In Dockborough, the FGC programme had developed quite separately from the YISP panels and had struggled to achieve any kind of integration. Some other pilots were also ambivalent about the importance of panels when children were being offered a family group conference. The FGC co-ordinators in Coburgh, for example, did not feel that the panel process added anything to the FGC process *per se* but regarded panels as a 'back-up' for elements of the ISP or family plan which were not working well. For example, during one family group conference relating to a family in our sample, complex child protection issues emerged and the YISP panel was used to galvanise and put pressure on social services to take action. For a number of YISP staff the added value of the FGC process related to the opportunity it provided to offer more information to the panel members about the family's problems than could be gained via the ONSET assessment. In this sense, when the panel met after a family group conference (as they did in most pilots), the enhanced information-sharing was considered to add value.

### **Panels Held After a Family Group Conference**

We were particularly interested in the extent to which the ISPs had been influenced by the family plans drawn up in the family group conferences when these had been held prior to the panel meeting (as in most of the pilots). It appeared that only in Welshboro was there a distinct connection between the family plan and the ISP. In other pilots, only a few of the ISPs had been formulated as a result of the discussions in family group conferences or contained references to aspects of the family plan. When panel meetings took place after a conference had been held we noted that ISPs did not always take account of the family plans. In two panels we observed, cases that had involved a family group conference were listed separately, with the children treated as a distinct group, different from the other YISP referrals. Since the YJB had indicated to pilots that all children and young people referred to the YISP should be offered a family group conference, we might have expected that more of the children discussed at the panels would have been to a conference. We observed that YISP keyworkers sometimes reported that a family group conference had been considered, but had either been refused by the young person or the family or had been considered inappropriate by the keyworker

because family relationships were very complex or because there were concerns about child protection or domestic violence.

Some YISP keyworkers believed that the role of the panel had been modified when a family group conference had taken place. The drawing up of an ISP may have been delayed while a conference took place and panel members could be left feeling somewhat redundant. One keyworker explained that quite a few problems might be dealt with at the conference so that panel members had less to do when the case reached the panel. In this sense, the panel might feel less involved with the case, especially if there was no discussion until a conference had been held, which could take several weeks. Moreover, some panels simply ratified the family plan.

This raised an issue about the panel's role in drawing up an ISP in these circumstances, particularly if interventions had begun soon after the family group conference had been held. One YISP keyworker described how he tended to get on with things once the family plan was in place and how the role of the panel might be to fill a gap in service provision identified by the family or by the keyworker, and others had similar experiences:

*The family plan gets done first ... And then you can fetch the professionals in and say, 'Can anybody help with that? And that's the best way we've found'.*

(YISP keyworker)

*If, for instance, the family identified the issues that were important to them ... they might want professional [help] or some other service brought in to help them, so it would be my job to try and get them some help. In which case I could then go to panel and ask for help from the panel.*

(YISP keyworker)

In these instances, panel members had the family plan as background information and could decide how they could support it.

#### **Panels Held Before a Family Group Conference**

When the family group conference was to be held after the panel had met, the *YISP Management Guidance* suggested that potential resources should be identified by the panel so that the family can decide how they might use them during discussions at the conference. In this structure, the YISP panel delegated authority for drawing up an ISP to the family group conference. From our observations, it was not clear that this process of ISP formulation was as coherent as the guidance suggested. We found that when a family group conference was held after the YISP panel, it was sometimes because the panel had recommended a conference as an intervention within the ISP. This differential use of a conference as an intervention rather than as an element in the YISP process raised interesting issues, to which we return later in the report.

#### **The Connection Between Family Plans and Integrated Support Plans**

Our observations of and discussions with YISP staff about the relationship between family plans drawn up at a family group conference and the ISPs



drawn up by the YISP panel suggest that the relationship was somewhat tenuous. Panel members were of the view that the family plan is a different kind of document, developed by the family for its own use, while the ISP is a more formal document which deals with onward referrals to other agencies and/or the one-to-one work that the YISP can offer to the child and the family.

This level of separation could render the review process rather complicated: if a family group conference was recommended as an intervention in an ISP, the review of that conference could be undertaken by the conference facilitator and/or the YISP panel. Sometimes, the YISP panel ended up reviewing the review undertaken by the FGC facilitator in the context of a second family group conference. Responsibility for undertaking reviews was not always clear-cut, therefore, and some panels had not agreed specific structures for reviewing cases that had involved a family group conference.

### ***An Integrated Approach***

Our observations of panels in the four FGC/YISP pilots suggest that the introduction of FGC did not impact greatly on the role, remit and structure of the YISP panels. Some regarded the children who had been to a conference as a separate group for panel discussion, but most seemed to take little account of the family plans that had resulted from the conference, seeing them as more about what family members would do and less about the services and interventions which might be offered via the ISP. The evaluation raised interesting questions about the integration of FGC and its place within YISP processes:

- to what extent should family group conferences stand apart from the mainstream work of the YISP panels?
- should panel members take more account of the family plans and should these be more closely integrated with ISPs?
- to what extent is the family group conference regarded by panels as a useful intervention in itself
- to what extent is a family group conference another way of involving family members in the development of a more comprehensive ISP?

We returned to these questions at various times during the evaluation and we suggest that they are worthy of further consideration by the YJB and the YISPs. These questions are less relevant in Welshboro, of course, since it developed a model of YISP in which FGC and the work of the panel were completely integrated. Suitability for YISP referral signified suitability for FGC. We observed two panels in Welshboro, which took place very soon after the family group conference had been held. In one case, the panel was convened immediately following the conference, on the same day. The family were expected to attend both.

The tone and atmosphere of the panel meetings were very different from those of the family group conferences, however: there was a move from relative informality to relative formality. The interaction between the parents, the child

and the professionals was very different in both meetings. The ISPs were considered extremely thoroughly in the panels we observed in Welshboro and family members were asked a number of questions after their keyworker had presented the case to the panel. The panels considered issues raised at the family group conferences. At one panel meeting the chairperson said to the young person:

*We are here to talk about the issues raised in the family group meeting ... we are not here to have a go at you ... We'll be asking you to do something, your parents to do something, and the panel will offer something.*

The panel members seemed to regard it as their role to challenge the family and then to discuss appropriate services or interventions among themselves. The agenda was driven by the professionals present and the ISP was modified accordingly. The Welshboro model offers one approach to linking family group conferences into the YISP process and the work of the panels, involving the child/young person and the parents directly in both meetings.

### **Implementing FGC**

During the study we talked to a range of staff in the pilot areas, both about the YISP itself and about the implementation of FGC. Staff in the pilots were overwhelmingly positive about the objectives of YISPs, and echoed the views of those in pilots during the previous national evaluation of YISPs. Staff at all levels were unanimous that early intervention to prevent offending and antisocial behaviour is key to addressing issues in juvenile justice:

*I think prevention is key. I was working with young people on the other end of the spectrum and I thought that if this type of service was here at the very beginning it would be a lot better. It would be a lot more effective because ... when they're just starting to offend or get into that type of behaviour, it would be more effective and simpler to make changes.*

(YISP co-ordinator)

*I think early intervention addresses the minor issues with regards to behaviour in school ... petty behaviour in the house which leads on to antisocial behaviour in the street ... I'm a hundred per cent for any sort of preventative work.*

(YISP keyworker)

However, a number of YISP staff were aware that early intervention will often blur the boundaries between welfare issues and offending behaviour:

*It's meant to be [about] reducing offending and antisocial behaviour, but I think it's possibly more [about] family support and more generic sort of social inclusion ... They're at risk, but whether they're always at risk of offending is doubtful given the referrals we get ... I would say the majority are more lower level welfare-based cases.*

(YISP keyworker)

*A lot of our cases ... I think this child is not going to break the law. I really don't know how they've been referred to us, but I'm very happy to help, because they've had help from nowhere and they could do with it.*

(YISP keyworker)

We heard similar views expressed in the national evaluation, and many YISP keyworkers were aware that assessing the risks associated with offending frequently becomes intertwined with looking at risk factors more generally. Moreover, many parents of children referred to YISPs had been looking for help for some time prior to YISP intervention. Some YISP keyworkers in this study were of the view that referrals should include children at risk more generally:

*A lot of the children who come to us aren't offenders ... To be labelled as at risk of offending ... it's about risk of [bad] behaviour.*

(YISP keyworker)

As a result, staff regarded YISPs as offering holistic support and a child-centred, family-friendly approach. The YISP keyworkers we spoke to firmly believed that family circumstances contributed to the problems attributed to children referred to the YISPs and welcomed the opportunity to work with the family as well as with the child:

*I don't think you can achieve a great amount of change unless you work with the family unit as a whole ... Nine times out of ten, it's about the whole family ... parenting skills and how they could achieve more by just working together as a whole family.*

(FGC/YISP keyworker)

Not surprisingly, then, the majority of YISP staff in the FGC/YISP pilots welcomed the introduction of FGC and the more active involvement of families in the design and delivery of family plans. There was general agreement that

*... if the family are here to do their own plan and to put it in place themselves, they're more likely to achieve their long-term goals, and they are more likely to stick to it.*

(FGC/YISP keyworker)

Staff talked in terms of being able to empower families through the introduction of family group conferences:

*What I like about it is that it empowers the family. They feel as though they've got some control, they've got some investment in what they've actually put together ... So they can come out of a family group conference a lot of the time feeling quite positive ... sometimes the first time they've actually been able to sit round a table without things kicking off big-time.*

(YISP keyworker)

*I am intrigued by the notion that the responsibility is on the family ... other agencies have to help ... so many issues are resolved within*

*families ... if they've got a bit of support to do it ... Some of them just need the confidence to do it.*

(FGC/YISP keyworker)

The consensus was that FGC empowers families because the professionals come to their conference and family members can address them directly rather than talking to what they called 'an anonymous voice on the phone'. Staff also regarded FGC as offering a safe arena in which children and young people and family members can have their say in front of all the agencies which can support them. One YISP worker described this as getting everybody to 'sing from the same hymn book'. Keyworkers also felt that FGC has the potential to engender better communication and goodwill between families and key professionals so that families actually access the help they need.

Nevertheless, despite feeling very positive about FGC, several YISP practitioners admitted that it had taken them some time to understand and accept it, and it was only as they had begun to see conferences in action that they had become convinced of their value and could see how convening a conference might enhance YISP practice. It was not always easy for YISP keyworkers to feel confident about handing over the family to a FGC co-ordinator who was responsible for preparing family members for the conference, and most co-ordinators spoke to us of the difficulties they had faced when they had first attempted to engage with YISP practitioners. In both our case-study pilots, YISP work was already well-established and was managed by experienced staff. It was potentially quite threatening, therefore, for YISP staff to embrace FGC within processes that they considered were already working well.

We noted that it took time for YISP practitioners to accept the introduction of FGC and to develop a shared understanding of its relevance and value within the YISP programme. Our study has highlighted the importance of careful preparatory work, not just with families, but also with professionals and panel members who may not be familiar with FGC approaches. Undoubtedly, practitioner 'buy-in' is essential for the initiative to be effective, and most pilots realised that someone needed to champion FGC and promote it as a valuable addition to YISP practice.

### **Selling the Idea**

The FGC co-ordinators in the two case-study pilots were initially concerned that YISP keyworkers were not selling the idea of FGC very effectively to the families who had been referred to the YISP. They regarded this as one of the reasons for the relatively low referrals in the early months of the initiative. Although the YJB had wanted everyone referred to the YISPs to be offered the opportunity of having a family group conference, YISP keyworkers and FGC staff were not always convinced that this was appropriate and there was undoubtedly some resistance to complying with this request:

*I think there are several cases that we could just handle ourselves without us having to go through [the family group conference procedure].*

(YISP keyworker)

*I think ... there are some cases which possibly require a bit of simple YISP work ... I personally don't think they all require FGC.*

(FGC keyworker)

Some strong feelings were voiced about the unhelpful targets set by the YJB with respect to referrals for FGC. These targets had increased the pressure to refer cases which were unsuitable. In practice, it seems that most YISP staff exercised a degree of discretion about exactly when and to whom they offered a family group conference, although some YISP keyworkers did talk about the option when they first met with the family:

*We tell them that we have different ways of working. We have a YISP panel, which offers the professional help, we have access to parenting [support] and everything ... but for the family to identify what they would like, some of the changes they would like within the family unit as well, there is the family group meeting that can be offered.*

(YISP keyworker)

It is interesting that this YISP keyworker made a distinction between the panel, which provides professional support, and the conference, which focuses on the family unit. There did not seem to be any mention at this early stage of the role played by professionals at the family group conference. Other YISP keyworkers waited to tell the family about the option for FGC until they knew the family better and had completed the ONSET assessment:

*I think that [mentioning FGC early]'s throwing something rather heavy on to people at a very early stage and possibly raising their expectation ... they think that would be the salvation ... So, I normally have a couple of meetings before I suggest it to the family ... and, also, in the meantime I talk to any other agencies that are involved ... It's up to them to see what their views are about the family ... piece it all together before offering FGC ... Perhaps the ultimate skill is to decide what case needs FGC.*

(FGC/YISP keyworker)

The understanding here, it seems, is that professionals should make a judgement about offering FGC to a family and not that families should always be empowered to make their own choices.

Some YISP keyworkers told us that they offered a family group conference at the later stages of YISP involvement, perhaps when a new risk factor had come to light or the child had committed an offence:

*... you could be in the middle of working with the family where one [a family group conference] becomes obvious ... Their circumstances change ... Or it could be at the end when you've worked with the family, something happens and the family group conference is relevant.*

(YISP keyworker)

Panels sometimes suggested FGC during reviews of cases, and one FGC co-ordinator commented:

*I'm a firm believer that a family group conference is a good route for the closure of a case ... empowering families to carry on without [YISP] support.*

This suggests that the family plan might focus primarily on what family members might do, and not include contributions of support and service provision by professionals.

It would seem from our interviews with YISP and FGC staff that the FGC/YISP pilots were deliberately flexible in their approaches to FGC and were keen to experiment in respect of its integration into the YISP process. Some YISP keyworkers regarded the FGC process as providing additional knowledge for them to work with because of the involvement of wider family members and saw it as another tool for them to use during YISP intervention. Others saw FGC as a way of working which could be integral to the YISP programme, involving families in the decision-making and problem-solving processes. What emerged is a view that FGC has a range of functions and offers a number of potential benefits for the family, for YISP staff and for panels.

In the main, FGC was sold to families as a style of working. How it was expected to fit within YISP processes was not always clear, however. One FGC co-ordinator explained how he introduced FGC to families as follows:

*My preferred strategy is ... [I tell the family], I can complete an assessment for you. I can tell you what I think from that assessment, that you need. I can put that in place and you can sign up to it and then it can go to panel. The alternative is, I come out, I can do an assessment. We can talk through the assessment and you can tell me what you want in a family meeting ... We're giving them the option and alternatives, and, whichever one they choose, they choose a style.*

This co-ordinator seemed to regard FGC as an alternative to the traditional YISP process. We sensed that FGC was usually made to sound attractive to families by the use of phrases such as 'it will be *your* meeting', 'getting everyone together', 'bringing professionals to you', 'everyone can have their say', 'you will be consulted about every aspect', 'it's non-accusatory, relaxed', or 'you won't be got at'. All these descriptions summarise some of the key attributes of FGC and YISP staff seemed to be keen to stress the relaxed atmosphere and the voluntary nature of engagement. They did not want parents or children to feel that they were being forced to participate if they felt uncomfortable about the idea of a conference. They told us that, as trust developed with a family, children and parents were more likely to be receptive to the idea of a conference, which is why some of them preferred to take time to introduce the concept of FGC to the family. But there were some situations in which staff did not regard a conference as suitable, including those in which there was domestic violence or concerns about child protection. This is significant, particularly as the FGC approach developed in New Zealand precisely as a result of just those kinds of concerns. Most YISP staff, however, were reluctant to accept that FGC is relevant for all families and preferred to

use their discretion about when to offer a conference. As an example, one YISP keyworker told us:

*At the moment I'm working with a single parent who's got one child and the child has virtually no contact with the father. There isn't any real family network around the mother and child, so, at this point, I feel it [a family group conference] would be inappropriate because there isn't anybody ... and the child is a very strong person and there isn't any communication between [the mother and the child].*

It is useful to contrast this assessment of a case deemed to be unsuitable for FGC with the following comment about another family:

*There was a lot of strengths with that family ... [the mother] is very, very insightful and she's an intelligent woman and she's got a lovely relationship with her children despite everything, and there's a lot of love ... and she talks to her children and there's a lot of affection.*

(YISP keyworker)

This latter family was regarded as very suitable for a family group conference. It seems that YISP staff took a number of factors into account, including the kind of family the child came from and the nature of the relationships in the family. If the ONSET assessment highlighted a number of difficulties within the family, FGC was usually regarded as a viable option. The following case was cited as an example:

*Because I felt that many of the problems stemmed from within the family, but he [the child] also had a wider family that were involved with him, like grandparents who spent a lot of time with him ... If you could put together the whole family ... then hopefully that would have helped him and supported his mother and father in addressing some of the issues we were looking at.*

(YISP keyworker)

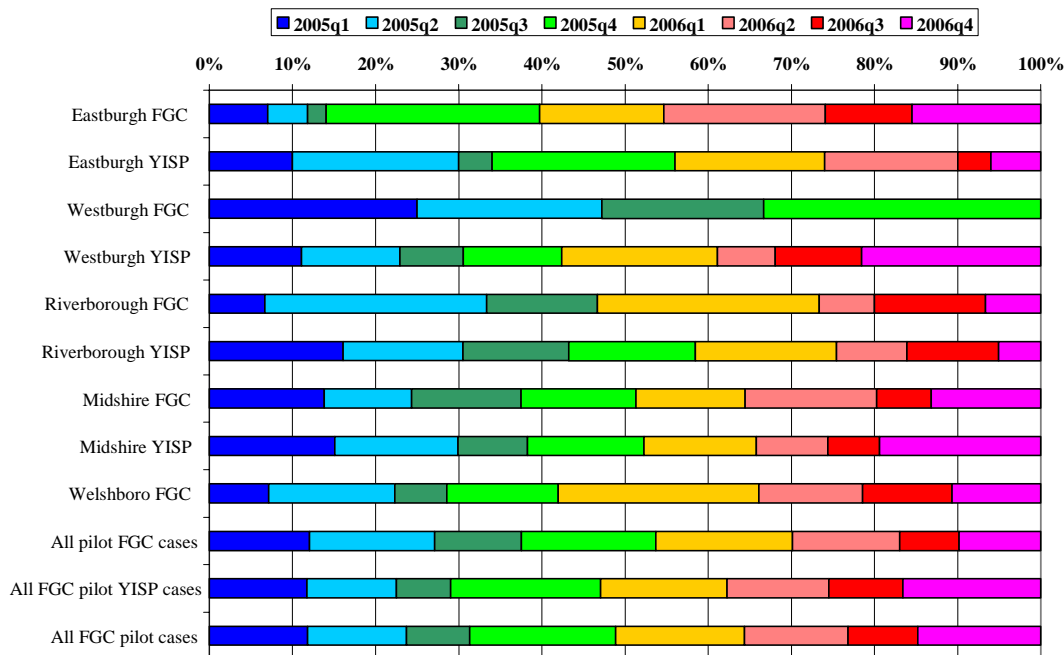
It was clear, from talking to YISP and FGC staff in the pilots, that not all children referred to the YISPs would be told about and offered a family group conference (except in Welshboro). The quantitative data supplied by the pilots confirms this.

### ***Referrals to the Pilots and to Family Group Conferencing***

We have relied on the MIS data provided by the pilots to discern the numbers of children and young people referred to the pilots during our two-year study period and the numbers of the referrals accepted by the YISPs in which a family group conference took place. Figure 3.1 identifies the referral patterns to the YISP and, subsequently, for FGC across the pilots for each of the eight quarters in the study period. The proportion of cases (YISP only and YISP/FGC) referred in the first year (2005) can be read from the right-hand edge of the bright green part of the bar. The figure shows that in Eastburgh, for example, almost 40 per cent of the FGC cases were referred during the first year of the pilot. Eastburgh shows a pattern which might be expected of a new initiative: a rather slow build-up of cases having a family group conference, followed by a steady rate which

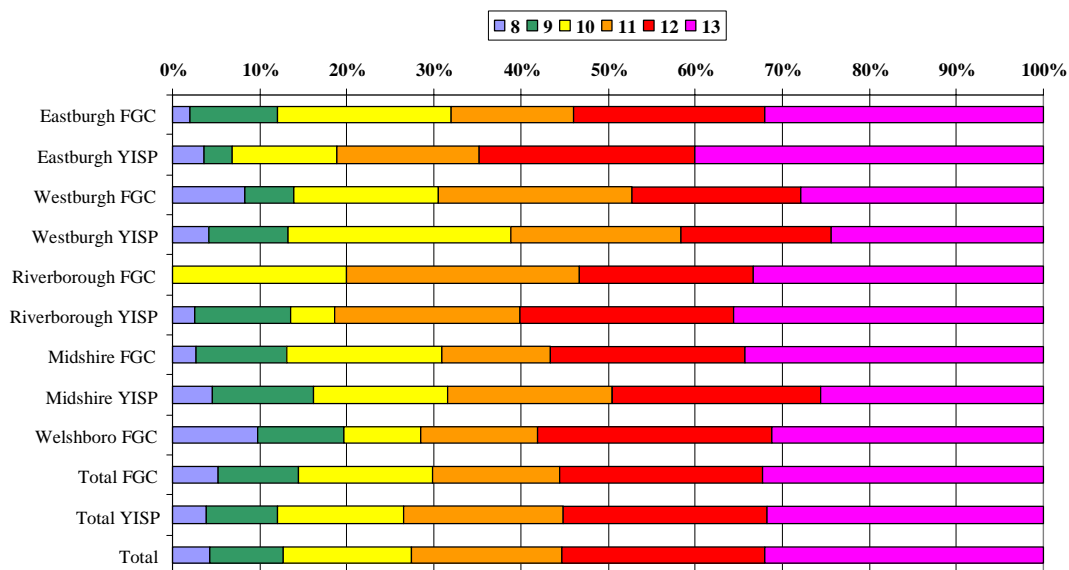
dips slightly during the summer months. This pattern is less common in the other pilots. In Westburgh, we can see that all the FGC cases were referred in Year 1, whereas in Midshire and Welshboro, referrals were fairly constant throughout the two years of the pilot.

**Figure 3.1: Percentage of cases referred in each quarter of the pilot period in each YISP**



We noted in our national evaluation of YISPs that half of all the children referred were aged 11 or 12, and that the vast majority of referrals related to boys. Far fewer children aged under 11 were referred to the 13 pilot YISPs. Figure 3.2 shows the distribution of cases by age, and there is relatively little variation between non-FGC and FGC cases or between pilots. There were no children under 10 referred in Riverborough.

**Figure 3.2: Percentages of cases by the age of the children referred**





Unsurprisingly, 75 per cent of all the referrals were boys. Eastburgh had a slightly higher proportion of girls (a third of all YISP referrals). In respect of ethnicity, most of the referrals in all but one pilot involved children categorised as white. The amount of missing data makes it impossible to provide robust analysis of ethnicity, however. Nevertheless, the distribution of cases in the FGC pilots reflects the findings from the previous national evaluation of YISPs in respect of gender, age and ethnicity.

As we noted in the previous section, the numbers of children participating in family group conferences varied between the pilots. Other than in Welshboro, relatively few YISP cases involved a family group conference. Quite clearly, many YISP keyworkers did not agree that all cases should be referred for a family group conference and there was some considerable way to go before the YJB's expectation that all YISP families should be offered a family group conference became a reality.

Unfortunately, the MIS data sets do not give us reliable information about the reasons for referral for a family group conference and so we have had to rely on the qualitative data to tell us about the processes in each pilot. The comments of YISP and FGC staff have shed a good deal of light on the relatively low numbers of cases proceeding to a family group conference during the pilot period. It would seem that decisions were based on the nature of the presenting problems/risks of offending and assessments about whether the family could manage/benefit from a family group conference. Only in Welshboro was FGC regarded as a way of working with and empowering families, irrespective of the characteristics of the case and the family. Moreover, in at least one pilot, FGC was seen as an intervention in its own right, chosen if other interventions had failed to promote desired changes, or as a way of galvanising family support, or as an exit strategy.

### ***Getting Involved with the YISP: Parents' Perceptions***

We sought the views of parents and children about their referral to a YISP and the subsequent offer of a family group conference, and the connections they made between the two. We asked the parents/carers in our interview samples in Midshire and Coburgh<sup>1</sup> why their child had been referred to the YISP and how they made the decision to agree to a family group conference. Participation in YISPs is voluntary and, although all YISP referrals should have been offered a conference, agreement to actually hold a conference is also voluntary. In a sense, participation in a family group conference implied 'double voluntariness' on the part of children and their parents. In Welshboro, of course, refusal to participate in a conference resulted in the family exiting from the YISP.

The majority of parents we spoke to reported that their child had been referred via the school or the education welfare service, although some referrals had been made by the police, social services or a health visitor. In several cases,

<sup>1</sup> Coburgh consisted of both Westburgh and Eastburgh.

parents told us that a sibling had been involved with the YISP and another child had been referred as a result. As in our national evaluation of YISPs, parents in this study explained that their children had multiple, complex and interrelated problems but the most prevalent concerns related to education and to home life.

With respect to educational difficulties, parents referred to bullying (both as victims and perpetrators), behavioural problems at school (such as smoking, drinking, fighting, causing damage and violence), truanting and school refusal, low achievement, school exclusion, and the need for special education. In relation to problems at home, parents talked about abuse towards family members, damage to property, lack of respect, poor relationships, and behaviour which caused disruption to the whole household, placing severe strain on family life.

Parents also referred frequently to their child having emotional or mental health problems, and described symptoms such as self-harm, suicidal tendencies, anxiety attacks, bed-wetting and ADHD. Although some parents referred to specific incidents of antisocial behaviour and offending, such as shoplifting, fire-setting, vandalism and selling drugs, as triggering a referral to the YISP, most parents understood YISP to be an early intervention programme designed to prevent offending behaviour. Very few parents regarded their children as being potential offenders, however, and often described their child's antisocial behaviour as 'kids' stuff'. One mother of a 13-year-old told us:

*Maxine got caught shoplifting, a big pair of men's Y-fronts ... I can see the funny side of it ... But what it was, they had money ... they were just pinching for the hell of it, they didn't need to.*

(Mother of Maxine,<sup>2</sup> aged 13)

The parents who had more serious concerns about their child usually worried about the harm their child might do to others. The descriptions of the problems leading to a YISP referral in this study closely resembled those given in the national YISP evaluation, perhaps with a slightly higher emphasis on school-related difficulties, indicating strong similarities between the interview samples in the two studies. In both studies, some parents were keen to tell us that they themselves and other family members were not part of the problem, while others were anxious that their children should not make the same mistakes as they had done such as under-achieving at school and getting involved in drug-taking.

Not surprisingly, the majority of the children in our interview samples had experienced previous involvement with statutory agencies, particularly social services, the education welfare service and CAMHS. Just as in our national evaluation, parents had usually been seeking help for a long time and used phrases such as being 'at the end of my tether' and 'at our wits' end'. Some went as far as suggesting that their child might have to be taken into care or sent to a brat camp. While these parents firmly believed in early intervention

<sup>2</sup> The names of all the children and young people have been changed in order to maintain confidentiality and protect identities.

they had usually failed to find or access help at an early stage. This was an important finding in the previous national evaluation of YISPs also: while YISPs were designed to offer early intervention and a preventative programme of support, many of the children referred had experienced a cluster of problems for a considerable time prior to YISP involvement. Parents in both evaluations were relieved, when their child was referred to the YISP, that at last someone was prepared to help, and so they welcomed the YISP assessment process as an indication that their child's problems were finally being fully explored.

#### **Agreeing to a Family Group Conference**

Parents usually welcomed the referral to a YISP and most subsequently reacted positively to the offer of a family group conference. They could usually recall who had suggested a family group conference to them, making comments such as the following:

*I think, at the time, it was actually [the YISP keyworker] who mentioned it ... because of a few things Naomi had said to her about school and things ... She [the YISP keyworker] says, 'Well, to try and get things sorted out ... would you like to try [a family group meeting] to see if it helps a bit ... so we all agreed to it.*

(Mother of Naomi, aged 13)

Parents were aware that holding a conference was a voluntary option, and while they did not feel under pressure to agree some were concerned that non-compliance might suggest that they were bad parents:

*Well, to be honest, I was willing to try anything. I didn't like to refuse because it sounds like you don't care, even though I thought it was a waste of time*

(Mother of George, aged 12)

It seemed clear to us that FGC had been 'sold' effectively to families, and the relationship of trust built up between a parent and a YISP keyworker or FGC co-ordinator was an important ingredient in reassuring parents that a conference was worth a try and would not be threatening. Rory's mother explained to us:

*... I'm not clever. I'm quite thick sometimes, but I thought, if I've got [the FGC co-ordinator] and her boss there then obviously they can help me with the questions that I need to ask that I can't get out ... They know the posh words ...*

(Mother of Rory, aged 13)

The FGC literature is at pains to emphasise the importance of careful preparation for a family group conference, and it seems that the YISP keyworkers were equally careful about building up confidence with parents before suggesting that a conference might be helpful. Parents usually agreed to a family group conference because it offered the chance to solve problems which had seemed intractable. One mother, for example, wanted her child to get back into mainstream education:

*I'd just like Boyd sorted out for school ... that is the first thing and then I would consider loads of other things like activities ... The school thing sorted, that's the only thing I wanted.*

(Mother of Boyd, aged 12)

Indeed, getting the question of their child's school attendance resolved was a primary goal for many parents. They recognised that getting their child to go to school regularly is an important factor in resolving a range of other problems. One mother had been fined as a result of her son's non-attendance at school and had been told she might go to prison if the problem persisted. She accepted that she needed help with this problem and agreed to a family group conference.

Other parents acknowledged that problems in the home needed to be dealt with, and saw the value of having a family meeting:

*My priority was and still is to get the relationship between my son and his dad sorted. Once that has been done, everything else should fall into place.*

(Mother of Joseph, aged 13)

Another mother saw the conference as a way

*... to talk openly and to find out what was really upsetting us as a family ... 'cos my children don't always talk to me. I don't always talk to them.*

(Mother of Shellie, aged 12)

Other parents seemed to think that a family group conference would provide some kind of mediation between them and their ex-partners, particularly when communication between them had broken down. This was particularly prevalent in reconstituted families which contained children from previous partners. One mother wanted her children

*... to realise we're all one family, not separate families, and we've all got to work together as a family ... I cannot do it all on my own ... For me to help them [the children] they've got to help themselves and for me to stop having to be pulled backwards and forwards between all of them fighting, and police stations and social services and counsellors, and all that.*

(Mother of Jason and Scott, aged 11 and 12)

For many parents, problems at school and at home were interrelated, and solving them via a family group conference was regarded as fundamental to reducing the strains families were under. Some parents, also, wanted to receive help accessing appropriate services to address their child's mental health issues:

*I thought there would be a lot of help for Duncan because of his self-harming. He's been sniffing glue-aerosol cans.*

(Mother of Duncan, aged 11)

*I think it's only the psychiatrist who can change him, because he hears voices in his head ... We think he's mental.*

(Father of Guy, aged 12)

While many parents regarded the conference as a means of addressing relationship and education issues, some were clearly looking to it to deal with the child's behaviour. One father wanted to address his son's drug-taking as well as his tendency to 'bunk off' school. For the most part, however, parents were less likely to prioritise antisocial behaviour as the primary problem and more likely to regard other issues as the cause of their child's current difficulties. Parents often described the main objective as being to resume some sense of normality. One mother put it as follows:

*I just want to get things back to normal. I just want Naomi to be happy ... to have a life together.*

(Mother of Naomi, aged 13)

Most parents regarded the offer of a family group conference as 'worth a try' because 'there was nothing to lose', primarily because they had tried everything else and were desperate for the situation to improve. Many of the remarks about the offer of a conference echoed those made about accepting a referral to the YISP, both in this study and in the previous national evaluation. Parents we spoke to were pleased that their child was receiving help and so willingly agreed to a YISP referral. It followed, therefore, that they were positive about the suggestion of a family group conference because they were keen to try anything that might lessen the tensions and reduce the problems as they perceived them. For many parents it was not so much that they particularly liked the idea of sitting down together as a family with professionals in order to sort things out, but, if YISP keyworkers presented FGC as a constructive way forward, parents were keen to grasp the opportunity, whatever it involved, and their expectations of positive outcomes were subsequently raised.

There is little doubt that the YISP keyworkers and FGC co-ordinators in our case-study pilots encouraged parents to regard a conference as a real opportunity to promote change – as a catalyst which may move things on. Moreover, family group conferences were far more tangible for parents than YISP panels, which remained remote and not something they got involved in, except in Welshboro. Whereas parents elsewhere participated in the conference but not the panel, only in Welshboro did parents experience both.

### ***Children's Perceptions Concerning Referral to a YISP***

Most of the children we interviewed did not know or could not remember who had referred them to the YISP. Most of those who could remember thought they had been referred from their school, and the majority of children believed that they had been referred to the YISP because of problems connected with schooling (e.g. bullying, being rude to teachers, fighting, poor achievement and school exclusion) or because of difficulties at home. Indeed, most children in this sample and in the national evaluation understood that YISPs are for children who have been naughty in some way. Only a minority in this study,

however, thought they had been referred to the YISP because they had been in trouble with the police. Some children told us that they were in trouble for hitting other children or for damaging property at school. Children in the case-study pilots described the reasons for their referral to the YISP as follows:

*My mam's got a social worker ... I think we were being naughty ... She [the social worker] gave my mam a list of groups and my mam picked [the YISP] for help with the children.*

(Maddie, aged 11)

*At the beginning of the year, I got caught in Asda pinching with my friends.*

(Maxine, aged 13)

*... mainly it was, 'cos I got involved with the cops ... Racial aggravation of the coloured [sic] people on the street with some lads that were from school.*

(Scott, aged 11)

### **Going to a Family Group Conference**

Many of the children could not remember who had suggested that they go to a family group conference, although some recalled that their YISP keyworker or their FGC co-ordinator had mentioned it. The majority knew that involvement in YISP and in the FGC process was voluntary. Nevertheless, several children did not see themselves as having a real choice about involvement, but felt that they had been forced to do what their parents wanted. One young person claimed that her mother had encouraged her to attend a family group conference under false pretences:

*Mum says she was doing it because of her panic attacks ... she lied to us to make us go ... and then, like, I got annoyed because she lied to us because she knew I wouldn't want to go ... I can sort me own [problems] out ... I wanted to help her get better and then when we went it wasn't for her panic attacks, it was for my behaviour and attitude, but she cannot see I don't need loads of people involved.*

(Teri, aged 13)

Whereas parents seemed desperate for help with their children, the children themselves were more ambivalent about being involved in either the YISP or the family group meeting, although they usually acknowledged that it was their behaviour that had triggered the referral.

When we asked children and young people why they thought they had been asked to go to a family group conference, most said they expected it to help them and their families 'sort out' the problems which had led to the YISP referral. They often listed the things they thought they had done wrong:

*... me and my dad didn't get on at all, and me and my sisters ... I didn't get on with the teachers, just didn't like school ... I was always in trouble ... I didn't want to go so I didn't behave.*

(Joseph, aged 13)

Beyond 'sorting things out', however, most children said that they had little real idea what a family group conference might mean prior to their preparation for it. Agreement to participate was sought prior to the more in-depth work which prepared participants for the meeting, and it was clear from our interviews that many children were not keen to go at that early stage, and were not necessarily giving informed consent to the process. The extent to which children and young people were willing, 'voluntary' participants in the YISP and FGC processes is an issue to which we return in the next section where we discuss the notion of empowerment in more depth.

### ***Linking FGC into the YISP Process: Summary of Key Findings***

The introduction of FGC into the five YISPs was a novel initiative. In this section we have seen that the pilots interpreted the policy intent in various ways. Although all the pilots were enthusiastic about the potential benefits of bringing family members and professionals together, few had thought through just how the process might be implemented prior to the start of the pilot. The YJB had indicated that all the children referred to the pilot YISPs should be routinely offered a family group conference, but this guidance was not followed strictly, except in Welshboro, which had no separate non-FGC route through its YISP. The FGC co-ordinators worked hard in the other four pilot areas to ensure that families were given information about FGC, but embedding the conferences into existing YISP structures and processes was not always straightforward.

In Dockborough the lack of fusion and integration led to the early demise of the FGC pilot, and Riverborough continued to struggle to integrate the FGC approach. In Midshire and Coburgh substantial progress was made to ensure that the new initiative could be implemented smoothly and these pilots were able to develop coherent referral systems to the YISPs and to the FGC option. Not all YISP staff across the pilots were convinced that all children referred to the YISPs should be offered a family group conference, however, and some resistance still remained at the end of the study.

The aspect of integration which proved to be most ambiguous, however, was to decide the role of the YISP panel when cases went through the FGC process. Only in Welshboro was the role of the panel more clearly defined, although we detected that some panel members there saw it as their task to revisit the decisions taken in the family group conference. Panel members elsewhere seemed less aware of the FGC process and did not necessarily make links between the family plan and the ISP when the conference had been held prior to the panel meeting. On occasions when a child had not been offered a family group conference prior to the panel meeting, panel members might recommend that a conference be held as part of the ISP – in other words, the conference became an intervention alongside other activities in the ISP.

The extent to which FGC should be regarded as an integral element in the process of defining and agreeing the child's problems, agreeing what actions and interventions should be initiated, and galvanising the family's own resources alongside those of a range of agencies, remained unclear at the end of our evaluation. The pilots tended to regard FGC as an option to be offered in certain circumstances and some were clearly being realistic when they referred

to the resource implications of routinely offering a family group conference to all the children and young people who engaged with the YISPs.

Although some YISP staff were unconvinced about the value of FGC for all the children referred to the YISPs, parents appear to have been overwhelmingly positive about any help they could get via the YISP and the FGC process. Most were desperate to get some help for their child and were willing to give anything and everything a go. The children and young people, on the other hand, were generally less enthusiastic and some felt coerced into the FGC process.

In the next section we turn specifically to examine steps taken by FGC staff to prepare families for a family group conference and the extent to which family members felt empowered by FGC.



## 4 Empowering Families

In the previous section, we described the different models of FGC adopted in the pilots, reported the mixed views among YISP professionals about whether all families should be offered a family group conference and noted differences in the pilots regarding how FGC had been and should be integrated within the YISP programme. In this section, we examine the ways in which families felt empowered by the FGC process and the roles played by professionals. Our focus was on assessing the extent to which FGC was an empowering experience within the YISP process.

The concept of 'user' empowerment emerged in the 1980s as a key aspiration in the delivery of health and social services, promoting the possibility of greater personal control and individual responsibility, and reduced reliance on the State (Lupton, 1998). The Children Act 1989 subsequently set a new tone for social work practice, which was expected to strike a balance between the rights and responsibilities of parents, the rights of children and the role of the state. 'Involving parents and children in decision-making' became an important mantra, which continued into the new millennium.

Finding the right balance, however, has remained a challenge for many professionals, and research in the 1990s indicated that neither they nor the families in their care were overwhelmingly positive about the results, particularly in the field of child protection. For example, Thoburn *et al.* (1995) found that while parents had increased their participation in case conference and planning meetings, most did not do so as equal partners with the professionals. Although professionals claimed that family participation increased the likelihood of decisions being taken in the child's best interests, parents' responses were more mixed (Corby *et al.*, 1994). While most parents welcomed the opportunity to put their views and to hear what was being said about the family by professionals (McGloin and Turnbull, 1986), many parents did not feel able to contribute to the decision-making or challenge outcomes (Corby *et al.*, 1994).

The belief in family participation and the promotion of parental responsibilities has been significantly extended through the introduction of FGC, which enshrines the principle of supporting and enabling families to be responsible for the behaviour and achievements of their children. The New Zealand model is explicit about the need to increase the family's responsibility for finding solutions to identified problems and to decrease the role of the State. Not surprisingly, therefore, the extension of FGC into the work of the YISPs has focused on the importance of empowering families to promote better outcomes for children via effective family functioning, enabling parents to meet their own needs, which may in itself further their empowerment.

### ***Family Group Conferences: Principles and Characteristics***

In 1994, the Family Rights Group laid out the general principles of FGC which should be adopted in the UK (Family Rights Group, 1994). These are:

- children are generally best looked after within their own family
- families are able to make good decisions about their children given the opportunity and the information to do so
- families provide identity, roots and continuity beneficial to children
- families have vital information that professionals cannot easily access
- the family's ability to care for its children will be encouraged by family decision-making
- family problems can be helped by the involvement of friends and wider family members
- families can make plans which are sensitive to and reflective of their culture
- professionals need to share some of their power in working with families.

The family group conference is a meeting for and with the family, and the task of the professionals who attend is to report on their assessment of the problem(s) and indicate the resources and support they can make available to the family. Lupton (1998) argued that the professionals should provide information to enable the family to reach decisions and not seek to present their own plan and obtain the family's compliance with it. In her model, it is the family which should take responsibility for drawing up the plan, and the professionals should assist the family in carrying it out. The conference co-ordinator should be independent of the agency responsible for the child and should take responsibility for organising the conference and facilitating the agreement of the family plan. The Family Rights Group identified three key characteristics which are essential preconditions of a family group conference:

1. The term 'family' should be interpreted widely to include family members, friends and other significant people.
2. The family must always be given the opportunity to plan in private.
3. The professionals should agree and support the family plan unless it places a child at risk of harm.

In order to ensure that the key principles and essential preconditions are met, families should be carefully prepared for the conference and empowered to make use of private family time, while professionals must avoid taking over or distorting the FGC process. Accordingly, we sought to explore these aspects of FGC within the YISP context. This was particularly important, because we had found in the national evaluation of the YISP pilots we had found that families were minimally involved in the YISP decision-making processes, except in the pilot which specifically used a FGC approach, despite the expectation that children and their parents would be consulted at all stages.

### ***Setting Up Family Group Conferences in the YISPs***

Most of the pilot YISPs appointed one or more co-ordinators to oversee the implementation of FGC within the YISP. Some co-ordinators held management roles within the YOT and others focused solely on actually running the family group conferences. As we saw in Section 3, some co-ordinators were located

within the YISP structures and others were affiliated elsewhere. Although we talked to co-ordinators in all five pilots, we became more familiar with the roles of professionals in our two case-study areas.

In Midshire, the role of the FGC co-ordinator was merged with that of a YISP keyworker in spring 2006. While, at first, the co-ordinators were concerned about the additional workload this might bring, they rapidly saw considerable value in the combined role:

- it helped them to sell the idea of FGC to families
- it seemed to be a natural extension of their YISP role
- families did not need to tell their stories twice because they had one keyworker throughout the process.

In Welshboro, this combined role had existed since the beginning of the pilot. In both Riverborough and Dockborough, the YISPs chose to subcontract the FGC work to external agencies and independent chairs. The principles of FGC set out by the Family Rights Group indicate that the FGC co-ordinator/facilitators should be independent if the child or young person is to experience a fair and balanced conference. We believe that workers in both Welshboro and Midshire would challenge this position and were of the view that dual roles can work well for families as well as for the workers. We return to this issue in our concluding section.

Whichever model of FGC the pilots adopted, however, all the staff we spoke to demonstrated total commitment to the core objectives, ethos and philosophy of FGC and were particularly keen to empower families to take ownership of the issues and contribute to finding appropriate solutions. Most families were considered to be capable of managing FGC with suitable support, but workers were firmly of the view that children and their parents needed to be motivated to participate in the process. The level of motivation had also emerged as a key finding in our national evaluation of YISPs: the YISP programme is likely to be most effective with parents and children who are motivated to change and to benefit from the services and support YISPs have to offer. It was reasonable to hypothesise, therefore, that motivation would be a key factor in the effectiveness of FGC within YISPs: those families most motivated to change and to participate in the YISP programme are the most likely to benefit from a family group conference. As one co-ordinator told us:

*You need every member that's involved with you to engage in the process ... and you need the young person to be able to open up at the meeting and say what the problems are.*

Most co-ordinators recognised that mothers were more likely than fathers to become involved with the YISP and with the FGC, so engaging mothers in the process and helping them to accept support was regarded as key. It is not surprising, therefore, that co-ordinators appeared to put more time and effort into establishing a relationship with and preparing mothers for a conference. We noted that fathers tended to be less involved in family group conferences, even when they were present.

### **Establishing Trust with Parents and Children**

Those who were responsible for chairing and running conferences (frequently referred to as FGC facilitators) were at pains to point out that no conference is like any other and that each one needs to be tailored to meet the specific needs of the individual child and his or her family. Good preparation and establishing a relationship of trust are essential and, as one conference facilitator commented:

*You need to have a fair handle on what might be going to come out and what the dynamics are, where the power lies and what the destructive influences are and the positive influences.*

Pilot staff expressed concerns to us that the hours they spent in preparation for conferences were not reflected in the statistics. They also pointed out that sometimes, because the preparation was so thorough, families decided they did not need a conference because many of the issues had been addressed satisfactorily during the preparation phase and they felt able to move on. The hours spent in preparation for each conference varied between five and fifty, depending on the number of participants, the complexity of the case and the ability of family members to grasp the concept of FGC.

Co-ordinators talked about the need to reassure young people about the conference. One of them said:

*I think with a young person it's got to be a process of reassurance ... potentially, [the meeting] is an alien concept because, at their age, people tell them what to do.*

It was regarded as very important that there were no surprises during conferences, that new information was not put on the table. It seems from our evaluation, however, that less effort was made to ensure that face-to-face preparation meetings were held with extended family members, and it may be that telephone contact alone could serve to marginalise their contribution and increase the risk that unexpected information is proffered during the conference. It also became clear that parents were sometimes reluctant to let extended family members know that their child was in trouble.

Lupton (1998) has argued that the extent of the family's control over the conference is limited from the outset: it is a professional, in this case the YISP/FGC keyworker, who suggests the conference, and families generally do not regard it as in their interests to refuse to participate. She argued further that control over the composition, timing and venue of the conference is also limited because families have to fit in with the host agency's structures and processes. Certainly, one could argue that families in Welshboro had very limited control at the outset, in that if they chose not to participate in a conference the YISP was unable to offer them any alternative kind of support. Previous research into FGC within youth justice in Hampshire (Jackson, 1998) found that families often felt that they had no choice about participation, particularly since the alternative to a conference may have been court proceedings, which were sold as the less attractive/constructive option.

The FGC facilitators usually met with the family several times prior to the conference and most pilots provided written information which explained the FGC process. The Midshire pilot, for example, used a video which was left with the family to view in their own time. Some parents seem to have found the video

very useful, particularly as it explained the format of the conference and discussed the agencies which might be invited to attend it. Parents in our interview sample seemed particularly pleased that staff had taken time to prepare their children. One mother commented:

*They actually took time out to see each of the children individually ... actually speak to them about it, so even the children knew what to expect. It was good.*

(Mother of Kieron, Charlie and Ellie, aged 8, 10 and 11)

Parents reported that they and their children were consulted about all aspects of the conference:

*It was basically mine and my daughter's choice who was going to be there.*

(Mother of Teri, aged 13)

While parents perceived it as being up to them to say who should attend the conference, nevertheless some left it to the FGC co-ordinator to decide which professionals to invite. Guy and Siobhan's mother said:

*I could have who I wanted there, and [the FGC co-ordinator] obviously picked the people she felt that we needed to be there as well ... So, we left it to her to decide ... she knew best, really.*

(Mother of Guy and Siobhan, aged 12 and 13)

Parents were also asked to make suggestions about suitable venues:

*They [the FGC co-ordinator] says, 'Would you recommend anywhere close?' ... and we said, 'The community centre', and that's where it was.*

(Mother of Naomi, aged 13)

*I was asked if I knew anywhere, and the closest I could think of was the comprehensive school ... it was within walking distance ... it was a ten-minute walk so it was easy.*

(Mother of Teri, aged 13)

Parents described the importance of the conference taking place 'on neutral territory', and this was clearly reinforced by the FGC staff. Parents regarded going to the local school or community centre as taking away the pressure which they would have felt had the conference been held in their own home. The time of each conference was set by the parents, but many of them had been aware that some professionals, such as teachers, would not be available at certain times such as at weekends and in school holidays. In addition to working with families to ensure they are fully prepared for the meeting, the FGC facilitators must ensure that other professionals and practitioners are invited appropriately, are made fully aware of the reasons for the conference and are suitably prepared.

## Being Prepared

The parents we interviewed shortly after they had attended a family group conference had all felt adequately prepared for the event, and some expressed a strong sense of ownership of the conference, referring to it as 'our meeting'. Even those who had felt nervous were able to regard the meeting as their own:

*I was a little bit dubious at first ... 'cos I didn't know what was going to go on, and then she [the FGC co-ordinator] says 'Well, it's your meeting, you invite who you want to invite ... it's got nothing to do with us ... we're just stand-bys and we just put the orders in the list of what you want to do ...*

(Mother of Stuart, aged 10)

The description of the FGC staff as 'stand-bys' is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the roles they took, but, clearly, families felt adequately prepared and this view was reflected in the exit questionnaires completed by parents at the end of the conference. Of the 221 parents who completed an exit questionnaire, 92 per cent said that they had received enough information prior to the conference, although fewer fathers than mothers (96% as against 77%) gave this response. Some 68 per cent of parents said they knew what to expect at the conference and 88 per cent of parents said that the meeting had been as they had expected. Again, however, fathers were less sure than mothers: while 91 per cent of mothers described the conference as having been what they had expected, only 80 per cent of fathers and 77 per cent of carers said it had been as they had expected, as Table 4.1 shows. The discrepancy between the views of mothers and those of fathers emerged as a key theme throughout the evaluation and is one to which we return later.

**Table 4.1: Parents' expectations of the family group conference**

Was the FGC what you expected?	Mother	Father	Carer	All parents
% Yes	91	80	77	88
% No	9	20	23	12
Total number of responses (100%)	149	49	13	211

Although parents were normally consulted about the time and place of the conference, 5 per cent of parents indicated that getting time off work was a problem. This was a far greater problem in Riverborough, where 27 per cent of parents described it as difficult. Although the vast majority of parents (98%) described the venue as 'fine', only 77 per cent of parents in Riverborough gave this response.

The children we interviewed were generally positive about the preparation for the conference, although some felt they had been given little choice about attending. They had usually met with the FGC co-ordinator or facilitator and/or their YISP keyworker on several occasions and had been consulted about various aspects of the meeting. Most children remembered being asked who they would like to attend the conference and indicated that they had selected other family members including grandparents, aunts and non-residential parents, or someone who they regarded as supportive, such as a teacher or social worker. One young person who refused to go to school excluded school

staff from the conference but chose his father, who did not live with him. Occasionally, children felt that they had been given little choice about who would attend and were simply asked to rubber-stamp decisions taken by others. For example, Maddie told us:

*The [FGC co-ordinator] didn't ask me. She just went, 'Your brother has got to come. Is that OK with you?'*

(Maddie, aged 11)

It appears that Maddie was told also that her mother, her younger sister and the social worker would be attending. Another child said she had been asked to choose who should come, but had been told that the teachers had to be there because the main concerns were about schooling. It seems, from our interviews, that children were given some choice about who should be invited to the conference, but that the choices had been limited. One child said he had been allowed to invite only one person, while another wanted to invite his father but his mother had vetoed this.

It became clear that the empowerment of children and young people was within certain boundaries set by adults, including the FGC staff and parents. It is easy to see, however, that it may be problematic if children choose to exclude professionals, such as teachers, who are the most likely to know about the issues causing concern. It might be more empowering if children are enabled to negotiate with adults over who should attend. None of the children in our two case-study pilots had been given the opportunity to send out their own invitations to the conference. This had been a feature in the pilot offering FGC in our national evaluation of YISPs and was regarded as a particularly tangible way of empowering children. In Midshire, children and young people were asked to choose an advocate who would assist them at the meeting. Sometimes, the advocate was someone the child knew such as a teacher or mentor, but on other occasions advocates were allocated to cases. We return to the role played by advocates later.

Most of the children and young people were happy with their preparation for the conference, although a minority said that they had not felt fully engaged with the process. A few remembered being asked about setting ground rules. Most, however, had simply been asked to agree ground rules set by the FGC staff. The children and young people had mostly known what to expect before going to a conference and had understood its purpose. Seventy-two per cent of children who completed an exit questionnaire told us that they had known what the conference was about prior to attending, and their siblings gave similar responses.

During our interviews with children we asked them to talk about their expectations of the family group conference. They made comments such as the following:

*Just like chatting and like talking about how we're gonna change things and stuff ... Just to say what we want to change – like me anger ... and just to see how the family could bond and things.*

(Adrian, aged 11)

*My behaviour's bad at school ... I got kicked out quite a few times... for losing my temper really, with teachers, getting really angry and that ... And about when my dad comes to pick me up ... He just, like, left us on Boxing Day two years ago.*

(Duncan, aged 11)

The young people's understandings about the conference were very similar to their understandings about the referral to the YISP. They regarded the conference as a meeting designed to challenge their behaviour, to tell them what is wrong and to put things right at school and/or at home. A few, however, claimed not to understand the purpose of the conference:

*I didn't know what was going on ... not one bit.*

(Matt, aged 10)

*I didn't expect anything. I didn't know anything about it.*

(Ashleigh, aged 13)

It is probable that these children had been told what to expect, but they may not have listened, may not have understood, or may have simply forgotten. Generally, children and young people expected the conference to offer a supportive environment where they would not be in trouble and where their opinions would be heard and they could say what they wanted. Nevertheless, we detected that they were more ambivalent than their parents about attending the conference, although some 90 per cent of those who completed an exit questionnaire thought that family group conferences were 'a good idea'.

#### **Going to the Family Group Conference**

For the most part, participants expected that the conference would be informal and friendly and would provide a non-judgmental and non-threatening forum in which they would be supported in expressing their concerns and needs to the professionals present. Adrian's mother had been told by the FGC co-ordinator that

*... nobody's gonna get wrong, and there's gonna be no shouting and raving ... it's just gonna be so you can express yourself and ... if you've got anything that's worrying you or anything like that, you can speak about it ...*

(Mother of Adrian, aged 11)

Some parents told us that they were excited about the conference while others expressed apprehension. Their apprehension was usually caused by worries about how their children would behave, concerns that there might be arguments among the family members, nervousness about speaking in front of professionals, and, occasionally, anxiety that children might be taken into care. The following extracts illustrate these mixed emotions:

*I was excited ... to try and get things out of the way.*

(Mother of Adrian, aged 11)



*I felt relaxed. I was wary to start with, but all the people were around the table to help my family.*

(Mother of Shellie, aged 12)

*I was a bit anxious ... not knowing if tempers would get frayed ...*

(Mother of Toby, aged 13)

*I was a bit worried that my son would go off and throw a tantrum.*

(Mother of Kieron, Charlie and Ellie, aged 8, 10 and 11)

Children also expressed mixed emotions about going to the conference. Some said that they had felt 'OK' about it and a few looked forward to it. Others told us that they had not wanted to go:

*I wasn't happy to go ... I didn't really want to go.*

(Alex, aged 12)

Like some parents, children had a number of concerns about the meeting: some were worried that their teacher or 'the wag man' would be there; some thought they might be asked a lot of questions; some thought there would be too many people there; and some were worried that the meeting would go on too long and be boring. It seems that conferences in our case-study pilots consisted of between five and seventeen people. If the conference was about more than one child in a family, the number of participants was generally higher than when the focus was on one child. Joseph, aged 11, told us that he had not wanted to go because he thought there would be 'loads and loads of people there, like fifty people'. In fact, only a few people attended his conference and, because he knew them all, he described it afterwards as having been 'all right'.

In the exit questionnaires, conference participants were asked to describe how they felt before going to the meeting. Table 4.2 indicates the responses of adult participants, and Table 4.3 indicates those of children and young people.

**Table 4.2: How adult conference participants felt before the meeting**

	<b>Parents n = 211 (%)*</b>	<b>Other family members n = 105 (%)*</b>
Happy	11	16
Worried	13	12
Nervous	29	20
Relieved	12	6
Looked forward to it	33	26
Wondered what it would be like	34	35

\* This was a multiple choice question so the percentages sum to over 100%

Again, we noted significant differences between the responses of mothers and of fathers. Mothers were more likely than fathers (15% as against 4%) to say that they had felt relieved before going to the conference. By contrast, fathers were more likely than mothers to say they had been looking forward to the

conference (48% as against 28%). Grandparents were also significantly more likely than other family members to have felt relieved that they were going to the conference.

Table 4.3 indicates significant variation in the feelings of children/young people and those of their siblings. Siblings were more likely than the children and young people who were the subject of the conference to state that they had felt 'happy' about going to the conference. Perhaps not surprisingly, despite the thorough preparation most participants had experienced beforehand, the majority still experienced mixed feelings before the conference.

**Table 4.3: How children and young people felt before the meeting**

	<b>The child concerned n = 191 (%)*</b>	<b>Siblings n = 60 (%)*</b>
Happy	40	58
Scared	33	22
Upset	6	6
Excited	11	12
Looked forward to it	36	42
Wished not to have to go	26	25

\* This was a multiple choice question so the percentages sum to over 100%

### ***Preparing Other Family Members and Friends***

Family group conferences are specifically designed to mobilise resources within the extended family and wider kinship networks. To this end, family members and friends also need adequate preparation. We received 111 exit questionnaires from other family members and friends who participated in a family group conference. A smaller percentage (47%) of them than of parents said they had known what to expect at the conference, although 88 per cent said that they had received enough information beforehand, and 98 per cent described the venue as 'fine'. Some 8 per cent reported that travel had been a problem, 6 per cent had experienced difficulty getting time off work and 5 per cent had difficulties arranging childcare.

The participation of family members and friends can be important in offering support to parents and to children. During the evaluation we interviewed five grandparents, seven siblings, two non-resident parents, the mother's partner in one case, and a family friend. Inevitably, the other family members attending conferences varied in age and in terms of their relationship with the child. Not surprisingly, therefore, their views varied considerably: grandparents had a different perspective on conferences from younger siblings, for example. Moreover, there were some cases in which the child's parents had separated and, in one family in particular, there had been difficult battles about the arrangements for the children. Inevitably, these contextual family factors influenced the conference and the perspectives of different family members.

Most family members, including younger siblings, had a clear idea why a family group conference had been proposed. All cited a variety of problems, often overlapping, relating to problems at school and at home and, occasionally, in

the community. A few family members referred to concerns about offending and antisocial behaviour:

*It started before he was nine ... he's always been very boisterous and he started to have real angry outbursts at home ... violent outbursts where he smashed things up ... he smashed his bedroom up ... and, he started to misbehave when he was outdoors ... going to places he shouldn't have.*

(Grandmother of Keith, aged 10)

Keith's grandmother went on to describe how her grandson had lied about what he had been doing and had claimed he was being bullied at school. She went on to say:

*He's had quite large problems at school ... I think he gets on very well with his teacher and he's in top sets for quite a few things but he can have these angry outbursts. He ran out of school once ... Just before Christmas he headbutted a teacher after he smashed a window.*

Indeed, grandparents could often foresee the potential difficulties if their grandchildren continued to behave badly. Keith's grandmother was particularly concerned that her grandson was not in full-time education and was worried for the future:

*He could end up in one of these secure units, like where one of [his uncle's] friends has been ... because he started off like this at twelve or thirteen ... He's going to be in court and his mum's going to end up having one of those ASBO things slapped on her and she's going to be threatened with eviction ... Any time now it's going to kick off ... he's going to get caught.*

Siblings were also alive to the potential consequences of bad behaviour. Toby's brother told us that Toby had been in trouble with the police and that he had actually phoned the police himself on two occasions, once when his brother was attacking their mother and once when he was threatening suicide. He was clearly frightened by this behaviour, and was scared that if his brother continued to refuse to go to school their mother would have to go to court. Their mother had already received a fine and been threatened with imprisonment.

Parents, by contrast, were apt to dismiss their child's behaviour as 'what normal kids do'. One non-resident father described how his son had been playing around railway lines, setting fires and throwing stones, mostly with other children. He realised that his son might be getting into danger, but nevertheless, felt he should go to the conference:

*In my eyes, he wasn't that bad ... looking through a parent's eyes. If it was going to help my son I had to go ... I mean, I couldn't just say we're not going.*

(Father of Matt, aged 10)

Other family members recognised that a family group conference might be helpful and were prepared to offer emotional and moral support:

*I've basically been trying to help mum out as best I can ... I don't want to see my brother turning out in a way that he shouldn't.*

(Brother of Duncan )

Most family members knew that their attendance at the conference was voluntary and presumed that either the child concerned or a parent had requested their attendance. One grandmother had agreed to attend because her grandson had told her he had got into trouble and that he had to go to a family meeting and wanted her to act as his advocate. Some family members wanted to be involved and saw it as their right to be at the conference, as Matt's non-resident stepmother told us:

*Well, I think I have got a right to be there!*

Grandparents, in particular, seemed to think that they could offer useful information about the family. George had been 12 when he was referred to the YISP and, later on, when we spoke to his paternal grandmother she indicated that she had foreseen the problems and the consequences for George:

*It was obvious to me what the problem was ... She [George's mother] is one of those binge drinkers ... She works three nights a week ... the other four nights she's drinking ... That's not right ... My grandson was left to please himself [at night] ... Children of thirteen can't be running the streets.*

Other grandparents knew that the child concerned needed help and, like many siblings, wanted to put everything on the table in the hope of finding solutions. However, although all the family members we spoke to had been keen to attend the conference and offer support, information or help and, in some cases, to ensure they knew what was happening in the family, they did not demonstrate the same sense of ownership of the conference as parents had done. It seems that they were more on the periphery and more inclined to want to be supportive than be part of the solution.

This contrasts with the position taken by other family members in the Maori tradition in New Zealand, but almost certainly reflects cultural differences and expectations about family responsibilities. These differences were reflected in the comments family members made about the preparation for the conference. Most, but not all family members had met with a member of FGC staff before the meeting, either individually or with the child's parents. Occasionally, the preparation had been done over the telephone. All the family members who felt well-prepared expected the conference to focus on the child or young person in order for them to gain a better understanding of the problems and find solutions:

*I knew it was going to be a discussion mostly about his school and why he was getting bad-tempered all the time ... and what we could do within the family to help him ... I was just hoping for a miracle for my grandson ... it's got to be a turning point where somebody is going to recognise that there is something wrong with him ... he does need help.*

(Grandmother of Keith, aged 10)

*I thought it was a way of ... diverting him ... channelling him into more positive ways for him to go.*

(Grandfather of Stuart, aged 10)

Some, who said they had not received any preparation, still went with high expectations:

*I was expecting something to be put in place for my brother, and my mum to cope so that he can start respecting my mother and everybody ... I didn't even know what was going on ... that was a big downfall.*

(Brother of Duncan, aged 11)

This participant, along with some other family members in different cases, felt particularly disempowered during private family time in the conference. They were unsure about what they could or should say and were worried about appearing to be negative. Some family members felt that parents had already begun to formulate what they were going to do and suggest, prior to going to the conference, because they had more information about the issues and possible solutions. Matt's stepmother, for example, was concerned about the imbalance of power this promoted and told us:

*It was more or less thrown at you ... you weren't prepared. They didn't send any letters to us previously to going to the meeting to say this is what we've planned ... we knew nothing about it until the day ... and you don't have time to think about it ... We went blindfolded, basically ... We should have been prepared to go to that meeting instead of just being hoisted in at the deep end.*

(Non-resident stepmother of Matt, aged 10)

It was clear from our interviews that many of the extended family members involved in a conference seemed less well-prepared than parents had been. There were often practical reasons for this, such as work commitments, which rendered preparatory meetings difficult, but feeling ill-prepared for the conference was regarded by these participants as unsatisfactory and disempowering. As a result, some told us that they had not been able to contribute constructively at the conference and some had been cynical about its value:

*I went blind really. I didn't know what it was for, didn't know anything about it at all.*

(Brother of Duncan, aged 11)

*I didn't expect anything ... We were pretty much in the dark about it all.*

(Non-resident father of Matt, aged 10)

Some family members were sceptical because they believed that the root causes of the child's problems, such as one mother's excessive drinking or ongoing poor parenting, were not likely to be dealt with at the conference. George's paternal grandmother was convinced that, unless George's mother

admitted that she had a problem with alcohol, nothing would help her grandson, whom she described as running wild. One non-resident father and his new wife were particularly concerned that his son's mother was simply labelling the child and that consequently he had begun to live up to a 'bad boy' image:

*He's a normal boy, just lazy sometimes ... half the things his mother does are over the top, like sending him to a psychiatrist ... Everybody has portrayed him as a bad boy, but he's not a bad boy when he's over here ... Over there, there's ... no stable family life ... and he's just branded.*

This father had low expectations of the family group conference and regarded it as just another step in the labelling process.

### ***Deciding Who Attends the Conference***

At the end of the day, co-ordinators were keen to let families decide who should attend a conference but admitted that they tried to work round situations in which the family wanted to exclude a key agency. The biggest challenge is said to be when the child and parent(s) disagree about who should attend. This can be very difficult in relation to the attendance of non-resident parents or family members following separation or divorce. It seems that in these circumstances parental wishes generally take precedence over those expressed by the child or young person. In general, however, co-ordinators believed that achieving a balance in attendance between family members and professionals was important and that at most conferences the right people had attended.

Throughout the evaluation, concerns were expressed about the poor attendance record of key agencies such as social services at both panel meetings and family group conferences. Even when social services did send a representative to a conference they frequently arrived late and left early, showing what co-ordinators described as a lack of respect for families and the conference. Even when they did attend conferences, social workers were not always familiar with the case or had not completed the work they had promised. We noted the negative contribution from social services to the work of the YISPs more generally in our report of the national evaluation (Procter, 2007).

The FGC co-ordinators also regarded schools as key players because so many of the risk factors were linked to the child's education. They often found it difficult to secure the attendance of teachers, and written statements from teachers who could not attend were regarded as poor substitutes for the teacher actually being a participant in the conference. It appeared to be easier to encourage education welfare officers and teaching assistants to attend, but their contribution was often considered to be less central than that of teachers. The co-ordinators and YISP practitioners accepted that FGC could be a difficult arena for teachers:

*Teachers are often unsure of the process and they can find it uncomfortable ... You've got a lot of family members who are here. [Teachers] are having to relate issues from school and then they might feel intimidated, or they might feel they are getting picked on by the family. It's a very difficult process for some people.*

(YISP keyworker)

It is interesting that FGC staff felt that teachers might feel intimidated. It would be reasonable to expect that children and parents might feel anxious at having to face teachers rather than the other way round. We know from this and our national evaluation of YISPs that bridging the gap between home and school is an important role for YISP keyworkers.

All professionals attending a family group conference were asked to complete an exit questionnaire directly after their involvement in the conference. The vast majority (97%) recorded that they had felt well-prepared, although if it was the first conference they had attended they were slightly less likely than those professionals more experienced in FGC to feel well-prepared (94% as against 98%). Similarly, the overwhelming majority of professionals (99%) knew why they had been invited to the conference, although approximately 17 per cent indicated that they thought that someone else should have been invited who was not there, usually other professionals. The most commonly cited agencies that professionals thought should have attended the conference but did not were social services (27% mentioned this) and CAMHS (17% mentioned this). Despite good preparation, of course, it is sometimes impossible to engage key agency representatives in preventative work in a climate of high caseloads and limited resources. The most common suggestion made by YISP and FGC staff for improving the conference was to increase attendance of specific key agency representatives and family members.

Some co-ordinators were less inclined to meet with the professionals who would be attending a conference, while others stressed the importance of carefully preparing those who would potentially be 'big players' at the meeting, such as teachers. Co-ordinators were concerned that some professionals found it difficult to relinquish an authoritarian stance and tended to dominate discussions unhelpfully, thus reducing the empowerment of families which co-ordinators had spent hours promoting.

### ***Structuring the Family Group Conference***

Since the beginning of FGC in New Zealand, the conference itself has been fairly tightly structured. The Family Rights Group has stipulated that all conferences should be co-ordinated and planned by an independent, impartial convenor<sup>1</sup> with no previous knowledge of or involvement with the family (Morris, 1996). The convenor's task is to chair the conference and to act as a link between the professionals involved and the family members. In the family/child welfare model, the conference has three clear stages:

1. Shared information exchange.
2. Private family time.
3. Agreement and endorsement of the family plan with professionals.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'convenor' was rarely used by the pilots. Instead they tended to use the terms 'co-ordinator' or 'facilitator' to describe the convenor's role.

As we noted in Section 1, the YJB introduced a preliminary stage for victim–offender dialogue which is relevant to the youth justice model of FGC. We discuss the attempts at restorative justice within the conferences convened by the pilots in Section 5. In this section, we look at the three more traditional stages in our consideration of family empowerment.

### **Stage 1: Information-sharing**

At the beginning of the conference the ground rules should be agreed and introductions made. Then the professionals present are expected to share information and concerns about the child in question as openly and as frankly as possible. They would usually describe the responsibilities of their own agencies and make suggestions as to how each agency might contribute services and resources to the family. Family members are usually able to ask questions, follow through particular themes and arguments, and put forward their own understandings of the problems and issues which have led to the conference being convened. Stage 1, therefore, is an opportunity for everyone at the conference, including the child, to put their own point of view and to share information and concerns. It is important that everyone has a chance to speak and that everyone is heard.

The ground rules set in the pilots usually reflected these expectations. Toby told us that when he went into the meeting room

*... there was laminated paper, and it had six rules on ... No shouting; listen to what other people have got to say. No talking when someone else is talking. Things like that.*

One young person remembered that the following were set as ground rules at her conference:

*Put your hand up when you want to speak. Think of what you are going to say ... If anyone was going to cry they had to not walk out [of] the room but go in the corner and calm down, 'cos they didn't want us crying in front of the little ones.*

(Maddie, aged 11)

The children we interviewed remembered the information-sharing stage, and most felt that the focus had been primarily on them:

*It went round in a circle. We went round and everyone had their say and every time someone said something I could say what I wanted to say.*

(Tom, aged 12)

Elliot remembered that everybody had introduced themselves and then people were asked to talk about his good points and his bad points. Children mostly remembered this kind of discussion as positive:

*The teacher said that I've got all good grades. I've got 'good' for behaviour and effort.*

(Elliot, aged 10)



*They were involving me ... they weren't just slagging me off and everything. They asked me if it was OK to talk about me ... They were asking me opinions, questions.*

(Tom, aged 12)

Children who mostly defined themselves in interview as having been 'naughty' clearly found the constructive comments from professionals useful and affirming. The tone also enabled them to feel more confident about participating and about disagreeing with things that were being said because people were listening to their point of view:

*I just said what I thought right here, that minute. If I thought [the teacher] was wrong I just said, 'Miss, I think you're wrong' ... I said what I thought.*

(Joseph, aged 13)

*I got to say my things first and get it off me chest ... Usually, when someone comes to the house, me mam always talks to them first.*

(Toby, aged 13)

Not all the children were reassured by the positive comments made in the meeting, however. Some resented their problems being discussed at the beginning of the conference and remembered the negative rather than the positive comments:

*I felt like smacking them ... I felt like telling them to 'f\*\*\* off' 'cos they were getting on my nerves.*

(Natalie, aged 12)

It seems that, although some children felt like leaving the meeting, they coped with their discomfort by switching off, by agreeing with everything that was being said about them because they did not want to upset their parents, or by being quiet, feeling unable to defend themselves. Children's accounts of information-sharing suggest that they felt that the professionals dominated the meeting because they described the child's behaviour, gave advice as to what might be done, made suggestions about services and activities they might engage with, and suggested strategies for dealing with specific issues such as poor relationships. Stuart told us:

*They [the professionals] says I can calm me temper and go to me room, and after that I can go back downstairs and then see me mum and ask her if I can play out.*

(Stuart, aged 10)

Some children said they had received warnings from the professionals about the consequences of taking drugs and other kinds of unacceptable behaviour.

Parents generally felt that the information stage of the conference had been handled well and noted that the professionals attempted to be positive and constructive in their comments:

*I think it was ordered ... it was nice, actually. You could say what you wanted to say and they seemed to listen.*

(Mother of Victoria and Tom, aged 10 and 12)

*Great, we said what we thought to a certain degree. And teachers were there saying, 'Well, we've got a problem with school, this is what's happening' ... it was good ... Other people were then hearing what the school had to say, and then they were hearing what we had to say and what was going on in his home life. So we were getting a big picture of what was happening in school, what was happening at home. People said, 'Well, we can do this to help you ...', brought it all together.*

(Father of Guy and Siobhan, aged 12 and 13)

Parents were generally impressed that each professional and family member present had been asked to outline the child's strengths as well as problems. Parents, particularly those in Midshire, felt that their parenting skills were affirmed by the identification of strengths in the family and the positives in their child's behaviour. For example, one mother was pleased when her family life was described as 'happy madness', and George's mother was glad when her son's teacher said how likeable everybody found him to be, despite outbursts of bad behaviour:

*I was quite pleased about what people said about George because there wasn't no one said a bad word about him ... he was just being a fool to himself, that sort of thing ... it was quite a positive meeting.*

Parents in the case-study pilots felt that the information-sharing stage had resulted in a deeper understanding of the issues and they had valued being addressed directly by different professionals. They regarded having had everyone together at one meeting as having been particularly helpful:

*When you've got a family the size of this that are dealing with lots of different agencies ... you can imagine all the backwards and forwards going on ... It all gets a bit confusing and crossed wires start happening ... nobody has a full understanding of what's happening ... so, to get everybody into one big area ... it was brilliant that the people had given the time to be there – that was touching as well – a really, really good way of dealing with it.*

(Mother of Fraser, aged 13, who was one of six children)

*It was nice to have ... everyone sitting around and having their say and their views and listening to people ... I don't think I'd realised quite how bad he was at school till the teachers were there telling me.*

(Mother of Keith, aged 10)

Parents and children, then, were generally very positive about the information-sharing and most had been able to take advantage of the opportunity to share with other people at the conference and felt that their concerns had been listened to:

*Talking about what our concerns were ... asking how we felt ... asking the children how they felt ... what we'd like to improve ... what actions*

*we'd taken ... how we thought the children could be helped ... how we thought the family could be helped.*

(Mother of Fraser, aged 13)

*They listened to my side. I listened to them and we spoke about everything.*

(Mother of Leo and Natalie, aged 9 and 12)

Not all parents believed that their child had taken the same advantage of the opportunity to share, however. A few were pleased that their child had spoken up, but not all had done so. Other family members also expressed satisfaction with the information exchange and felt able to contribute. Grandparents, in particular, were positive about the opportunity to challenge professionals. One grandmother, for example, had been able to express her views about her grandson's problems at school, and had told the teacher that

*... kicking him out is just annoying me ... 'cos, in a way, you're letting him win ... that's not helping him ... he's got to stay in school.*

(Grandmother of Keith, aged 10)

Grandparents and siblings were also able to describe how a child's behaviour impacted on them:

*If there was anything to say, I just said it ... that special school ... made my brother worse ... they're like monkeys in that school ... I was just getting bored because [the teacher] was just blathering on about crap basically.*

(Sister of Boyd, aged 12)

*To me, [the teacher] was coming across like my grandson was a pain in the arse and she basically didn't bloody want him there ... just seemed to put him down and down and down. My son challenged her. He just said 'Well, your attitude stinks ... why have you bothered to bloody come? ... I'm sorry, but your attitude is coming across as being bloody awful ... I know you've got to criticise him to a certain extent, but I think you're going overboard a bit.'*

(Grandmother of Keith, aged 10)

There was little evidence in our interviews, however, that parents or other family members challenged things said by professionals except in respect of problems relating to schooling. One mother was able to tackle the year tutor about things that were happening to her daughter in school and felt that her concerns had been ignored until the conference. She told us that she had been pleased that the teacher had actually written down what the mother had said.

A few family members told us either that they had made little contribution to the information exchange or that their contributions had been ignored. One non-resident father felt strongly that his views had been overlooked in favour of his son's mother's contribution. Some family members felt unable to raise what they regarded as important issues for fear of causing arguments within the family, upsetting the child concerned, or simply appearing too negative. It can be

difficult to address some important issues if parents are not ready or willing to be open, particularly about sensitive issues such as domestic violence or alcohol problems. Similarly, if key agencies are absent, it is impossible to tackle some issues since there are no professionals present who can offer the appropriate support.

Nevertheless, it seems that many families were able to establish better communication, particularly with teachers, having felt previously that schools had failed to take their concerns seriously. Meeting education staff on neutral territory with the support of the FGC staff had been very helpful for parents. We noted in our national evaluation of YISPs that YISP keyworkers frequently helped to bridge the gap between home and school by helping parents to communicate more effectively with teachers. It seems that family group conferences were able to take this a stage further by supporting parents to talk directly to teachers and to share concerns. It was particularly disappointing for parents, therefore, when representatives from education failed to attend the conference, having been invited to do so:

*I was a little bit put out that my son's teacher couldn't make it, because I really wanted his input ... I did make that known.*

(Mother of Ben, aged 11)

*I was a bit let down that someone from education didn't attend ... that was the main object of the exercise ... to try and get X a school and iron out the main issues with his behaviour.*

(Father of Guy and Siobhan, aged 12 and 13)

Families were also disappointed when social workers or CAMHS staff failed to attend. Guy's father, for example, had felt let down by social services as well as by education:

*... a couple of weeks before [the conference] we contacted social services ... and suggested they come to the family group meeting ... They never contacted us ... They're a waste of time.*

Guy's father went on to tell us that social services had contacted him four months later to ask if he still wanted them to be involved. He told them not to bother because they had done nothing to help when they had been needed. Another mother told us she had been 'pissed off' when someone from CAMHS had failed to attend the conference.

### **Stage 2: Family Time**

The information-sharing stage of the conference usually concludes when everyone has disclosed the information they wish to share and family members have had a chance to ask all the questions they want to pose to the professionals present. Stage 2 is an important element in the conference, when family members are given time to talk in private without the professionals and the chairperson present. Normally, everyone who is not a family member or part of the extended kinship network is asked to leave the conference so as to allow the family to formulate a plan, based on the information that has been shared thus far, and agree how the plan will be implemented, reviewed and revised, as necessary. It is generally accepted that, while the family should be left to work

together in private, the conference co-ordinator/facilitator should be available to provide assistance and offer any additional information the family may request.

The FGC literature indicates that the family should have as much time as they need for this stage in the conference and should not be restricted in any way. While this stage could be regarded as empowering family members to formulate a plan of action free of any professional interference, Lupton (1998) argued that the absence of the professionals means that the family can no longer interrogate them or challenge them to provide specific services or support. In practice, the family should have done this during stage 1 and should have an opportunity to check things with the professionals again at stage 3 of the conference.

We asked participants across the five pilots to tell us about their experience of family time in the exit survey. Some 88 per cent of parents, 80 per cent of children and 93 per cent of family members who completed an exit questionnaire indicated that the family had had time in private to make a plan. There was significant variation between the pilots, however: 98 per cent of parents in Midshire said they had time alone to make a plan, as against just 61 per cent in Riverborough. Parents in Riverborough were also more likely than parents elsewhere to say that they had found family time difficult (25% as against 6% overall). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that parents in Riverborough were significantly less likely than other parents to say that they were happy with the family plan at the end of the conference (72% as against 92%).

The majority of children completing the exit survey said that they had had time alone with their family to make a plan, although children in Eastburgh were less likely than children from other pilots to state this (64% as against 80% overall). This indicated, perhaps, that the children were more acutely aware of the presence of the facilitator ‘tidying up’ around them and remaining in the room than their parents were.

We asked parents if they had found it helpful to have time alone as a family to make a plan. Around two in five parents said that they had found it helpful and fathers and carers were significantly more likely than mothers to have found this helpful, as Table 4.4 indicates. It may be that fathers welcomed the opportunity to participate in discussions which normally only involve mothers. It also seems to have provided an important opportunity for non-resident fathers to get more involved in their children’s lives.

**Table 4.4: Parents’ perceptions regarding the helpfulness of family time**

	<b>Mothers</b>	<b>Fathers</b>	<b>Carers</b>	<b>Total</b>
Helpful (%)	33	56	62	40
Not helpful (%)	67	44	38	60
Number of parents/carers	133	45	13	191

The exit survey indicated that a high proportion (97%) of other family members found family time useful, although nearly one in five stated that it ‘didn’t work’.

By contrast, only one parent (a mother) stated that she thought that having time alone to make a family plan ‘didn’t work’.

Only a very few children (4%) said that they ‘hated’ family time and were glad when it ended. Many children indicated that family time had been ‘OK’ (44%) and that they liked it (41%), and we found no differences between those children who were the subject of the conference and their siblings, nor between boys and girls. One of the purposes of family time is to allow children and young people to participate in developing the plan, and to express their views. The vast majority of children stated that they had been able to help make the family plan. However, children in Welshboro were less likely to say they had been able to help than were children elsewhere: only 75 per cent of children in Welshboro told us that they had helped to make the plan, as against 90 per cent in other pilot areas.

As they left the conference, participants were asked if having time out to make a plan without the presence of professionals was ‘a good thing’. Of the parents who confirmed they had had time out to make the plan, just under two-thirds stated that it was a good thing, but there was a significant difference between mothers and fathers. Mothers were more likely than fathers or carers to regard family time as ‘a good thing’, as Table 4.5 shows.

**Table 4.5: Parents’ perceptions as to whether family time was ‘a good thing’**

	<b>Mothers</b>	<b>Fathers</b>	<b>Carers</b>	<b>Total</b>
Helpful (%)	67	53	31	61
Not helpful (%)	33	47	69	39
Number of parents/carers	133	45	13	191

By contrast, nearly all other family members, neighbours and friends (99%) stated that they thought family time had been ‘a good thing’: a far higher proportion than parents. It may be that for some of these family members, family time represented a rare opportunity to get involved with the family in a supportive environment. Nevertheless, 15 per cent of other family members said they had found family time difficult.

*Issues Emerging from Family Time*

Family time is regarded as vital, but whether or not families should meet in private remained a moot point during the evaluation. The YISP and FGC staff expressed a range of views:

*It gives them time to sit back and think what’s really going on, what’s been said, how we are going to move forward, what do we do ... And maybe one [parent] doesn’t really understand it ... and they feel embarrassed asking in front of the others ... then they can get a fuller understanding and it’s putting them in control.*

(FGC co-ordinator)

*A lot of families we work with whilst we’re empowering them still need to be led or guided in the process ... If you’re talking about a family issue and the only other person in attendance is the keyworker ... I’d question what the value of them leaving is rather than staying ... I*

*don't have an issue if they've wanted to have their own family time without me being there ... but being a keyworker and me being the person taking on the plan and focusing on it after the meeting.*

(YISP keyworker)

Sometimes, the co-ordinator made a list of services offered and suggestions made during the information-sharing, and gave it to the family to use in family time and to agree or disagree with. Some families described the notes as an aide-memoire – a list of all the offers of support and services mentioned by the professionals during stage 1:

*It was just a case of going through the list saying, 'Yes, yes'. And I think we sat there for ten minutes waiting for them to come back in.*

(Mother of Adrian, aged 11)

Family members were encouraged to add to the list. From our interviews, however, it appears that referrals to agencies (e.g. to a parenting programme) and to activities had been initiated by the YISP keyworker prior to the family group conference taking place, and it was not always clear to the families how these would fit into the family plan. This was particularly the case when the family plan focused on what members of the family would do and did not include discussion about what agencies might contribute. Parents usually accepted services and activities offered by YISP keyworkers and simply rubber-stamped these proposals. When co-ordinators stayed with the family they, too, would come up with suggestions for the plan in order to stimulate discussion:

*We write down all sorts of ideas that people are coming up with and then we leave the family to have a bit of time and they tick or cross which ones they are willing to buy into. I think some families are better at making constructive use of the time than others ... but some use it really well.*

(FGC co-ordinator)

*The FGC co-ordinator led it [family time] and made notes ... he sort of helped us along.*

(Mother of Naomi, aged 13)

Independence from statutory decision-making and private family time are central principles in FGC. In two pilots, the co-ordinating role was delegated to outside agencies, and in the other three pilots it was held in-house. Subcontracting proved to be problematic organisationally and we cannot know whether it was more effective since we have few cases to go on. But the view has been expressed elsewhere (Barnsdale and Walker, 2007) that parents and children more readily engage with co-ordinators who build up trust: in other words, it matters how co-ordinators approach and talk to families, but not who employs them or where they are located. It has been suggested that the key lies in the co-ordinator's independence from the decision-making process, and it is questionable whether the co-ordinators in the pilots, particularly in Welshboro and Midshire, could be described as truly independent. Indeed, some co-ordinators felt that, because they would be having to work with the family, they

should play a role in the decision-making process. This approach would clearly limit the extent to which families are empowered and trusted to make their own decisions.

Lupton and Nixon (1999) have argued that the main challenge for FGC in social-work settings in the UK has been to make appropriate links between a new way of working and existing practice. They point to the use of FGC as a 'technique' to use *on* families rather than as a means of framing which services will be offered in partnership *with* the families, and how. Implementing FGC requires the role of 'expert professional' to be reconfigured and traditional power relationships to be reconstructed. Becoming a facilitator rather than a provider is an important shift. Research in other jurisdictions has highlighted the resistance of some professionals to their dominance in decision-making being reduced and ways in which they present 'bottom lines' to families which are non-negotiable as far as the key professionals are concerned. For example, they might insist that a particular practitioner, such as a teacher, is invited to attend the conference, irrespective of the wishes expressed by the family (Cashmore and Kelly, 2000).

Even though families may request that the co-ordinator stays with them during family time, the research indicates that there should be concerns about the influence of the professional on the family's deliberations and subsequent family plan. The extent to which reliance on professionals is evident in FGC poses a problem in terms of empowering families. There is, as Barnsdale and Walker have pointed out, a fine line between providing legitimate assistance and stymieing the principles of family empowerment which underpin FGC. It may be that family members would benefit from greater help during the preparation for the conference about how to use the family time, how to ensure all family members, including children, are able to contribute, and how to take more responsibility for the decision-making process.

Our evaluation confirms that the presence of family members does not guarantee their participation, which can be particularly difficult for the child concerned and extended family members. A good deal of previous research (Barnsdale and Walker, 2007) has shown that children generally do not participate fully in conferences, and while most cope successfully with the situation the experience may not be a positive one. Children in our study varied in their responses: some were obviously well-involved and able to have their say, but others certainly felt that it had been an event they had had to endure and about which they had had little choice.

We followed up a number of the themes that had emerged about family time during our interviews with families in Midshire and Coburgh. Most people could remember having private family time during the conference but some families told us that they had not been left to formulate a plan without anyone else being present:

*No, they didn't go out and leave us or anything like that ... but I don't think we really needed it [private family time].*

(Mother of Tara, aged 13)

In this respect, we noted a difference in practice between Midshire and Coburgh during our observations of family group conferences. It seems from our



interviews and observations that the duration of family time was between five and twenty minutes. When the family members were left alone, one member of the family normally took the lead, including, occasionally, a child. On other occasions, the FGC co-ordinator had made notes which were given to the family to use during family time.

While some families really appreciated time alone, others wished that someone had stayed with them:

*I think it might have been easier if they'd been in the room really ... somebody else writing it down.*

(Father of Guy and Siobhan, aged 12 and 13)

Some parents had appreciated having the FGC staff nearby:

*If [the family] had anything to say that they didn't want [the FGC co-ordinator] and [the keyworker] to hear, it gave them the opportunity ... We knew that they were still outside and that if there was any arguments they would be coming back in ...*

(Mother of Tara, aged 13)

Some parents described how some family members had left the conference during family time. Others told us that arguments had broken out, and some felt that family members had 'switched off' and did not participate:

*My son walked out because he got upset, so we were just sat there not knowing what to do. His dad went early because he said he'd got a job interview ... so we just sat there.*

(Mother of Duncan, aged 13)

Clearly, family time had been very unsatisfactory for this family. Other parents told us that their children had started 'playing up' and some had walked out of the conference. For some families, family time had been a very positive experience but for others it had been rather tense and was described as 'fraught'.

In our interviews with children, it became clear that children were inclined to want to get 'family time' over with as quickly as possible. Some said they were tired by then, others that they were bored. Some children told us that they had said very little, while others said that they had agreed with everything in order to speed up the process:

*I would have said something, but the quicker I got it over with the better ... to shut mum up!*

(Shellie, aged 12)

On occasion, the voice of the child or young person was drowned out by the competing voices of a range of family members. At most conferences we observed, the child's involvement in drawing up a family plan was largely limited to saying 'yes' or 'no' to what a family member proposed. At some conferences, the child became the scribe. At one conference, the FGC facilitator insisted on including an intervention in the plan despite the child expressly stating that she

did not wish to participate in it. At another conference, the mother's wish to include a referral to CAMHS was ignored by the YISP keyworker.

Just a few children appeared to have enjoyed the opportunity to talk as a family in private, and had been involved in writing up what everyone was going to do:

*We had about half an hour and me and Elliot made this massive chart of our behaviour, like saying 'Do things first time', Every swear word you say put ten pence in the box'.*

(Joel, aged 12)

During our observations of conferences we found that the clearest differences in terms of how families used their time were attributable to whether the family members all lived in the same household. While we observed that family members were generally supportive of each other and engaged with the process, when they all lived in the same household they tended to hold common views and work together as a team to a greater extent than when they were drawn from different households. Negotiations tended to be more relaxed and more sensitive. When family members lived in several households, we noticed that parents and children seemed more anxious, reserved or defensive from the outset of the conference. A greater diversity of views were presented and different opinions emerged which could lead to arguments. Moreover, the role played by extended family members was not always clearly defined and we sensed that they tended to support parents rather than to consider the needs of the child or young person.

As we have already shown, the participation of professionals in contributing to the family plan varied, as did the amount of assistance given to families. When co-ordinators provided suggestions to families about services they felt would be important it was likely that these services would be included in the plan, but we wonder how far families owned plans which were prescribed in some way. Moreover, the degree to which children were consulted or involved at this stage was variable, with some children playing very little part in the discussions. If they did voice dissent it was frequently ignored by the adults. At one conference we observed, the young person wandered out of the room during the preparation of the family plan. The extent to which most children and young people felt empowered at this stage of the conference is questionable.

We noticed that the only interventions family members discussed were activities for the child and those that offered respite for the parents. During family time, the focus was very much on agreeing the changes the child was expected to make at home, sometimes with the use of a system of rewards and penalties, and occasionally included actions to be taken by parents and siblings. In one conference, we observed the family plan being built around a relative's concern that the child needed to eat more healthily and have more baths to help him relax.

We came to the conclusion that family time had been a valuable experience for many families, but not all families had private time alone to discuss issues or generate a plan by themselves. Giving parents and other family members the opportunity to have time out alone to create a plan may well give them a sense of empowerment in that they are able to take responsibility for their future plans, yet it may also run the risk of leaving families without the support or the tools

they need to be able to develop a plan effectively. It is clear that the FGC facilitator needs to prepare all the members of the family and guide them in how to use their family time effectively, ensuring that each family member can participate in the process.

### **Stage 3: Approval of the Family Plan**

The final stage of the family group conference takes place when the family indicate that they have formulated a family plan and are ready for the professionals to rejoin the conference to discuss the plan with them. The task for the professionals is not to challenge the family plan, but to allocate resources and indicate how they will help the family to implement it. The plan should then be circulated to everyone concerned and a review date agreed. From our observations and interviews with families in Midshire and Coburgh, the final stage of the conference rarely lasted more than 20 minutes, and often much less. Sometimes, the professionals had already left the conference and did not rejoin the family during the third and final stage.

Some children could not recall this stage at all, and it left little impression on most of them. It seems that they and others were usually ready to go home by this stage, and other family members had often left already and did not reconvene to consider the family plan. In general, parents and children did not appear to be concerned that conference participants had left, and some felt relieved that they did not have to meet with the professionals again. Some family members were critical, however, that plans were accepted without any further discussion beyond checking that the family were agreed about the plan:

*The lady that was chairing just turned round and said, 'Well, I hope that you do it' and that was it. There wasn't any points to be made or anything ... I thought it should have been elaborated and explained so that everybody knows what is actually happening ... so that everyone knew where we were going ...*

(Sibling of Duncan, aged 11)

*They looked at what we had crossed [ticked]. Then they all said, 'Right, we'll put a plan together and we'll have it sent out to you through the post to comply with on an everyday basis.*

(Mother of Maddie, aged 11)

We reviewed the content of the family plans, how they were implemented and the review processes used by the pilots in Section 6. It is clear, however that this final stage in the conference was somewhat brief and did not mean much to the families concerned.

### **Reactions after the Family Group Conference**

Although the ways in which conferences were conducted varied between and within pilots, the majority of family members were complimentary about the process. Conference participants were asked on the exit questionnaires how they had felt during the conference and Table 4.6 summarises their immediate responses, which were often mixed.

**Table 4.6: Feelings of adult conference participants during the conference**

	<b>Parents n = 211 (%)</b>	<b>Grandparents n = 32 (%)</b>	<b>Other family members n = 51 (%)</b>
Happy	18	6	20
Relaxed	63	78	55
Uncomfortable	5	0	2
Nervous	10	13	8
Relieved	19	25	16
Worried	10	3	16

It is notable that a sizeable proportion of participants felt relaxed during the conference, although grandparents were significantly more likely to say this than other family members. Although, overall, some 63 per cent of parents stated that they had felt relaxed during the conference, only 28 per cent of parents in Riverborough had felt relaxed. This may reflect the finding that parents in Riverborough were less likely than parents elsewhere to describe the venue as suitable.

During our Time 1 interviews, shortly after the conference, many parents described the conference as 'brilliant', 'excellent' or 'uplifting'. Most appear to have enjoyed the meeting and even those who had been apprehensive before the conference had felt comfortable and relaxed once the meeting started:

*[I was] very, very nervous ... I've got no confidence to start with and I just felt really panicky. But the more that everybody started talking, I started to relax a bit.*

(Mother of Maddie, aged 11)

Most parents had been relieved to find that the atmosphere at the conference was non-judgmental and non-threatening, and that they could express their views openly:

*We all sat round a table ... and you felt at ease ... As soon as we walked in we were offered drinks and there was muffins and cakes, and juice for the little 'uns ... it was very friendly.*

(Mother of Teri, aged 13)

*I enjoyed the whole meeting because there was no atmosphere ... There was no one on edge, nobody was nervous ... It's an unbiased approach ... I just thought it was brilliant.*

(Mother of Fraser, aged 13)

Many parents and other family members referred to the food that was available during the conference, and it was clear that the availability of refreshments helped to promote informality and a feeling of homeliness. Several parents felt that the food had helped people to relax. All of the children could remember being asked to choose the food they liked, and drinks were normally available as soon as participants arrived. There was usually a generous selection of food and drink available and, in some pilots, participants were invited to help themselves whenever they wished. We noticed that this could be disruptive to

the process at times, as different family members got up to refill their plates or pour drinks. In some conferences, participants seemed to be eating almost continuously, and younger children especially often became absorbed with selecting cakes and fizzy drinks, seemingly paying scant attention to what was being discussed. In some pilots, break-times were built into the timetable for the conference, and the consumption of refreshments was far less distracting and intrusive than in meetings when food was freely available throughout the meeting. While everyone appreciated being able to have food and drink, some parents and older family members questioned the wisdom of children consuming so much sweet food and having continuous access to fizzy drinks.

Choosing the food inevitably empowers children to make a real contribution to the planning of the conference. We noted that this sometimes had created the impression that they were going to a social event rather than a meeting with a serious purpose. In some conferences, children were provided with colouring materials, etc. so that they could relax and have something to do:

*I think it was made more relaxed because the children were all colouring ... they were getting drinks ... and it wasn't structured.*

(Mother of Victoria and Tom, aged 10 and 12)

One or two participants, however, had found the informality difficult because, in their view, the conference appeared to lack seriousness:

*The bairns just carried on and giggled ... They were trying to give them crisps and pop and stuff to shut them up ... We had to send them out one at a time.*

(Mother of Jason and Scott, aged 11 and 12)

Most children, however, also appreciated the relaxed environment and one referred to the conference as 'laid-back'. Children felt free to participate and early concerns about what might happen to them soon disappeared. Many children had been able to talk about difficulties at school or at home, but a few clearly did not engage with the process at all:

*[I] didn't say anything ... I did have a chance but I didn't want to say anything. Couldn't be bothered to say anything.*

(Fraser, aged 13)

Fraser's remark is in direct contrast to his mother's sense that the meeting had been 'brilliant'. We found that children's responses were more mixed than those of their parents, although several children said they had felt happy after the meeting and glad that things were going to change for them. Others were simply pleased that the conference was over. Several analyses were undertaken on the data contained in the exit and follow-up surveys to discern if we could detect any patterns in children's perceptions of the FGC. Some potentially explanatory variables did not contain sufficient numbers of cases for us to conduct an effective comparison (e.g. between ethnicity and disability). It was not possible to discern any patterns in circumstances or attributes from the survey data or from our interviews with families that make it more or less likely that a child will find the FGC a positive experience.

Other family members were generally positive about the conference, but less so than parents. Grandparents usually felt that their grandchild had responded well in the conference, but a few felt that the child had 'clammed up', not taken the meeting seriously enough, or had simply agreed with the adults to 'keep everybody happy'. Some family members felt that the presence of parents had limited the child's ability to discuss issues openly. One child was very reluctant to talk about his parents' separation, which had impacted on him deeply. The child concerned had attended the conference with his parents, who had separated and had brought their new partners to the meeting. Loyalty to parents or fear of reprisals may well have inhibited some children. Family members seemed to be very sensitive to the inhibitions children might feel when talking in front of their parents:

*I think it would be uncomfortable for the bairn because, if you put a nine-year-old in front of two parents, he doesn't want to upset either ... doesn't want to cause any friction.*

(Non-resident stepmother of Matt, aged 10)

Our follow-up survey some months later indicated that, on reflection, 43 per cent of parents were 'very satisfied' with the FGC process and a further 40 per cent were 'fairly satisfied'. Only 16 per cent said that they were 'not at all satisfied'. Indeed, 74 per cent of parents said they would recommend FGC to others in similar circumstances. The vast majority of children and young people were glad they had gone to the conference (93%) and half of them said that they would recommend it to their friends in similar circumstances. The young people were also asked to rate the conference from one to ten, and the vast majority of young people scored it over five, with approximately half rating their conference between eight and ten on the scale. Other family members were equally positive: 89 per cent would recommend the FGC process to others.

### ***The Use of Advocates***

The family group conference is designed to give children a voice and their views and concerns should be central to the process. Inevitably, some children were shy and tended to withdraw when asked to contribute. Others seemed well able to speak for themselves and parents often encouraged the child to speak their mind. On some occasions, however, we noted that when children tried to articulate a point of view which ran contrary to that of a family member, they struggled to be heard. Furthermore, children and young people were occasionally put on the spot, and faced a barrage of questions from professionals and/or family members. In these circumstances, it can be helpful for some children and young people to have an advocate to assist them in the conference. In Midshire, children and young people were routinely offered an advocate: some advocates were drawn from YISP staff and others were adults known to the children. Some children we spoke to were very pleased with the emotional support offered by their advocate and the help they received to put across their own point of view:

*If I didn't want to say anything, [my advocate] would say it for me ...  
Without her it would have made [the conference] a bit worse and I  
would have been more scared.*

(Victoria, aged 10)

Some children did not want an advocate while a few of those with advocates felt let down because their advocate had not represented their views well. One child felt that an advocate had been imposed on him and had not spent enough time in preparation with him prior to the conference. Consequently, the advocate did not gain the child's trust and did not fully understand the issues. Another young person described his advocate as inexperienced and unable to represent his views at the conference. It seems clear from the children's accounts that advocacy is a skilled and specific role and that untrained advocates (including family members) rarely manage to fulfil their role effectively. It is salient to note, therefore, that over half of the exit questionnaires in Midshire were completed by advocates who had never previously attended a family group conference. Most of them, it seems, were new to the role.

In Coburgh, the advocacy role was performed informally by the FGC co-ordinator or the YISP worker, and children seemed to appreciate this:

*A while ago she (the FGC co-ordinator) asked us to write our feelings  
down and then she explained them [at the conference], but she asked  
us if it was all right to say them in front of everyone.*

(Maddie, aged 11)

The advocacy role certainly has the potential to enhance the young person's sense of empowerment, but our observations and the responses of children and young people in the study suggest that for it to be effective a number of conditions need to be met, as follows:

- a relationship of trust needs to be established between the child and the advocate
- adequate time needs to be given to establish this relationship and for the advocate to understand the child's concerns and views fully
- time needs to be allocated to rehearsing what the advocate might say and how the child's views might be represented at the conference
- there needs to be a shared understanding of the advocate's role
- adequate training in advocacy skills needs to be provided.

There is always a danger, of course, that advocates take over and that the child rarely participates personally in the conference. Dawson and Yancey (2006) have pointed to the risk that children and young people are overlooked as a source of knowledge, leadership and power in FGC. We noted that advocates in Coburgh sometimes stayed with the child during family time and, while this may have empowered the child to contribute to the formulation of the plan, because the advocate was a member of YISP staff he or she could also influence the family decision-making. This suggests that it might be more helpful for advocates to be truly independent of the YISP and the family, and able to focus

solely on representing and helping the child, with no other agenda which might be influential and which might divert their attention away from the key task. Family members were rarely able to help children. One grandmother could not persuade her grandson to speak at the conference and was not comfortable speaking on his behalf. An older sibling lost his temper while being an advocate for his brother, and subsequently stormed out of the meeting. These incidents suggest that the role of an advocate is complex and requires the kinds of skills and independence that family members and friends may not possess.

Advocates can play an important role in supporting young people, but it is, undoubtedly, a skilled role. Our evaluation suggests that 'professional' advocates need to spend time building up a relationship with the child and agreeing how to support them in advance of the conference. Not all the advocates who took part in the pilots had much experience of the role, and children were quick to be critical if they did not do a good job.

### ***Empowerment and Participation***

There is considerable evidence from our study that many parents, children and other family members did feel a sense of empowerment. Attendance at the conference was seen as being voluntary, parents and children were consulted about all aspects of the meeting, preparation for it was generally thought to be adequate, the meeting itself provided a safe, supportive environment for shared decision-making, and some children engaged well with the process.

What children appeared to value most was being able to express their own concerns and put their own points of view across to family members and to professionals. Not only were they being heard, but they felt that they were being listened to. The children who had been less engaged with the conference were more likely to feel that the meeting had been imposed on them: they did not understand what the aims were; they did not like being the centre of attention; and did not want to talk publicly about their problems. Interestingly, a few parents also expressed concerns about their child being the focus of attention at the family group conference, particularly when very difficult family issues were clearly impacting on the child's behaviour. Some parents also felt that their child had been overwhelmed by the occasion and they noted that some children had opted to leave the meeting. There seemed to be some discrepancy between the extent to which children were empowered and the empowerment of parents. Parents were generally very relieved that the conference had brought issues out into the open and offered some ways forward:

*It took a lot of weight off me shoulders ... when I said what I had to say. I just felt like a whole brick had just been lifted off us.*

(Mother of Stuart, aged 10)

*I did feel empowered, because I was really happy that I'd managed to get somebody from the school who had to listen to us and who actually wrote something down and had to stick to it ... I had felt as though I was banging my head up against a brick wall.*

(Mother of Teri, aged 13)



Only a few parents had left the conference feeling negative: primarily, because they had been disappointed that key professionals had not attended or, in one case, because it felt as if the parents were being blamed for their son's antisocial behaviour. Overall, however, most families we interviewed left the conference feeling positive, feeling that it had been worthwhile and that things would change for the better. Conferences were family-centred and family-friendly, but one of the key questions must be the extent to which the empowerment felt at the conference by family members, particularly parents, can be sustained during the implementation of the family plan. Are parents and children able to exert control over the factors affecting their lives? Recent research from New Zealand suggests that families may not be more empowered as a result of the FGC process (Connolly, 2006). There are two ways in which the FGC process can empower families: by giving them a voice, and by offering them choice or authority. The conference should allow their views to be heard, and it should give them some authority in making decisions about their conference and its outcomes.

During our Time 2 interviews with children and parents we asked them to reflect back on the conference. It emerged from these interviews that, on reflection, parents did not regard the composition and format of the conference as something they had necessarily chosen, but as something the keyworker had arranged and they had agreed to. This is not in itself disempowering and many parents were at pains to stress the supportive relationship they had experienced with YISP staff and viewed their efforts on the family's behalf as a key strength of the intervention:

*It was just like sitting there with a member of the family. I felt so comfortable with [the YISP worker and the FGC co-ordinator] ... I felt like they were part of the family because they'd been there from the beginning to try and help out and sort things out. They were my mouthpiece.*

(Mother of Rory, aged 13)

*I think [the YISP worker] communicated with him [Matt] and she could probably see factors that I couldn't. If she was passing, she'd pop in and say, 'Right, I've been to school today.' And she was great. She really was.*

(Mother of Matt, aged 10)

*She [the FGC co-ordinator] was the only one out of all of the people we've ever seen over the years that came up with real solutions or ... real insights into why these things happened and why he [Joseph] did these things and how you could change it, sort of thing. She really did have an insight and I miss talking to her ... Even me husband said 'She knows what she's talking about.'*

(Mother of Joseph, aged 13)

In this respect it was noticeable that a few parents described their compliance with the FGC process as being because of a sense of obligation to the YISP or to the worker, especially those who saw the intervention as a means of getting

service providers to 'do their duty', rather than as a forum in which to change their own family functioning. It may be that, for some parents, empowerment comes in the form of their finding a family 'champion' rather than necessarily finding the resources to take things into their own hands, and the conference is simply something the YISP staff expect of them.

The children and young people interviewed at Time 2 were less certain that they had been asked to make choices at the time of the conference, and some still did not think they had any choice about attending a conference. It is difficult to know whether children had really felt empowered by the experience or whether going to a family group conference was simply something they felt they had to do. In any event, empowerment may be a more meaningful concept for parents than it is for children.

### ***The Importance of Family Empowerment***

Recent changes in the delivery of services for children and young people have put considerable emphasis on developing partnerships with parents. Rather than imposing external remedies, the focus has been on supporting families, specifically parents, to find their own solutions to problems and to take responsibility for their children's behaviour. It is clear from our study of FGC that families were frequently looking for the YISP to come up with answers and for other agencies to intervene with their children. Empowerment is a complex concept to define and one which is difficult to measure. Most families in this study seemed relieved and happy that someone was listening to their problems and was prepared to help.

Whether many family members actually felt that they had been empowered to make significant changes in the way the problems were manifested remains unclear. While most family members regarded the family group conference as a good thing, fathers and some extended family members had often felt less well-prepared for it and children and young people themselves were generally more ambivalent about the value of going to a conference. Clearly, some young people simply gritted their teeth and got through the occasion with as little active participation as possible. Although most families acknowledged that they had been given choices about participation, they nevertheless felt constrained to accept whatever was on offer.

Lupton and Nixon (1999) made a helpful distinction between empowerment in terms of participation (power to make decisions respected by professionals at the conference) and empowerment in terms of promoting change (power to alter situations for the better). They argued that for families truly to be empowered they must experience beneficial outcomes in both spheres. In the conferences held in the pilot YISPs the majority of families were empowered through participation, but it is less clear that they were empowered to promote change. They still regarded the support of professionals as critical, and previous research in the UK substantiates this finding (Marsh and Crown, 1998). The family plans placed emphasis on what family members would do rather than on how family members and professionals might work in partnership, however.

We have noted that not all the pilots promoted private family time and that not all families wanted it anyway. In an international review of FGC practice, Nixon et al. (2005) found that schemes within the field of youth justice were the least

likely to incorporate private family time. While it is thought that private family time may promote a more unified family approach and the realisation of more positive outcomes (Burford and Pennell, 1995), there is little rigorous research which actually demonstrates this connection as being causal. Nevertheless, the presence of the facilitator during private family time inevitably changes the dynamics and the discussions that take place between family members. There are clearly inherent tensions between the role of professionals as facilitators and the empowerment of families to take responsibility for their own decision-making.

### ***Meeting the Challenges***

The FGC facilitators described the challenges of their role as being fourfold:

1. Knowing how to create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere at the meeting, pitch the tone to fit the family involved, and maintain interest while remaining focused on formulating a plan.
2. Dealing effectively with professionals, particularly teachers, who do not fully appreciate the concept of FGC and tend to dominate discussions.
3. Dealing sensitively with dominant family members, especially those whose dominance within the family is subtle.
4. Remaining neutral.

They gave examples of situations which required sensitive handling or in which they had to walk on eggshells for fear of somebody losing their temper. We were observers at some conferences at which family members left the room, sometimes abruptly, and did not return.

A range of studies have called for more attention to be given to the professional development and support for facilitators and to encouraging their independence (Marsh and Crow, 1998). Most regard the separation of conference facilitation and case management/keyworker involvement as essential in maintaining impartiality. Despite the need for co-ordinators to possess a specific skill-set, Barnsdale and Walker (2007) argue that there is little discussion in the literature of the issue of training for the role. The need for ongoing training for co-ordinators to ensure that the core principles of FGC are adhered to also seems to be self-evident. In their evaluation of FGC in Scotland (Barnsdale and Walker, 2007), the authors suggest that a good deal of training is taking place but that no coherent body of literature documents the training, so that it is difficult to identify specific best-practice guidelines.

Co-ordinating and facilitating family group conferences are challenging tasks. Co-ordinators have to engage families, prepare them for a potentially stressful meeting and ensure that family members are able to formulate a family plan. They are not expected to direct, advise or fix problems, but to ensure that families are empowered to take on a problem-solving role. This requires patient preparation and good negotiating and communication skills. Face-to-face preparation is almost certainly more effective than telephone conversations, and our evaluation suggests that co-ordinators may need to put more resources into detailed preparation with all participants.

### **Relinquishing Ownership**

It is a principle of the FGC model adopted by the pilots that the child or young person should be central to the process and that the family should take ownership of it by making their own decisions about their own needs and undertakings. It appears that while there was a strong commitment to achieving this, some aspects of ownership and decision-making were being circumvented and professionals remained in control of the content. We sensed that in some cases a schedule of interventions had been pre-planned by the FGC facilitator. Rather than emerging from the discussions in the conference or in response to anything the family have requested, any interventions offered by professionals tended to be presented to the family at Stage 1 at the beginning of the meeting. It seemed likely that professionals had already discussed what to offer with the FGC/YISP staff and attended simply in order to make the offers. While some pre-planning seems very helpful, it does raise the question of whether professionals are able to respond to the families' expressed needs in the conference and to tailor the services offered accordingly. Sometimes, the pre-planning led to decisions being taken about what should be in the family plan during the information-sharing stage rather than the empowerment of families to take suggestions from the information-sharing and use the information to develop their own ideas.

All the FGC and YISP staff were observed to be attentive, helpful and friendly during conferences, and intent on creating and maintaining an environment conducive to informal, focused discussion. Some used humour to reduce tension. For the most part, FGC facilitators encouraged dialogue and kept the focus on the child. As conferences progressed through the various stages, however, some took a more active role, intervening in more directive ways.

The professionals who were invited to attend the conference were usually well-prepared for the meeting and sensitive to the family's problems. They also made it clear that they wanted families to take steps themselves to address concerns with the child's behaviour and to find ways of making changes at home which would complement services offered by outside agencies. While most parents generally agreed with the observations of professionals, they tended to be looking for professional interventions that would address their child's problems because they themselves were finding it difficult to cope, and some were desperate for someone else to take responsibility. As we noted earlier, many of the parents of children referred to YISPs were at their wits' end by the time the referral was made. Suggestions that they themselves should be taking more responsibility for their child's problems were not always received kindly.

The professionals occasionally challenged family members, suggesting, for example, that stricter discipline in the home might be beneficial for the child. On occasions, however, communication between professionals and families appeared to be strained. We would suggest that both professionals and family members appeared to be somewhat wary, which is probably to be expected, but we wonder just how far the content of the conferences may be influenced by professionals, including the FGC/YISP staff, rather than by the families themselves. Of course, families may be happy to be led and guided by others and may not want to be any more empowered, but there was a tendency at times to stifle creativity.

It may well be that parents and children were perfectly content for the professionals to lead the way in determining what should be contained within the family plan. Nevertheless, we observed one conference in which the family were openly hostile to the professionals who attended. On another occasion, the child's father voiced concerns about what had been decided for his family. These concerns were not acknowledged and the facilitator responded that the young person 'must work our way'. The extent to which children and their parents were able to exercise real choice and remain in control varied considerably, therefore. As we have indicated earlier, children were not always comfortable at the conference. We witnessed three conferences where the child either arrived late or ran away during the conference.

### ***The Views of Practitioners***

The practitioners from other agencies attending a family group conference were also asked to complete an exit questionnaire following each meeting they attended. They were given the opportunity to comment on the operation of the conference and indicate how they felt about it. The majority of practitioners (97%) thought that the venue had been suitable, and 90 per cent thought that the meeting had lasted about the right length of time. They also reported that they felt children, parents and other family members had been able to participate fully. In addition, the majority of practitioners (86%) felt that their own views had been taken into account.

Over three-quarters of practitioners (78%) thought that the conference had been very helpful, with a further 20 per cent stating that it had been a little helpful. There were, however, significant variations in responses from professionals from different agencies: CAMHS staff were slightly less positive, while conference chairs (who were predominantly FGC staff) were significantly more likely than other professionals to say that the conference had been very helpful. The majority of practitioners (84%) thought that the conference had come at the right time for the family, but approximately 16 per cent indicated that it had come too late for the child and family.

In most cases (94%), the professionals indicated a desire to stay involved with the family, but YOT staff and the police were significantly less likely than other agencies to state that they would stay involved, perhaps reflecting the early intervention focus of the cases referred to the YISPs. The link between a family plan and an ISP was not made at most conferences (Welshboro practice was different in this respect), so that the overall effect was that families appeared to be involved in planning what *they* might do after the family group conference, but with little reference to how this might fit with the ISP or the professional services and interventions which might be available via a YISP. Accountability for bringing these two elements together and bringing the result of the conference back into the YISP process was not made clear at any of the conferences we observed (except in Welshboro).

We noted that very rarely were practitioners from social services, the police or the YOT, present at conferences and most discussions centred on problems at home and at school. Rarely were these problems linked to the child's risks of offending behaviour. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the family plans tended

to be more about what the family needed to do to deal with what were often regarded as 'welfare' issues. Because families were often looking for more than this, it may have been easier for them to distance themselves from family plans, particularly those that were shaped by professionals.

It emerged in this study and in our previous national evaluation of YISPs that professionals could and did provide an important bridge between home and school. The family group conferences frequently helped parents and children to talk to education staff about problems at school in ways which had not been possible previously. Many referrals to the YISPs involved risks associated with education/schooling and so the facilitation of greater communication between home and school is an important factor in dealing with those risk factors. It was particularly disappointing for some parents, therefore, that teachers did not attend the conference when they had been invited, but when teachers did attend families were grateful for the opportunity to talk about and share information relating to problems in and out of school. It seems reasonable to suggest that facilitating dialogue between key professionals and families is an important aspect of empowerment and one which needs to be fostered as YISPs develop FGC practice.

### ***Striking the Right Balance***

The professionals who organise and those who participate in a family group conference have to strike a fine balance between informality and formality, empowering families and maintaining some control over the process, trusting families to find their own solutions and imposing solutions on them, catering for all kinds of families, and avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. We sensed that everyone in the pilots was working hard to achieve these balances, and that they were learning new skills and experimenting with different approaches. Being able to relinquish control and hand it over to the families is a core skill and a difficult one – not all professionals were comfortable with this, but greater experience may encourage them to move closer to all the essential principles of FGC, including the empowerment of families.

In this section we have reviewed the ways in which family members were able to play a central role in decision-making about how to tackle identified problems, and noted variations between pilots and within families. Family group conferences require commitment from everyone concerned and this can be challenging for FGC staff, the families and the practitioners from other agencies. In the next section we examine the extent to which the pilots were able to embrace restorative justice processes within FGC practice.

## 5 Promoting restorative justice

In the last section we examined the FGC pilot processes with a specific focus on how they empowered children and young people and their families to take responsibility for finding solutions to the problems and risks associated with offending and antisocial behaviour and for working constructively with professionals involved with the YISPs. One of the YJB's key aspirations for the pilots was that FGC would also promote restorative justice, and victim–offender dialogue was described as the first stage in the family group conference. In this section, we discuss the extent to which the pilots were able to embrace restorative justice and present the views of those involved.

One of the most important claims made about family group conferences is that they enable damage to be healed and harmony to be restored, particularly when victims and offenders are brought together (Maxwell and Morris, 1996). Although welfare issues are often predominant in FGC which focuses on early intervention, accountability for poor or antisocial behaviour should remain central to the issues discussed. Determining who is a victim if the young person concerned has not yet committed an offence, however, is not straightforward. In some episodes of antisocial behaviour there may be an identifiable victim, but frequently this victim is the local community rather than a named person.

The YISPs were established as a mechanism for intervening in the lives of children and young people aged between 8 and 13 *before* they had committed offences and *before* they were being dealt with by the criminal justice system. The focus was on determining the risk factors in a child's life which would indicate high risk of becoming involved in offending and antisocial behaviour at a later date. The ONSET assessment tools which were developed for use in the YISPs were designed to do this, but, as we found in our national evaluation of YISPs, separating out general risks from the risks associated with offending is not easy unless the child has already come to the attention of the police. Moreover, scoring the extent of the risk is far from being an exact science (Walker *et al.*, 2007a). If an offence has been committed, however, not only is it easier to determine the associated risk factors, but it is also likely to be easier to identify the victim.

The YJB, nevertheless, believed that the FGC/YISP pilots should be incorporating elements of restorative justice, holding children and young people accountable for their actions even if they had not committed offences. During our scoping study, it was clear that the pilots were struggling to meet this requirement. The problem centred on the use of the term 'victim' and the expectation that the first stage in the family group conference would consist of victim–offender dialogue. The view expressed by the pilots was that they were keen to target young people prior to their involvement in criminal behaviour when there were no victims as such, and they did not want to shift their focus in order to satisfy the expectation that conferences would normally involve a restorative element.

The YJB had been heavily influenced by a project in Essex in which FGC was being used with young offenders (Hennessy *et al.*, 2001). Unlike in the YISPs, however, the main referral source to the Essex project was the youth offending team (YOT), and the focus was clearly on preventing reoffending by those young people who had already committed offences. Moreover, it was a model which had been designed for older children, with restorative justice defined as follows:

*Restorative justice seeks to balance the concerns of the victim and the community with the need to reintegrate the offender into society. It seeks to assist the recovery of the victim and enable all parties with a stake in the justice process to participate fruitfully in it.*

(Hennessy *et al.*, 2001)

This definition was applied to the FGC/YISP pilots, but staff in the pilots did not consider it to be a good fit with the primary aims and objectives of YISP intervention. The main aim of the Essex project was

*... to restore the equilibrium to victims of crime and young people who have offended against them. The primary focus of [family group] conferences will be the offence(s) committed and reparation to the victim(s).*

(*ibid*)

This aim was significantly different from the rationale for YISP intervention and had a much stronger criminal justice focus than had been customary in the YISPs which attempted to work with younger children. The *YISP Management Guidance* took a broader view, and defined restorative justice as:

*A meeting between individuals who have harmed or been harmed to discuss the impact and consequences of that behaviour or those affected by it.*

(Youth Justice Board, 2005)

It went on to describe FGC as one of three models for restorative justice within the criminal justice system (the other two being victim–offender mediation and restorative conferencing), and suggested that restorative justice and its terminology would need ‘to be sensitively adapted to the YISP context’. It is clear from the guidance that the YJB was aware that the Essex model would not be immediately transferable to the YISPs without ‘sensitive’ adaptation, but the FGC/YISP pilots received a number of mixed messages in the early months of the pilots and were actively encouraged to adopt the Essex model.

In our scoping report, we noted that the pilots were doing their best to integrate restorative justice principles but wanted to work with a broader definition of ‘victim’, which they preferred to refer to as a ‘negatively affected person’ (NAP). Within this definition, the NAP might be a teacher, a neighbour or a member of the family who had been negatively affected by the young person’s behaviour. The change to this broader definition was not acceptable to the YJB, however, and pilots were encouraged to persevere with the narrower term ‘victim’ and the Essex model of practice. Much of the pioneering work in FGC in England and Wales had been firmly located within a youth justice context and the YJB’s approach was inevitably shaped by this work. Whether a model developed for



use at the sharp end of criminal justice was easily transferable to preventative work within an early intervention context was questionable, and pilot staff were keen to find more innovative and flexible approaches for use in the YISPs and in family group conferences.

The use of FGC as a mode of promoting restorative justice remained problematic for the pilots throughout our evaluation, and they had varying degrees of success in moving closer to the identification of victims. With these challenges in mind, we sought, in our study, to identify:

- the numbers of conferences at which a victim was present
- the views of YISP and FGC staff
- how victims were prepared for the conference
- whether the child/young person was able to make an apology to the victim(s)
- the part played by victims in family group conferences
- whether the needs of victims were met and whether they were satisfied with the FGC process and the outcomes
- whether victims felt that justice had been done and harm had been addressed
- how restorative justice approaches might be enhanced within FGC in particular, and within YISPs more generally.

Moreover, we endeavoured to observe conferences to which a victim had been invited, talk to victims who had been to a family group conference, and collect exit survey questionnaires from victims who attended conferences. We asked all pilots to collect detailed information about the involvement of victims on their MIS databases. In this section we present the findings and consider the implications for the YISP programme. Before doing so, we refer to the principles of best practice which should have guided the pilots in the implementation of restorative justice and consider the research evidence from other studies.

### ***Best Practice in Restorative Justice***

In December 2004, guidance was issued about best practice for restorative practitioners (Criminal Justice System, 2004). The purpose was to ensure consistently high standards in restorative practice and to set out core skills and knowledge for practitioners working in a range of settings. The core skills include: high-level communication skills; the ability to create a safe environment for participants; knowing how to treat people fairly and in a non-discriminatory way; and managing systems to ensure confidentiality and promote multi-agency working. Practitioners are advised to carry out a formal risk assessment prior to embarking on a process of restorative work and to advise participants about their options, roles and responsibilities. For crimes or incidents with a corporate rather than an individual victim, or where the community has been affected, the practitioner is advised to assess who in the community or organisation has been affected most and who is best placed to communicate the harm effectively.

As with FGC more generally, restorative approaches require that victims are adequately prepared for a meeting with the offender/perpetrator and are supported during it, and that systems are in place for follow-up monitoring, evaluation and ongoing support. A restorative outcome agreement should be developed during the meeting. In respect of the FGC/YISP pilots, this could be included as part of the family plan which is agreed at the end of the conference, but the management guidance notes that there should be a clear distinction between information which the victim has a right to and wants to hear and information which should remain confidential to the offender and their family and supporters.

The guidance suggests that including restorative approaches requires skills over and above those required for running family group conferences. A particular challenge is that of encouraging victims to attend a restorative conference. Early research in New Zealand indicated that victims actually attended conferences in less than half the cases where they could have been present. This failure to attend was attributed to poor practice (Maxwell and Morris, 1993). About 60 per cent of the victims who did attend generally found it helpful, positive and rewarding. Some described it as a cathartic experience, and most had felt involved, particularly in determining appropriate outcomes. However, about 25 per cent of victims reported feeling worse as a result of attending a family group conference. A variety of reasons were given for this, but the most frequent was that the young person and his or her family had not appeared to be truly sorry for the harm done. Only half the victims in the New Zealand study were satisfied with the outcomes, often because promised arrangements failed to materialise afterwards. The responsibility for the relatively disappointing results was often attributed to the professionals involved in running the conferences, and the authors concluded that family group conferences which attempt to include restorative elements are not always successful.

### ***Previous Research Evidence***

Sherman and Strang (2007) examined the evidence relating to restorative justice, assessing a range of studies to discern what works and with whom. The most important conclusion they reached is that restorative justice works differently with different kinds of people. Rigorous tests in diverse samples have found substantial reductions in repeat offending for both violence and property crimes, suggesting that restorative approaches work better with crimes involving personal victims rather than corporate/community victims, and that they appear to reduce more serious crimes more effectively than less serious crimes. These findings are particularly significant in respect of YISPs: on the whole, the young people involved had not committed serious crimes, and the victim was rarely a personal one.

The evidence suggests that victims benefit when they willingly meet offenders face to face, and that their mental health improves. It is perhaps not surprising that offenders who have been involved in non-victim offences are less likely to be positively impacted by restorative approaches than those whose behaviour has negatively affected a specific person. It follows, therefore, that corporate victims are less likely to reap benefits from attending a family group conference than individual victims. Sherman and Strang concluded that restorative justice

offers a strategy for holding more offenders accountable for their actions, with many more victims helped and with more crimes prevented (thus reducing the cost of crime to the public purse), but that it works best with some kinds of offences and certain kinds of offenders.

How such approaches can be used more effectively in early intervention programmes such as YISPs remains a challenge in the face of the evidence from previous research. It is clear that the choice victims make about participating in a family group conference is likely to depend on how they are invited, who invites them, the priority given to apology and restoration of harmony, and the benefits they perceive for themselves as well as for society more generally. Evidence in the UK indicates that without a special restorative justice unit in youth offending teams, relatively low numbers of victims attend panel meetings or conferences (Crawford and Burden, 2005; Newburn *et al.*, 2001). To some extent this finding suggests that time and effort are required to plan for, prepare, conduct and monitor restorative justice approaches. Moreover, adequate time for victim–offender dialogue must be set aside within a family group conference if the exchange is to be meaningful for both parties.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 was intended to make restorative justice an important element in youth justice in the UK. One important initiative, spearheaded by YOTs, involved a whole-school approach to restorative justice (YJB, 2004). Almost 600 conferences were held, for incidents of bullying, family feuds, conflict with teachers, minor property offences and more violent crimes. The evaluation concluded that if a conference was held it was usually successful in resolving disputes. Given that many of the children and young people referred to the FGC/YISP pilots had difficulties and problems associated with education and schooling, a greater focus on schools might be a helpful way forward, although a number of tensions relating to different institutional cultures may need to be addressed. It is significant that when parents in our study were disappointed with the family group conference, it was often because teachers had not been present. It would seem that there is more fruitful work to be done to involve teachers if restorative justice is to be a more dominant feature of FGC.

An early intervention project in Essex with children and young people aged 8–14, most of whom had committed offences, found that improvement in children's behaviour at school and the prevention of permanent exclusion were positive longer-term outcomes of the restorative justice initiative (Pountney, 2005). The author recommended that children should be referred at an early stage rather than as a last resort and that schools should be encouraged to make referrals for FGC. He also pointed to the importance of FGC co-ordinators working closely with colleagues in education. It seems, however, that only a small number of conferences included a restorative justice component as such and that victims did not always agree to attend. Feedback from victims themselves was not obtained, so it is difficult to assess just how far the outcomes were positive for them as well as for the children concerned.

Most of the previous research evidence has focused on the impact of restorative justice with known offenders. We have found very little research that has focused on restorative justice within the context of early intervention, and

the initiatives that have been evaluated do not appear to have focused as much on the victims as they have on the offenders. The evidence suggests that implementing restorative justice approaches was in its infancy within contexts such as the YISP programmes, and that valuable lessons can be learned from this evaluation of FGCs/YISPs about the work which may still need to be done to fully embrace and capture the opportunities restorative justice and victim-offender dialogue might hold.

### ***The Evidence from the FGC/YISP Pilots***

#### **Implementing Restorative Justice**

In our interviews with YISP and FGC staff, they generally expressed support for restorative justice as an approach and were keen to incorporate it into FGC on the grounds that, as one FGC co-ordinator put it: 'They fit very, very well.'

This co-ordinator believed that restorative justice offers an arena in which to intervene early following one-off incidents of offending or antisocial behaviour. In these cases, the aim would be to prevent reoffending. Co-ordinators were well aware, however, that restorative justice cannot be used in every case and is more likely to be an option with families with some history of offending:

*The restorative element is good if it's early intervention ... if there's a history of dad being an offender, an older brother being an offender, and the child is brought up in that household, at the reprimand stage it's very important to try and get the message across, that this isn't the life you [should] lead ...*

(FGC co-ordinator)

One YISP keyworker who had experience in restorative conferencing in the YOT was aware that there is a difference between using restorative approaches with young offenders and using it in the YISP work:

*Having worked with the youth offending service, there's a big difference between FGC and restorative conferencing, and I have found it very hard to get my head around the concept of a family group conference being restorative ... I've had to get my head around the fact that we're putting a generic title to conferencing.*

Because many YISP referrals involved children and families in which the issues were primarily welfare- rather than criminal-justice-focused, YISP staff admitted that they had found it difficult to identify appropriate cases for restorative approaches:

*I haven't done one [a restorative justice conference] in my time doing this job. In four months I haven't had any victim or person harmed ... because the young people aren't that far down the line.*

(YISP keyworker)

Moreover, the YISP staff believed that it was important to embed FGC in YISP practice first before trying to introduce restorative justice elements as well:

*[Family group conferences] are confronting a lot of issues which we haven't done before ... It seemed to be, when we started off*

*[conferences] were welfare-based, [but now] antisocial behaviour issues are coming in ... I think [restorative justice conferences] would work because everybody knows what they are doing now.*

(FGC co-ordinator)

In order to include a restorative element, however, YISP staff needed to be able to identify a specific incident and a victim who was willing to attend a family group conference. Examples of cases which were considered appropriate were described as follows:

*I've just had one case that was [about] flicking mud at the [local shop] windows, and [the young person] got a reprimand for that, so the objective is quite strong ... The main reason we went into the family group conference was to fetch him together with the victim and the police.*

(FGC co-ordinator)

*She [the young person] had been shoplifting ... There was an identifiable victim ... So it was quite clear from the start of the referral, what we're all going to look at is a family group conference to bring everybody together, and for them to sort out all the issues.*

(the FGC/YISP keyworker)

The 'victim' in this second example was a security guard who knew the family because the young person's brother had a criminal record, and he was keen to attempt a preventative, restorative approach. Several YISP workers were prepared to identify a range of corporate and community victims, such as shop assistants and community wardens. A shop assistant who worked in a local store where the young person referred to above had been flicking mud and throwing stones at the windows agreed to attend the family group conference because she felt intimidated by the young people who hung around the shop. We were told that she became very supportive of the young person after attending the conference.

Fundamental to identifying a victim, it seems, is the ability to identify a specific or precipitating event rather than a catalogue of difficulties or problems a child might be experiencing. Usually, this meant that the child had to have been involved in an incident of criminal or antisocial behaviour. Sometimes family members were identified as the victims. In one case, the young person had run up huge bills on the family phone and was asked to make amends to the family in the family group conference.

The YISP and FGC staff were of the view that implementing a restorative justice element in a family group conference required even more preparation beforehand. For a start, victims often needed to be persuaded of the value of attending and family members needed to know what would be expected of the young person. Ensuring the safety of all participants was also regarded as a key factor. The FGC co-ordinators told us that restorative justice could be very challenging and some explained the pressure they felt under when convening a restorative conference:

*It's very stressing as a facilitator ... especially when you've got a family that are used to [bad] behaviour ... and they don't see it as such a big deal.*

*I can go home after a family meeting and feel absolutely drained.*

Some parents were said to be vehemently opposed to the idea of a restorative conference even if the case appeared to be ideal. We were told about one mother who refused to allow the next-door neighbour to attend the conference as a victim after her son had assaulted the neighbour's child. Apparently, the mother and her neighbour were not on speaking terms and were 'at each other's throat', trading threats and calling the police. Although the FGC co-ordinator tried to persuade the mother that getting everyone together at the family group conference could resolve the disputes with her neighbour, she was adamant that she would not allow it.

It is clear from this case that restorative approaches cannot work unless all the family members are prepared to buy in to the process. As we have seen, this is difficult if the child and/or other family members deny responsibility for the incident specified. Some staff felt that it also needed to be 'the right time' for the young person even if they were willing, in principle, to engage in a restorative conference. Unless all the key players were willing and committed to the conference, FGC co-ordinators were inclined to regard restorative work as potentially harmful, especially for the victims, who could feel even more victimised.

The YJB's expectations for the pilots were regarded as challenging and demanding although staff could see the potential value of the additional element. Some felt that adding the restorative dimension could be just too much for some families:

*The idea of dealing with the incident, dealing with the restorative side of things, and then following on to the welfare and risk factors just comes naturally to me. But ... the family group meeting is a long, long process ... it feels like you're almost having two meetings ... It's too much, sometimes, for the family ... some of the families have got limits on what they can take in at one time.*

(FGC co-ordinator)

This co-ordinator had split the process into two meetings for at least one case: the restorative element was held one week, and the family group meeting the next.

### **The Victims Involved**

As we noted in Section 2, we received just nine exit questionnaires from victims who had attended a family group conference, and none from either Riverborough or Dockborough. This extremely low number may be due in part to the fact that victims left conferences before exit questionnaires were handed out, but the MIS data suggest that very few conferences were held at which victims were present. The MIS data provided on the involvement of victims are sparse. For cases where we have information, however, there is an indication that just one in six involved a victim. For some of these cases there is little other information available, making it difficult to provide a robust comparative analysis

between the pilots, nor can we be confident about the generalisability of the findings here.

Although the original 13 YISP pilots were expected to include restorative justice within their work, there was little evidence in our national evaluation that this had been embraced. The quantitative data available from the later pilots would suggest that they also struggled to embrace restorative justice within FGC, but this may not be so surprising given the pressure to undertake preventative early intervention with children and young people who have not yet committed offences. However, the MIS data suggest that some pilots were dealing with more children and young people who were already known to the police. The data were not consistently recorded unfortunately and neither Eastburgh or Midshire provided usable data. This is particularly disappointing as, between them, they provided almost 70 per cent of the cases that were in scope for the evaluation. One pilot recorded only educational factors in the field reserved for information about previous offences and police contact. Westburgh provided the most complete information. We have to conclude, however, that the MIS data we had were not robust and were highly anecdotal.

### **Victims' Perspectives**

The exit questionnaires we received provide some very limited insight into the views of victims. They were completed by a variety of victims, including a mother, a grandparent, a neighbour and two agency representatives. All of the victims knew the child and had known them for over a year. They all stated that they understood why they had been invited to the conference and that they had received enough information beforehand. Most of the victims said they had been happy to attend, but one admitted to having felt scared before the conference. All but two of the victims stated that they had felt relaxed during the conference. None of the victims said that they had felt nervous or worried.

All the victims felt that they had been able to express their point of view during the conference and that they had been listened to, and that other people had understood their point of view. Four victims received an apology from the child and believed that the child was sorry for their actions. All the victims said that they were glad they had taken part in the conference, and all but two said that it had been helpful. The victims described the best part of the conference as follows:

*Being able to put across my role as a warden and expressing my feelings. Receiving information about how the young person feels she is being treated and singled out.*

*I was able to talk to someone about what had been going on.*

*Everyone was able to have input and to discuss what was going on within the family and to give suggestions to help.*

Some of the victims, however, identified some dissatisfactions with the conference:

*Being the only two people from the estate made us feel very isolated, having to go over the things that had happened.*

*I found the meeting very intimidating. I would have preferred a smaller room and just the parents and child, us and two mediators. I thought the whole thing [was] over the top for a first meeting.*

We were able to interview three victims and asked them to describe their experiences of attending a family group conference. Their experiences contrasted sharply. One of the victims had attended a conference in Midshire, representing a group of shops in which the young person referred to the YISP had been caught shoplifting. The other two victims had attended the same conference in Coburgh, where they had worked at a community-based support centre which had been vandalised. None of the victims was a personal victim, therefore, but had worked at the places where offences had been committed. In Midshire, the victim could be described as a corporate victim and, in Coburgh, the victims represented what could be described as a victimised community. It was not clear, however, that the siblings who were the subject of the family group conference in Coburgh had been responsible for causing the damage, so the victims could not accuse the children of having done so. One of them told us:

*We couldn't actually say that we were here because one of the children had been doing the damage. We'd just have to say our feelings about the damage ... The finger wasn't actually pointed at them.*

We know from other research that it is vitally important to prepare victims carefully for the conference. All three victims in our interview sample had been prepared by a telephone call from the relevant FGC co-ordinator and had not met face to face. The corporate victim was content with this approach and knew what to expect and what was expected of him at the conference:

*I was briefed saying if we could let her [the FGC co-ordinator] know that we are within our rights to regain the cost of the items [stolen] and if there was any way ... to do something positive to help [the young person] ... something positive to help her in the future, which we did.*

Of course, this victim had a specific incident to discuss with the young person concerned and was representing a company that had well-honed guidelines about how to deal with shoplifting. The guidelines fitted well with the principles of FGC, so he felt very comfortable with the process. The community victims, by contrast, seemed far less certain of their role or of what to expect at the conference. They both felt that, with better preparation, they could have made a greater contribution to the discussions at the conference. They compared their preparation for the YISP family group conference with that for others they had attended in a social services context, somewhat unfavourably. They had found themselves in a difficult position since the young people concerned had not admitted playing any part in the damage that had been caused. Nevertheless, all three victims expected that the conferences would have a restorative justice focus and that the young people would be challenged to take responsibility for their behaviour and, in the Midshire case, to recompense the shop concerned. All of them expected what they variously described as a 'long' and 'serious' meeting.



In Midshire, the conference began with a period, lasting about 20 minutes, which consisted of victim–offender dialogue. The victim then left the conference. During that time, the items stolen had been paid for and the young person had apologised to the victim and promised to begin to attend school regularly. She and her friends were banned from visiting the shop in the future. The victim told us:

*Luckily enough, a family friend was there who actually volunteered to pay for the goods ... We actually asked Dad to encourage his daughter to go back to school and learn a bit so she wouldn't offend and do these things again. We suggested that she do a couple of weeks without any absences from school ... That way, we're trying to encourage her rather than shoot her down in flames.*

In Coburgh there could be no period of victim–offender dialogue because no offence had been admitted. The victims made their contribution at the end of the conference when the family plan was being discussed. One of them explained:

*At the end of the meeting the FGC co-ordinator explained why we were there and about the damage ... and we were just asked to say how we felt ... It would have been nice for our roles to be identified better 'cos we didn't know what to say.*

Their confusion was heightened by the fact that they were professionals within the field of social care and knew the family concerned. This role confusion appeared to hinder their contribution to the conference:

*We were victims as well as professionals ... We were invited as a victim to sort of show how it [the damage] affected us ... [and] the services there. So the young people would know what they'd done really ... As professionals, we have lots of information about the family that we would have liked to have discussed, to help other professionals to help the family, but we weren't asked any of that.*

They also felt that other participants at the conference, including the children and their parents, did not know why they were there until the end of the meeting, which hindered any meaningful victim–offender dialogue. In fact, one could question whether the conference should have been described as including a restorative justice component and whether the victims should have been invited as victims if this role had not been made clear to the other participants, most importantly to the children and their parents. When we interviewed the children and the parents at Time 1 it was abundantly clear that they had no idea that there were any victims at the conference and had assumed that the two people concerned were attending in their professional capacity. The victims themselves did not regard the conference as restorative in any sense, nor did they think that the children had taken it seriously. They felt, also, that their mother had not wanted to take any responsibility for her children's behaviour.

Since there was no evidence that the children had in fact been involved in causing the damage it is difficult to see how this conference could have been restorative or how the victims could have taken that role, even if they had been

given better preparation for the conference. Not surprisingly these two victims felt 'let down' and 'disappointed':

*As a victim, I didn't like the fact that people didn't know why we were there.*

They both hoped that the conference would have provided an opportunity to challenge the children and to work with the mother to help her realise what her children were doing. They also thought that the meeting had been too short. One of them commented:

*I just thought – how the hell are they going to thrash out everything in an hour? ... I came away quite flat, just like, we could have done so much that day and we could have really got to the bottom of everything.*

Both admitted that they would only attend another conference if they received better preparation, there was greater clarification of their roles, and the other participants were aware of these. This negative attitude was in stark contrast to that of the victim in Midshire, who had been very satisfied with the conference he had attended. He felt that everyone knew why he was there, he had been able to express the shop's point of view, he had been involved in decision-making, and the meeting had achieved positive outcomes. He also regarded the conference as having provided a supportive environment for the young person, and felt that the meeting had been conducted 'respectfully':

*I think that the school were supportive to her, her mother and father and the friend as well. The whole set-up was very supportive ... and I think she may gain something by it ... if she doesn't reoffend.*

Given the very positive experience reported by this victim, it was interesting that, during our interview with the girl's father, he had no clear recollection of the victim's role at the conference. Instead, he regarded the focus as having been on problems at school and at home. Moreover, he did not believe that his daughter had been guilty of the shoplifting, preferring to blame her friends for the incident. His daughter also blamed her friends during our first interview with her, although she did remember the victim having been at the conference. As far as she was concerned, he attended and gave her a letter banning her and her friends from the shop and made her promise to go to school. She certainly showed no remorse for the offence, nor was she willing to admit to any guilt. Nevertheless, she said she had been staying out of trouble since going to the conference.

The victim had told us that a family friend had provided compensation for the goods that had been stolen. When we talked to the family friend she said that she thought the victim had been 'a bit soft' and seemed to be letting the young person 'get away with it'. The friend went on to say that although the young person had promised to go to school she did not keep her promise after the conference, adding to the friend's sense that everyone had been too 'soft'. While there is no statutory obligation on the young people to fulfil what has been promised in the conference, this case highlights the importance of there being some monitoring and support for the young person to carry promises through. The young man who had been throwing stones and flicking mud at the shop window had promised to write a letter of apology to the shop and to the shop

assistant. Our subsequent interviews suggested that, while the young person did write the letters, they were never posted, so the victims could well have felt let down because of a lack of follow-up after the conference.

### ***Our Observations on Restorative Conferences in the YISPs***

We observed two conferences in Coburg at which victims were present. After another observation we noted that the child's mother had completed an exit questionnaire as if she were the victim of her son's behaviour at home. It became clear from our observations that victim-offender dialogue was occasionally somewhat awkward, and that when the victims were representing community-based organisations they appeared to be somewhat unsettled by the family's manner and surprised by the informality of the occasion. In one restorative conference, the victims, who were present in a personal capacity, were able to talk openly with the family and their contribution had a visible impact on the parents, who expressed concern and regret about their son's behaviour. In most of the conferences where a victim was present, we did not observe children apologising for their behaviour, however; but perhaps it is more difficult for children as young as nine to grasp the significance of making amends unless they are well-prepared beforehand.

Some victims stayed for the entire conference; others left after the victim-offender dialogue. The role of several victims appeared to be limited to giving a description of their complaint against the child or young person, and we did not always detect meaningful dialogue between the victim and the offender. We would suggest that the conferences did not, on the whole, appear to be restorative. We suspect that the pilots felt under considerable pressure to conduct restorative conferences and, as a result, stretched the definition of a victim to its limit. We were left in no doubt from our observations and our subsequent interviews with participants that restorative justice has little meaning unless:

- the victim has personally suffered harm as a result of the child's actions or behaviour
- there is an identifiable incident
- the child admits to doing something which has caused harm.

These findings are consistent with those from other research, and suggest that more thought needs to be given to finding ways of embracing restorative justice effectively within FGC which is designed to form part of an early intervention programme. It may be particularly difficult for young children to understand that their behaviour has harmed their parents or other members of the family and, if an element of restorative justice is to be included in FGC within the context of YISPs, much better preparation needs to be undertaken with children and young people, their parents and victims than was evident during the pilot.

The research evidence indicates that restorative justice approaches are valuable and effective in the right contexts. Since FGC within YISPs was at an early stage of development and had not been fully accepted by all the professionals involved, it may have simply been too soon to attempt to

introduce a restorative element. Despite the best efforts of staff within the pilots, attempts to include restorative justice were not particularly successful, but valuable lessons may have been learned for the future. The YISP and FGC staff felt that restorative justice approaches could result in very good outcomes, including a reduction in the likelihood of young people reoffending. They also regarded restorative conferences as helpful in moving families on:

*It's also about moving on from things. If you've got events which remain unresolved, how will you move forward in the future? ... So the restorative side of things is very, very beneficial in drawing a line in the sand and moving on.*

(FGC co-ordinator)

It is possible that restorative approaches have the potential to galvanise professional and community support. The professionals involved in one conference set up a committee to look at ways of diverting young people on a particular housing estate from antisocial behaviour. The mother of a girl who had been the subject of a restorative conference had joined the committee. We were told that the restorative conference had thereby improved community relationships and reduced antisocial behaviour.

Some of the YISP staff in the pilots were in agreement that the way forward might be for restorative conferencing to take place in schools rather than in the YISP context. This would seem to be in keeping with some of the available research evidence:

*We've talked in here quite often about going in with schools and using it for preventative ... say, bullying issues.*

(YISP keyworker)

*Why can't we use an FGC approach before we take formal approaches like exclusions, permanent exclusions, court appearances? ... They should be the last resort ... In terms of school attendance, it's the biggest factor ... every other risk factor can be seen as a 'knock-on' factor of not going to school and not attaining.*

(FGC co-ordinator)

Some concern was expressed in Coburn that young people who reoffended and received a final warning exited YISP and were dealt with by the YOT. Although they were not usually serious offenders and had a low risk assessment score, many of them receive no interventions, and yet a restorative justice element within a family group meeting might have been very relevant and constructive, and could have avoided the young person becoming criminalised.

### ***Developing Restorative Justice***

A major concern expressed by a range of writers and researchers in criminal justice is that, while restorative justice models appear sound in theory, evaluations have suffered from shortcomings (Miers, 2001). There are a number of recurring paradigms, however, and these can be summarised in terms of responsibilities, restoration and reintegration (Miers *et al.*, 2001). The

community has an interest in the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders, and young people and parents taking responsibility for criminal and antisocial behaviour is an increasing aspect of an agenda which promotes rights and responsibilities. Evaluations have highlighted, however, that whatever form restorative justice takes, it is usually a labour-intensive and time-consuming activity.

The FGC/YISP pilots did not seem well-prepared for the requirement that restorative justice would be a central feature of FGC with children and young people at high risk of offending. It became clear that integrating restorative justice approaches within the FGC process would be challenging and time-consuming. Most pilots found it difficult to meet the expectations in respect of restorative justice, and the inclusion of victims in conferences was relatively rare during the piloting period. Although the FGC and YISP staff were positive that restorative justice could fit well into the FGC process, they felt that the ways of doing this were unclear and that it can be difficult to identify appropriate cases.

One of the difficulties all the pilots faced was incorporating restorative justice simultaneously with implementing and getting to grips with FGC within YISPs. Undoubtedly, family group conferences which involve a victim and a restorative justice component require more preparation and careful planning. Not only do young people and their families have to be persuaded about and prepared for FGC but victims also need to be convinced of the value of participating. For most of the victims in the evaluation attendance at a family group conference had been a positive experience, but some found it intimidating, indicating just how important it is to prepare victims for the occasion. This clearly needs some face-to-face preparation rather than the telephone conversations which were sometimes used in the pilots. It is not helpful if victims are uncertain about their role and not sure what to expect at the conference. The evidence here would suggest that the FGC staff need to review and refine their processes for preparing victims and families for a restorative justice conference, and to be clear about the role victims will play in it. There appeared to be considerable potential for developing the restorative justice component of FGC as YISPs began to consolidate their practice and to feel more comfortable with embedding family group conferences as a central feature within YISP processes. It is clear from the evaluation that families in our sample rarely took account of the impact their child's behaviour had on 'victims' as such and family plans did not appear to have been influenced by the existence of victims or their participation in the conference.

While restorative justice approaches are clearly relevant within the YISP context, our findings would suggest that much more work needs to be done in thinking through just how they can be integrated into FGC with children who are at high risk of offending but who, for the most part, have not yet got into trouble. In the FGC pilots, restorative justice was not a key aspect and seemed largely peripheral to the FGC process, and had little meaning for the young people involved. In the next section, we turn to look in more depth at how family plans were developed and implemented.

## 6 Developing and Implementing Family Plans

Family group conferences were founded on the belief that extended family members can assist the child/young person and his/her parents to deal with the issues which are of concern, both by helping with decision-making and by implementing those decisions (Robertson, 1996). This does not necessarily mean that professional support from a range of agencies is not needed. Early research in New Zealand indicated that a range of services were usually included in family plans and continued state involvement was usually appropriate in all but a few cases (Paterson and Harvey, 1991; Renouf et al., 1990). We were interested, therefore, to examine the contents of family plans, ascertain how they were used, once they had been agreed, and consider how they linked with ISPs.

In this section we turn specifically to consider the family plans which emerged from the family group conferences, including those we observed, and draw from our interviews with families and professionals to ascertain how they were used and whether they were reviewed and modified subsequently. In addition, we examined 26 FGC cases for which we had copies of both the family plan and the ISP.

We noted in Section 4 that families were not always left alone to draw up their family plan in private and that some FGC facilitators were more directional than others in the assistance they gave to family members while they were developing the plan. Indeed, early in the evaluation, we drew a distinction between two observable approaches to practice: directional facilitation and impartial facilitation. The differences between these approaches were often subtle.

In the directional approach, the FGC facilitator noted the advice, suggestions and/or recommendations of the various professionals during the period of information exchange and fielded these to the family either during that phase of the conference or during family time. We observed that, during family time, family members did not always discuss the kinds of services that might be available or their pros and cons, but instead spent the time making sure they had either recalled what was on offer or had allocated individuals to the tasks identified. Directional facilitators often stayed with the family during family time and helped the family record the services available to them. Rarely was there any discussion about the services themselves – families tended to accept what was proposed at face value.

In contrast to this approach, facilitators who remained more impartial tended not to contribute when professionals were discussing the services they could offer in the early stage of the conference, but gently encouraged family members to ask questions and enter discussion with the professionals. The more impartial FGC facilitators played a chairing role, guiding the conference participants through the various phases, offering advice and/or answering questions in order to move things on and keep the discussion focused. There was greater participation in these conferences on the part of family members, particularly as the facilitators did not stay with them during family time. We observed families

discussing the advantages and disadvantages of certain services, rejecting some and accepting others and talking about which services might be best for their own child.

Conferences with an impartial facilitator seemed closest to the New Zealand model: family members became involved in decision-making and took the lead in writing the family plan. We noted, nevertheless, that dominant family members often influenced the plan, while other family members contributed little to it. Nevertheless, parents and children normally valued the presence of other family members even if their contribution appeared to be relatively small. Only occasionally did family time serve to reopen old arguments and create new tensions among some family members. Although the FGC literature suggests that children should play a central role in the development of the family plan, we were aware that some children were rarely consulted, opted out of the discussions or wandered about the room taking little notice of what was being discussed. Some children appeared to be quite dismissive of the family plan and showed minimal interest in its contents. Mostly, family plans appeared to focus on what actions the child and/or other family members might take in the future and less on the services which might be available to them.

### ***Initial Satisfaction with the Plan***

Immediately after the family group conference, we asked family members about whether they were happy with the family plan that had been drawn up. Analysis of the exit questionnaires shows that:

- 98 per cent of parents were happy with the family plan and 2 per cent were unsure
- parents in Riverborough were significantly less likely than parents elsewhere to say they were happy with the family plan: just 72 per cent of parents in Riverborough were happy with the plan
- 93 per cent of relatives, friends and neighbours were happy with the family plan
- 89 per cent of children were happy with the family plan: there were no statistically significant variations between siblings or pilots
- children with higher risk factors demonstrated by having higher ONSET scores (20 and above) were slightly more likely than those with lower ONSET scores to be happy with the family plan.

Conference participants were asked, also, whether they thought that the plan would subsequently help either themselves or other family members. Looking first at the responses from parents, we found that:

- 76 per cent of parents thought that the plan would help them
- 77 per cent of parents thought that the plan would help their child
- 77 per cent of parents thought that the plan would help the family as a whole.

Nevertheless, there were statistically significant differences again between parents in Riverborough and parents elsewhere. Less than half of the Riverborough parents thought that the plan would help their child (43%), or that it would help the family (47%). There were no such variations between the pilots in respect of the responses of other family members, friends and neighbours: some three-quarters (78%) thought that the plan would help the parents, the child (77%) or the family as a whole (77%). The analysis of the exit surveys shows that, apart from parents in Riverborough, conference participants felt fairly optimistic at the end of the conference that the plan would be helpful.

### **Implementing Family Plans**

So, what happens to the family plans after the family group conference? Families should receive a written copy of their plan, and be supported in its implementation by nominated professionals, co-ordinated by the YISP keyworker. Plans should be regularly discussed, reviewed, and changed as necessary if aspects are found to be unworkable. When we asked parents at Time 1 interviews about the plan, most but not all remembered having received a copy but not everyone had kept it. Some parents had put it in a 'safe place', and some had displayed it in a prominent place in the home:

*It was kept on top of my microwave, and, I'll be honest, I didn't always go to it. The only time I looked at it was when I'd be clearing the top, which was quite frequently, so I'd stand there and I'd look at it and I'd think 'Oh, yes, we haven't stuck to that ... we've stuck to that ...'.*

(Mother of Ben and Darcy, aged 11 and 13)

Most parents had regarded the family plan as 'a good idea', and at the time of the conference were 'hopeful' that it would work. However, most reported that it had 'failed' quite quickly and that the problems discussed at the conference had persisted. Adrian's mother told us:

*It was a good idea, it just hasn't worked out ... Adrian's got one up in his bedroom and I've got one on the fridge ... but, phew, it causes more problems. I'll say to [him] 'Well, you're meant to be doing this' and [he says] 'Nah, I'm not doing that – it's not meant to say that' ... and it just causes arguments all the time.*

Another mother told us a few weeks after the family group conference:

*We do feel it's a bit of a waste of time ... I can see where it might help some people, but with us ... it's a waste of time.*

(Mother of George, aged 12)

Other parents commented:

*I had to get a board up, and if he washed a dish or something he got a pound ... Well, I haven't done it lately ... And he wanted quality time with me, so on a Sunday they were going to get something we could all do round the table, but that's knocked on the head because his brother doesn't want to do it.*

(Mother of Nial, aged 10)



*They tried to get me parenting skills and it's very difficult because I need to work. I cannot have time off to go and do these parenting skills, the parent craft ... so that's gone out the window.*

(Mother of Shellie, aged 12)

*We've done basically everything that was proposed to us ... The only thing we haven't done is getting the DVD recorder, which we went out to buy a couple of weeks ago, and the kids were absolutely awful the whole day and we decided against it ... and we took him to Pizza Hut ... kept our side of the bargain ... we've treated them ... we've tried our best, but it's not working.*

(Mother of Adrian, aged 11)

Many of the parents we interviewed admitted that they had not carried out their part of the family plan. It seems that several family plans contained recommendations to introduce behaviour charts, but, without ongoing keyworker support, parents did not seem able to implement them effectively. Parents reported, also, that their children had not kept to their promises and, as a result, that they had found it hard to enforce the family plan:

*Things seemed to have been getting better on the run-up to the meeting ... and the meeting went great! But then once it was over with Toby stopped going to school again ... he was refusing to go a week later.*

(Mother of Toby, aged 13)

*When they did the plan, when they typed it up, it would have been a good idea for them to bring them [the children] in, sit down and say 'That is what we've come up with' ... They never sent us any declarations saying that we agree to it and we understand it, and we'll try and sort of keep to these rules and regulations.*

(Mother of Adrian, aged 13)

Adrian's mother felt that the family had been left to implement a plan to which family members had not necessarily agreed, and they had expected someone from the YISP to follow it through shortly after the conference. Other parents blamed their children for the failure of the plan:

*He was gonna do the star chart, but that didn't happen.*

(Mother of Guy, aged 12)

*I didn't think it made a ha'p'orth of difference ... I've got two very strong-headed, stubborn children here and it takes a lot to get through to them.*

(Mother of Maddie, aged 11)

*The family plan's gone ... it's gone straight down ... Teri won't take a blind bit of notice ... but sometimes I'm at the point where I'm ready to walk out, I don't want to come back ... and it's not fair to me other three children.*

(Mother of Teri, aged 13)

The parents quoted above had all tried to implement the family plan, but because the child/young person was not willing to co-operate their good intentions were thwarted and nothing had changed for the better.

Some families experienced changes in circumstances after the family group conference, which militated against the family plan working well. Nial's family put the plan up on the wall, but when their eldest son came home after release from youth custody the family dynamics changed and the children would not co-operate. In another family in which the parents had separated, the mother felt there had been a breakdown in communication between herself and her ex-partner, his wife and the child in question, and that her ex-partner did not stick to his side of the plan. Perhaps not surprisingly, the child's father presented a different version of events. Whatever the facts of the case, the family plan simply had not worked for this family.

Perhaps a more serious concern relates to the failure of agencies to deliver services that had been promised in the family group conference. At our Time 1 interviews, we heard a range of complaints:

*They offered us all these clubs and that to give us more time out from them [the children], but they never came to light.*

(Mother of Penny, aged 8, and Alan, aged 9)

*... after Christmas, everything went pear-shaped when all of us [were] expecting him [Boyd] in school and he wasn't ... and it was a lack of communication on the school's part because there was a member of staff at the meeting [the family group conference] who I thought was a teacher ... she's just a classroom assistant ... and the information was not passed on to the school, so there was a bit of a mix-up there ...*

(Mother of Boyd, aged 12)

We found a distinct change in parents' views about the family group conference just a few weeks after they had attended. While their immediate responses on the exit questionnaires had been fairly positive, and they had found the conference to be a good experience and regarded the family plan as a good idea, very shortly afterwards many parents felt that the plan was not working and that little had changed for them and their family. For a few families, however, the conference had been the catalyst for positive improvement and parents regarded it as a turning point in their child's life. In our interview sample, the families reporting positive improvements were the exceptions, however. Overall, parents demonstrated little sense of ownership of the family plan and we found little evidence in our Time 1 interviews that the family plan had been a key driver for change.

## Review Meetings

One mechanism for checking up on the implementation of the family plan is the holding of review meetings. The review process varied between the pilots and not all families attended a review meeting. Most pilots tended to carry out some kind of formal review some four to six weeks after the initial conference. At this point we asked parents to complete another exit questionnaire. We received responses from all pilots except Riverborough. Nearly all parents (98%) reported that they had discussed the plan with their family and nearly three-quarters of parents (72%) claimed that the plan was working well. Most parents (76%) said they had done the things that were planned, and 85 per cent seemed to have received the help they had been promised. However, it was evident at the time of the review meeting that not all the problems had been solved. Approximately half the parents (54%) stated that things were going well for the family but less than half (44%) stated that everyone was sticking to the family plan, indicating that, while there may have been an initial high level of compliance by parents, the contributions of others left room for improvement. Perhaps as a result of this, over a quarter of parents (27%) indicated to us, after review, that they would like their plan to be changed. It is clear from our interviews that not all promises made in the family plan were being kept, and there was little systematic monitoring of progress in the weeks after the conference.

In some pilots, professionals and extended family members were invited to review meetings, and in others just the child and the parents were invited to meet with the FGC co-ordinator and the YISP keyworker, often in the family home. When professionals were included there was an opportunity for participants to challenge agencies which had failed to deliver services, and put pressure on them to do so.

We observed two review meetings in Coburgh, both of which involved families in our interview sample. One review meeting involved just the child's mother and younger brother, and the FGC co-ordinator; the other involved the child, his mother, the YISP keyworker, the FGC co-ordinator and an education welfare officer. Fewer people attended these review meetings than had attended the family group conference. Both reviews lasted about an hour and were held in the local school. Refreshments were provided and the atmosphere was relaxed and informal on both occasions. The FGC co-ordinator went through the family plans, checking on progress and inviting discussion about the unachieved objectives and the actions which might be taken to remedy the situation, including consideration of referral to other services.

In the review meeting attended by the child who had been the object of the family group conference, it was clear that his behaviour at home had improved, as had his school attendance. The FGC co-ordinator presented him with a certificate for carrying out his family plan successfully. The YISP keyworker apologised for having forgotten to carry through a commitment to take the child to play pool. The child's mother reported that she had not kept her side of the bargain (including having his room decorated and allowing him to attend an after-school club) because her son had not improved his behaviour (relating to his temper) to her satisfaction. Actions which were listed on the family plan as things the mother would do had been recast by her as rewards which depended

on the child's behaviour. Nevertheless, the boy's father had kept his promise to take his son to a football match. The boy concerned left the review meeting early to go back to his class (the meeting had been held at lunchtime) and the mother was then encouraged to do what she had promised in the family plan. When the mother left, the professionals referred to other problems within the family which they had not felt able to raise at the review meeting.

The child concerned (Toby) did not attend the other review meeting we observed, but his mother reported that he had ignored the family plan. Although, the FGC co-ordinator reported that the child's school attendance had improved (from zero to 34%), his mother was sceptical about her son's motivation, believing that he went to school more often only in order to obtain some rewards. Although the YISP keyworker was keen to close the case, the FGC co-ordinator suggested further intervention via the YISP panel and another review meeting. It was clear that Toby's mother did not know anything about the YISP panel and who its members were, so what the panel did had to be explained to her. She felt that the review meeting had achieved little because Toby was not present. Toby told us he was fed up with the intervention:

*I just got sick. I get that many people coming round trying to talk to me.  
I just get bored of it and sick of it.*

(Toby, aged 13)

It is interesting to note that, while the YISP staff had perceived improvement in the behaviour of both the children in these two cases, the mothers who attended the review meeting were more pessimistic, and disappointed that more improvement had not been achieved. While the professionals could log changes for the better, these fell short of what the families were hoping to achieve. It seems that the most disappointed and disheartened parents, who were negative about the review meetings, were those whose children had made little effort to change and whose behaviour was as bad as ever. Having been through the FGC process with little positive change, these parents were not inclined to go to a further meeting.

When we interviewed parents at Time 2, they said little about the review meeting. Some clearly regarded a review meeting as 'a good thing', but others regarded it as 'pointless'. Two parents described the review meetings they had attended as negative experiences. Parents who were positive about the review process felt that they had received positive feedback and that it had been less stressful than attending the family group conference. This was attributed to knowing what to expect and knowing the people who would be involved in the review. Some parents were satisfied with the progress their child had made and one mother talked about the ability to move on. For one mother, the second review meeting had signalled the end of a long period of talking about family difficulties:

*I thought, we were just glad it was over and done with ... there'd been  
so much talking and the kids had had enough of talking ...*

(Mother of Ben and Darcey, aged 11 and 13)

Another mother told us she had not been offered a review meeting, but would have liked one, and another was disappointed that the review meeting had been cancelled because large numbers of invitees had said they could not attend.

Parents who saw little reason to have a review meeting felt either that nothing had changed anyway, so a further meeting would be unlikely to help, or that everything they wanted to achieve had been achieved, so there was nothing more to be gained from a meeting.

Some children had not wanted to participate in a review meeting because they had not enjoyed the family group conference and/or had regarded it as a waste of time. Some of the children who did attend a review meeting had felt got-at:

*They were just basically having a go at me and stuff ... I just felt like they were putting me down ... it didn't help me.*

(George, aged 12)

George described how the Year Head at his school had talked about things George had done in school, and a policeman had also put him on the spot. This young person was thoroughly disillusioned both about FGC and about the review process. George said that unnecessary things had been said about his mother. His mother told us that she thought the review meeting had been set up to bring pressure to bear on her and her daughter and had not achieved anything positive for the family. She felt that the discussion had become personal and seemed like 'bitching, rather than discussing'. Although a second review meeting was arranged for the family, no one from George's immediate family wanted to attend: so, the meeting went ahead with representatives from the school and the police and the keyworker. However, George's father, who did not live with his son, and his own mother (George's paternal grandmother) did attend the meeting. George's mother told us that she was very taken aback by the decision to hold the second review meeting without her and George being present and was disconcerted by the idea that other family members and professionals would sit and discuss issues to do with her and her children when they were not there 'to speak up for themselves'. She said:

*I did feel a bit annoyed because I thought the co-ordinator would say we won't carry on with the meeting ... but no, they carried on and talked about us anyway. I thought 'Oh, great!'*

The decision to hold the review meeting in these circumstances does, perhaps, raise issues about how far this kind of practice aids the empowerment of children and their parents. George's FGC co-ordinator, however, spoke positively about the review meeting:

*When the second review meeting was held, George refused to come, which didn't look very good, but ... the school came along and the police came along and said things were better. The school said he's much, much better since the last review meeting, and as far as I'm aware now he's OK.*

Nevertheless, family members had clearly been split as a result of the decision to go ahead. George's paternal grandmother said she had been told by George's mother that the meeting had been cancelled, which proved to be incorrect. Furthermore, the grandmother's account of the review meeting in her interview with us suggested that George's behaviour had actually got worse and he had been arrested by the police and caught in possession of alcohol, the

household was facing eviction, George had been excluded from school, and a decision had been taken to get social services involved. This account bears no resemblance to that of George's FGC co-ordinator and demonstrates the potential for misinterpretation and for family conflicts being exacerbated if the resident parent and the child who is the subject of the YISP process are not present at a review meeting.

Shellie also refused to attend a review meeting and her mother attributed this to the teacher having 'had a go' at Shellie during the family group conference:

*When we were there before, there was a few people having a go at Shellie about the way she was behaving. It was things like, 'When an adult talks to you, I want you to look at me in the face ... don't look away' and things like that. And she felt she couldn't go [to the review meeting] because she felt everybody was having a go at her all the time.*

(Mother of Shellie, aged 12)

Although the review meeting went ahead, Shellie's mother thought it had made little difference and that the focus had been on closing the case. This was of concern to Shellie's mother because Shellie's behaviour at home was still physically aggressive and beyond what she regarded as 'normal teenage behaviour'. It seems that the social workers involved also agreed with Shellie's mother.

Some family members other than parents and the children concerned also expressed disappointment about the review process. Duncan's brother described the FGC process and the review meeting as 'a load of codswallop' because there had been no tangible changes as a result. Other family members were frustrated that the family plan had not been implemented. One family friend commented:

*I think the family group conference is a good thing, but the follow-up was not brilliant ... we all had goals and none of them worked out.*

(family friend)

*What was the point of it ... ? Nothing's changed, no nothing. He's been left and that's it.*

(Grandmother of Keith, aged 10)

This grandmother was angry that her grandson had heard nothing after the meeting and felt very let down. Several family members told us that the FGC process had been a complete waste of time because nothing had changed for the better. They were clear that they would not be prepared to attend another conference. They all felt that the YISP should have taken more responsibility for the family plan and that family members should not have been left 'to sink or swim'. Family members rarely saw it as entirely their responsibility to implement the family plan and regarded it as the job of the FGC co-ordinator or YISP keyworker to help them. They were not overly critical of the YISP/FGC staff, but were disappointed at their lack of ongoing involvement and the lack of rigour in the review process. These criticisms are important in the light of our earlier discussion in Section 4 about the roles of FGC co-ordinators and facilitators. It appears that families found it difficult to understand why there was no continuing

involvement with the FGC staff after the conference. Clearly, unless another keyworker takes over responsibility for helping families to implement the family plan, family members are likely to be dissatisfied and disillusioned about the process, having been buoyed up by the conference and then, seemingly, let down.

From the parents' perspective, the review meetings were understood as being a means of checking whether the plans were being implemented. When professionals were not included, the focus was on whether family members and the child had adhered to the plan. Parents felt that review meetings were designed to hold the family to account without any reciprocal process for holding professionals to account. Furthermore, parents seemed unaware of any involvement of the YISP panel in the review process.

The review process provoked the most dissatisfaction among parents. The main areas of dissatisfaction focused on:

- the loss of contact with the FGC co-ordinator after the conference (except in Welshboro and, latterly, in Midshire), which results in a loss of support and understanding
- the inability to hold agencies to account for failing to deliver services that have been promised
- the lack of any substantive one-to-one work with the child/young person and the resultant absence of anyone who could help the family to implement the plan.

A strong theme to emerge from the evaluation is the low level of monitoring and follow-up after a conference and families' frustrations with this situation. The New Zealand model suggests that families should be in control of the review process. Moreover, family plans should contain a statement about regular monitoring, but previous research indicates that many have not (Paterson and Harvey, 1991) and it would appear that monitoring is often very limited. One irate parent told us:

*At the review meeting, when they rang us to say that the school couldn't afford to let anybody out because they'd got so many people off, that was when my son gave up. He just gave up, and told her [the teacher] to her face at the last [school] meeting we had ... 'When you rang to say you couldn't make it I thought, why the f\*\*\*ing hell should I bother, 'cos you can't be bothered,' and she was, like, very defensive. He said, 'Miss, I'm sorry, I know it wasn't your fault but that's how it felt on the day. Why the hell should I bend over backwards at school and you can't be bothered to turn up for an hour' ... He's been let down so many times in the past that he thinks 'you let me down then sod you.'*

(Mother of Joseph, aged 13)

Since most families had not paid much attention to their family plan and it had made very little difference to their lives, it is hardly surprising that those we spoke to were rather negative about the review process. Although there was a general view among the children and young people who had attended a review

meeting that it was easier and less frightening to participate than it had been at the initial conference, they did not regard the review meeting as particularly important or relevant to them.

### ***Reflections 6–9 Months after the Family Group Conference***

When we talked to parents at Time 2, most still remembered that they had had a family plan, but none of them was using it. Two parents told us that they had never received a copy of the family plan and others had got it but had done nothing with it:

*When it came in the post, we looked at it and then just threw it on top of the cupboard. We never refer back to it, to be honest.*

(Mother of Guy, aged 12)

Most parents said that the plan had been abandoned long ago. Matt's parents, who had separated, still blamed each other for the failure of the plan while the grandmother blamed both sets of parents, stating that 'there's not one of them from the four adults could follow a plan'. Nevertheless, many parents were able to recount positive outcomes as a result of the family group conference, and we consider these in more detail in the next section.

Our follow-up survey of families nine months after their family group conference shed a little more light on the use of the family plans:

- 85 per cent of parents said that they had discussed the family plan since going to the initial family group conference
- 70 per cent of parents had managed to do most of the things contained in the plan
- 41 per cent of parents said that everyone was sticking to the plan
- 47 per cent had received the help they were promised from others
- 46 per cent said things were going well.

So, while most parents had tried to implement the family plan, less than half reported that it was working well several months later and over a half of parents had not received the help they had been promised. It would seem that parents complied more with the provisions in the family plan than other family members and that problems in implementing the plan emerged quite quickly after the conference and were not resolved in the longer term. Overall, 20 per cent of parents stated in our follow-up survey that they were very happy with their family plan, with a further 43 per cent stating that they were fairly happy. These figures are considerably lower than they were immediately after the family group conference.

### **Perceptions of Other Family Members**

Extended family members mostly remembered that there had been a plan and could remember some of the promises that had been made. One of the key areas of FGC is to mobilise the support of the wider family and many family members could recall promising to offer assistance, mostly of a practical nature, such as taking the child to activities, providing meals, providing equipment, and



teaching skills such as decorating. However, family members were often critical of the YISP because no contingency plans had been made to deal with the situation in which the plan fails to meet its objectives. Some had been sceptical during the conference about whether the promises made would be kept. Matt's grandmother explained:

*I know both parties ... they're the type of people who cannot organise themselves ... their plans fall flat ... they never plan ahead ... I really wanted to put my hand up and say 'Excuse me, you've got five children and a husband who's got a full-time job ... it's not going to work' ... I feel, sometimes, there's empty promises made, which doesn't help.*

Comments such as this echo the views of other participants that little was done to enforce family plans and that the plans were often too vague and too general to be enforceable anyway. Some family members would have liked the plan to have been more structured and more directive.

The evidence relating to family plans is fairly negative on the whole, and many families felt that there had been a vacuum after the conference. Most of them came away feeling positive about the experience and expecting change, but the mechanism for delivering change, the family plan, appears to have been a somewhat weak document, which only a few families took seriously. Most families, it seems, were disappointed about what were described as 'failures' because nothing much happened afterwards.

### ***Children's Perceptions of the Family Plan***

When we asked children what they thought of the family plan, the kinds of things they remembered can be grouped into three of categories:

- what they were expected to do
- what their parents were expected to do
- what activities they would like.

The majority of children (89%) indicated on the exit survey that they had helped to make the family plan, although 25 per cent said that they did not know what would happen to the plan after the conference. In interviews, children rehearsed the kinds of tasks they were expected to perform, such as helping in the house, tidying up, stopping arguing and answering back, and going to school:

*[The family plan was] just about charts. These star charts, see – if you be good one week ... then you get stars. One week I got a pound.*

(Guy, aged 12)

*I get up in the morning, go to school, come in on time ... can't really remember the rest. My brother promised to stop winding me up.*

(Scott, aged 12)

At Time 2, none of the children interviewed knew where the family plan was and some seemed to think they had never received one. Some could remember the

plan but thought it had been put away and they had not seen it since the conference. A few children could remember attempts to make the plan work and felt that their behaviour had improved, but all the children said that their good intentions had lapsed fairly quickly:

*Like me and my mam started to get along a bit more. I started doing a couple of jobs around the house, and then all of a sudden my attitude went back to normal again.*

(Naomi, aged 13)

One young person said he had not seen the point of walking the dog (one of his activities in the plan) since his mother was not bothered whether he did or not. Another told us that he saw little reason to do the dishes as he was not at home often. Some children had expected to become involved in activities, such as going to a football club, but told us that they did not materialise. Maddie described how she thought the family plan had been a good idea at the start but had changed her mind when she had gone home after the conference:

*We tried it out, and it was a bit harder 'cos, it wasn't like reality ... it wasn't that good.*

(Maddie, aged 11)

Joseph told us that other members of the family had been complying with the family plan, but that he had not:

*I'm never here, I can't really keep up with it ... It [what they do with the family plan] doesn't really bother me because ... the only time I'm here is at night or in the morning ... [I] stay out all day ... I don't like being in the house.*

(Joseph, aged 13)

There is little evidence, then, that family plans held much meaning for the children. Like their parents, many children regarded the plan as a waste of time because no one adhered to it. The young people explained that circumstances had changed, or that they simply did not want to do the things planned for them. Occasionally, children did not bother to keep their promises because parents had not done so either:

*Me mam doesn't do what she said, so I'm not doing what I said.*

(Toby, aged 13)

*My nan was trying to help me, but she fell out with my dad and then me nan just didn't get in touch.*

(George, aged 12)

Children and young people told us that they felt let down by family members and professionals who did not deliver what had been promised in the conference, although they rarely mentioned any services that were going to be provided.

When the family plans did work, however, the children and young people were positive about what had been achieved and the changes they had been able to make in their own lives. Just over half of those (53%) who were asked about the

family plan in our follow-up questionnaire said that they thought that it had helped them. Some 48 per cent of young people thought that the plan had helped their family.

### ***Developing Tailored Packages of Support***

The aim of YISP intervention was to deliver individually tailored packages of intervention and support designed to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors in children's lives. This package of support should have been recorded on an ISP, which set out the expectations of the child and the family as well as those of service providers. It was also expected that children and parents/carers, with the aid of their keyworker, should be involved in the design, implementation and review of their ISP. The aim of introducing family group conferencing into the YISP process was to extend the involvement and participation of children and their families in the formulation of their ISPs. It was anticipated that the FGC process would increase the effectiveness of the ISPs in reducing the risk of children offending, by enhancing the empowerment of families to take authorship and ownership of their plans (YJB, 2006). As the FGC/YISP National Steering Group and the National Strategic Group observed, the 'value-base of FGC' is that 'if families are given the information and the support they can make good plans for their children and deliver upon them' (Hennessy, 2005, p.11).

In Section 3 we noted that YISP panels rarely seemed to be informed about the family plans that had been drawn up at conferences when they were developing an ISP. Staff in both the case-study pilots told us that integrating family plans and ISPs had presented a considerable challenge, involving a number of compromises. Families had tended to work with the YISP keyworkers to formulate the ISP, using the ONSET assessment as an informative document. The ISPs frequently included references to onward referrals to a range of agencies or activities and one-to-one work with the keyworker. If a family group conference had not preceded the panel meeting, a referral for a conference was often an action point in the ISP. One YISP co-ordinator commented:

*I'd like to see family group conferences on all ISPs ... I think somewhere along each case there's an appropriate time for [one]. It mightn't be at the beginning but it might be later on.*

It seems, then, that the family plan was regarded as somewhat different from the ISP. On the whole, YISP staff wanted the ISP to be drawn up as soon as possible, particularly if there were to be referrals to other agencies, some of which might have long waiting lists. The family plan, by contrast, was regarded as a less 'official' document, more family-friendly and primarily focused on issues for the family to address:

*... there is a difference because the family plan is looking to suit the family ... the [ISP] looks at what we're going to put in place for the family for changing behaviour [and] what we're going to refer to another agency ... and a family plan is what a family's going to actually input into making changes ... So I think the distinct difference is who's making the changes.*

(YISP keyworker)

If an ISP had been drawn up prior to a family group conference taking place, the YISP keyworker could use it to inform the conference participants of the actions being undertaken by the YISP. If the conference took place first, it was less clear how the contents of a family plan were fed into the development of an ISP, however, as panels did not usually see the family plans.

Whatever the order in which the ISP and family plan were developed, it appears that families ended up with two separate documents, although one pilot had made efforts to amalgamate them, incorporating the ISP into the family plan, so that families had just one document. The YISP co-ordinator in that pilot expressed the following view:

*It's difficult for some families to work from two plans, and generally we've got our plan [the ISP] already developed by the time [the case] goes to a family group conference because that is an action point on the ISP. What I would like to see is the two of them amalgamated at the family meeting so that the family come out with one plan ...*

One of the challenges in achieving this was described as dealing with the fact that ISPs 'need to be a document suitable for panel professionals' while the family plan had to be 'written and presented in a way which is suitable for families to understand'. This is an interesting reflection, because it was always the intention that the ISP should be a document families help to develop and then, subsequently, own. It is surprising that some FGC co-ordinators regarded the two documents as written for different audiences. One told us:

*We have this contradiction between the needs of the families, the needs of the family group conference [participants] and the needs of the YISP panel.*

The family group conference co-ordinators were clearly not used to formulating plans in the way the YJB had envisaged for ISPs and so the family plans were being developed as separate documents, some of which were fairly thin in terms of content. Occasionally, therefore, the ISP had 'to fill in the gaps in a family plan'. Referring to one conference, the FGC co-ordinator reflected:

*It was a simple family plan ... it wasn't a particularly strong plan except where mother was trying to get [the young person] to do a few things in the house ... There's nothing here about [the young person's] behaviour in the community.*

In the pilots in which the conference was an action point in the ISP, the conference was an intervention recorded on the ISP rather than a step in the YISP process to formulate the ISP and enhance the empowerment of families to own and take some responsibility for the ISP and its effective implementation. In this situation, one FGC co-ordinator described the FGC as being 'a useful tool':

*I think I would maybe see it as a tool to get the families working together properly, focusing on the issues that they have got and themselves coming up with ways of putting them right, and the family group conference leads them to do that, and supports them and empowers them to do that, and it's skills that they learn for future issues that the family may have when we're not there ... for later on in life ... I think it's just an excellent tool.*

Another co-ordinator admitted to having difficulty working out the role of the conference, once the ONSET assessment had been completed. In his view, the conference was probably best described as an intervention rather than as part of the YISP process.

In order to examine whether, and if so how, tailored packages of support were offered to children and their families we analysed 26 cases (8 from Midshire, 9 from Westburgh and 9 from Eastburgh), for which we had received copies of the ISP and the family plan. We also examined three family plans from cases for which no ISP was available for analysis, and one ISP from another case for which no family plan was available. Twenty-five of the families were interviewed and we have drawn extensively from these interviews in this report.

The family plans were written to varying standards, both within and between YISPs, and there was very little data on reviews of either the family plans or ISPs. Most of the ISPs held information about the commitment expected of various agencies, but only a few contained any expectation of commitment from the child and the family. We noted that the ISPs in Midshire tended to refer to holding a family group conference as the only action to be taken and the FGC co-ordinator or keyworker was expected to secure the commitment of other agencies attending the conference. The responsibility for involving other agencies seemed to have shifted from the YISP panel to the FGC staff. The families were expected to engage with the FGC process and with any interventions/activities which emerged from it.

We are aware from the interviews that the ISPs did not always record the services families subsequently received and that families did not always take up services that were offered. We cannot be certain, therefore, that our analysis of the ISPs and family plans includes all the interventions received by the children and their families, but we have focused on how these documents were designed and on the ways in which they were linked.

As we noted in Section 1, the YJB had expected that a family group conference would be held at various stages during the YISP process and that its timing would influence how the family plan would link with the ISP. Three possible scenarios were envisaged. From our analysis of the ISPs and family plans, we found that they were divided as follows:

- in 16 cases, the family group conference had been held before the panel meeting
- in none of the cases did the panel itself act as a family group conference
- in 11 cases, the family group conference was held after the panel meeting.

More significantly, however, we found that, in every case we analysed, irrespective of whether the conference had been held before or after the panel meeting, the family's ISP and the family plan were written up as separate documents. We know from our interviews that when the conference had been held before the panel meeting, the ISP was usually submitted for panel consideration with a copy of the family plan attached. When the conference had been held after the panel meeting, the documentation indicated that an ISP had been considered/ratified by the panel before the conference had occurred. From our observations, however, we saw no evidence of the panel allocating potential resources to be used by the family in the drawing up of the family plan at a conference held after panel. These findings confirm that the panel and the YISP keyworkers regarded the ISP and the family plan as having distinct, albeit overlapping, functions.

### Comparing Format, Style, Content and Focus

The ISPs and the family plans were highly variable in terms of their format and content: some were very detailed and others were so brief that it was impossible for a third party to understand them. The ISP was considered to be a formal document, and was usually written in a format which reflected its status. Although the YJB had supplied a pro-forma for the ISP, the pilots had adapted it to suit their own needs, often to enable more fluidity about planned interventions and in recognition that situations change over time. The ISP contained a section for recording the commitment of the child and family, and we had expected that this might be where the contents of family plans might be recorded.

Surprisingly, perhaps, in only 12 of the 27 cases examined was this section completed at all. In eight of the 12 the section simply contained a restatement of the information recorded elsewhere in the ISP under the heading 'Agency Commitment'. One ISP noted the only action for the child/family as being 'Attend FGC', even though the family group conference had actually taken place before the date of the panel meeting. In the other four ISPs, elements of the family plan were summarised, primarily recording actions the young person and family members had said they would undertake, as shown in the examples below:

#### Nial's ISP Child/family commitment

<i>What is the problem?</i>	<i>What will I/we need to do?</i>
Family arguments about household chores	Nial and his brother will help mum to clean and tidy the kitchen after each meal. They will keep their bedrooms tidy and pick up toys after use
No access to activities	Nial and his brother will attend the schemes and will behave well in order to keep attending
No support for mum	Mum will look to do some activities
The family want to spend more time together	Every Sunday they will spend at least 1 hour together doing an activity. Nial and his brother will keep a scrapbook of these activities

## Darcy's ISP Child/family commitment

<i>What is the problem?</i>	<i>What will I/we need to do?</i>
Family arguments/other kids coming into the house	Family have made agreements on dealing with arguments, household chores, and having a friend around
We don't do much as a family	We will make an effort to do family outings that are cheap/free and we will not expect to bring a friend along every time

In the examples cited above, some attempt had clearly been made to link the actions noted in the family plan with the ISP.

Although the YJB had provided a pro-forma for the ISP, there was no pro-forma for the family plan. The FGC co-ordinators in Coburgh had developed a document which they had hoped would be family-friendly and it tended to be written simply and concisely. A range of headings were used, including: What do we want to change? What are we going to do? Who is going to do it? When are we going to do it by? Who will make sure we are doing it?

In Midshire, the headings used were threefold: 'Positives', 'Concerns' and 'Actions'. Occasionally, an additional section headed 'Family Plan' was included at the end of the ISP. The majority of the agreed actions recorded in the family plans related to things the child/young person had to accomplish. The following are examples of these actions:

- Maddie will try to run her own bath
- if Stuart is asked to go to the shops, he will come straight back
- Tara will try hard not to get in trouble at her new school
- Nial and his brother will attend the activity schemes and will behave well in order to keep attending
- Tom – to continue to go swimming with Victoria on Friday evenings
- Mick – I must listen to Mom when asked and not to shout
- Jeff – go to my aunt's and walk the dog every Friday.

Many of the actions noted in the family plans were designed to change the child's behaviour, as the following examples indicate:

## Tara

It was agreed that Tara would get an allowance of £5 per week. This would be reduced to a minimum of £2 depending upon her behaviour. Money would be taken away for:

- not going to school
- not tidying her bedroom
- shouting and arguing
- smoking in her bedroom (£3 to be taken away as it is a fire risk).

Mum agreed that money will be added if Tara helps around the house.

## Duncan

- School night curfew: 7.30pm–8.00pm
- Weekends: 9.00pm
- Tidy own room on a regular basis
- No food in bedroom.

Before pocket money is given, Duncan and (his sister) will:

- tidy house with Mum every weekend
- help to wash up at least twice a week.

Duncan will stop with Dad every other weekend if he has done all jobs and his attitude changes towards mum and (his sister).

The actions required of parents were primarily targeted at supporting the child or young person in achieving the tasks specified. In two plans, however, no actions were required of parents. Although one of the aims of FGC is to mobilise wider family support, in only 13 of the 29 family plans we analysed were any extended family members or friends present at the family group conference and in only seven family plans were they recorded as offering support. Since these family members were almost certainly offering support prior to the family group conference, there is limited evidence of FGC extending the support provided by wider family members.

When actions were recorded for professionals, they too tended to be related to providing support to the child. In one family plan, no actions were recorded for anyone other than the FGC co-ordinator. Eighteen of the 29 family plans contained actions agreed by school staff. This almost certainly demonstrates that considerable value had been added by the family group conference in respect of children's education. The encouragement of better communication between home and school a significant feature of family group conferences, and this served to strengthen the important liaison role played by YISP keyworkers which we identified in the national evaluation.

What is striking from our analysis is that, in 18 of the cases, the family group conference was referred to as an intervention to tackle a range of risk factors, many in relation to personal and family relationships, education difficulties and lifestyle and behaviour issues. It is not surprising, therefore, that family plans were rarely linked to ISPs because the family group conference was not usually



seen as a mechanism for enhancing family empowerment in the development of the ISP. Instead it was seen as an intervention which would take place alongside other interventions agreed by the YISP panel, including leisure activities, one-to-one work, mentoring and specific programmes to tackle problems such as anger management or drug misuse.

What emerges from the analyses is that the ISPs for the children and young people who had a family group conference were remarkably similar to those for the children in our national evaluation of YISPs which did not have a conference. In other words, the introduction of FGC into the YISP process seems to have had little influence on the ISPs which were developed by YISP panels. We might have expected that the family group conference and the family plan would have added to/alterd the ISPs that had been drawn up, or that the family plan would influence the ISP if the conference had taken place after the panel had agreed the ISP. However, the expectations of family members as recorded in the family plans do not seem to be linked through to the activities or support recorded in the ISPs.

### ***Being SMART***

The pilots were well aware of the need for ISPs to be 'SMART' (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic/relevant, and time-bounded). Most ISPs had used ONSET scores to determine the key areas of intervention and most of the ISPs linked interventions to risk factors identified in the ONSET assessment. Rarely did the ISPs indicate how the interventions were expected to achieve these objectives, however. By contrast, the family plans were of variable quality in terms of being SMART. Actions to be taken by family members were often vague, for example. Keith's family plan listed a number of actions for Keith which would not be considered SMART. The following statements were listed:

- contact with Dad and family
- more activities with children his own age
- own chill-out space, i.e. bigger house – own room
- a little more discipline at school.

Keith was almost certainly not able to instigate these actions himself and they were not linked to specific objectives or targets which were measurable. No timescales were given and it became clear that these activities were too vague to be achievable.

Not all family plans were as vague, and some were considerably closer to being SMART (e.g. 'Tom is to go out with [named student social worker] on a weekly basis for an initial period of six weeks'). It may be that as the pilots became more experienced in FGC, family plans became tighter and more closely linked with ISPs, so that the young people and their families could play a full part in promoting change and reducing risk factors.

There seems little merit in families being presented with two discrete documents, nor in separating actions to be taken by family members from those to be taken by the YISP keyworker and other agencies. It also seems important

to link family plans with ONSET assessments so that these provide a baseline for encouraging change. For the most part, family plans did not contain much information about the support to be offered by the keyworker or by other agencies, and usually focused only on what the family members would do. Opportunities to integrate FGC within the YISP process and to empower families to contribute more directly to the formulation of ISPs appear not to have been taken, and this remained a significant challenge for most of the pilots at the end of the evaluation.

It is evident from the study, however, that family plans have the capacity to enhance ISPs and to address a wider range of risk factors, particularly those relating to family functioning and family relationships. With greater linkage between the family plan and the ISP, the comprehensiveness and individuality of the ISPs could be significantly extended and enhanced. We noted also that the FGC process and the development of family plans significantly strengthened the voices of children, young people and their parents in the YISP process. The concerns of children were taken into account in ways which were not evident in most of the YISPs in the national evaluation. The fears and anxieties experienced by the children who had been referred to the YISPs were brought to the fore through the FGC process, and children could be empowered to speak for themselves and contribute to the decision-making.

Nevertheless, family plans often reflected a series of compromises: while parents usually felt they had done their best for their children and simply could not cope with difficult behaviour, professionals tended to regard poor parenting as the cause of a child's problems. The actions recorded in family plans were often agreed following subtle negotiation, taking account of the varying perspectives. As a result, family plans tended to oscillate between encouraging children and parents to take responsibility for the problems which had been highlighted and blaming them for the situation. Sensitive family issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence, were often avoided in discussions, and neither family plans nor ISPs appeared to be addressing all of the most serious risk factors in a child's life.

### ***Encouraging Change***

In this section we have examined the ways in which families were supported and encouraged to make changes which could reduce the risk factors in a child's life. There appears to have been little integration of ISPs and family plans, and some families were clearly disappointed that promised interventions were not forthcoming. The follow-through on the family plans, which were often rather vague in their content, appeared to be variable. Many families felt that had been left to try to implement changes without much support from the professionals concerned.

Family group conferencing is dependent on families being willing to participate, and all those we interviewed had been keen to try anything and everything. But we noted that the willingness of some families began to fade after the initial family group conference and that family members, particularly the children concerned, were less keen on going through a formal review process. The staff described positive review meetings and positive outcomes, whereas many parents and other family members were less likely to regard review meetings as

helpful. Parents were inclined to regard them as a procedural requirement that offered little benefit to the family. Indeed, in some cases, the review process resulted in the family's confidence being undermined. Clearly, many children in the sample had not felt fully committed to FGC in the first place and were even less inclined to get involved at the times when review meetings were scheduled.

There are a number of competing interests in a process of intervention which is voluntary: children, young people and their families are free to make choices about engagement with a YISP and with FGC; busy professionals give valuable time to FGC believing it to be a positive and powerful experience for families; and FGC co-ordinators spend a good deal of time in preparation for family group conferences and want them to succeed in helping children and young people to reduce the risk of offending. Parents also want things to change, but they may have higher expectations than the professionals about just what FGC can achieve. Professionals celebrate small signs of change in a child's behaviour whereas parents need to see bigger changes in order to regard the intervention as worthwhile. If nothing much changes, disillusionment occurs and the initial enthusiasm to try anything begins to wane.

It seems likely that more intensive effort was needed on the part of FGC staff to sustain the momentum generated at the initial family group conference and to ensure that the review process was meaningful and empowering for children and their families. As we found in our national evaluation of YISPs, the commitment of children and parents to the YISP process and the interventions offered is fundamental to achieving positive outcomes. This continued commitment is equally important if FGC is to achieve its potential. Ensuring that all the key players can and will participate in a review process is an essential element.

Our interviews at Time 2 provided very little evidence that extended family support was effectively mobilised through FGC. Family members who were already involved remained involved. Others who promised to make changes reported some improvement, but it did not last. We found that many family members had distanced themselves from the child and the parents, and therefore from playing any part in implementing the family plan. We wondered whether these findings were linked to the apparent distinction made between family plans and ISPs. If keyworkers regarded the family plan as 'family business' and put their efforts into delivering the ISP, it would not be surprising if they spent little time checking up on the implementation of the family plan.

The review of the ISP was an entirely separate process and usually involved the YISP panels. This dual review process further indicates that the ISP and the family plan remained separate. Our observations suggested that the FGC review process was an exercise in calling families to account rather than giving families the opportunity to contribute to a collective review process which would also hold agencies to account.

Our findings lead us to believe that there was greater potential for FGC to be integrated into the YISP process than had been realised during the study period and that more work needed to be done to link family plans with ISPs. Families who went to a family group conference were almost always willing and eager to address the key issues, but their energy and resources were not always

harnessed. The ISPs were not enhanced by the family plan and tended to remain remote from the family. There appears to be greater scope for family empowerment and partnership between families and professionals in addressing risk factors than had been realised. There was also scope for finding better ways to maintain commitment and momentum between the initial family group conference and review meetings. It is important to acknowledge, however, that we were evaluating a new initiative in its very early stages, and most pilots were already developing their expertise and modifying their approach as their experience of introducing FGC into the YISPs grew.

In the next section we look specifically at the ways in which YISP intervention and FGC can make a difference in the lives of children and young people at high risk of offending and antisocial behaviour.

## 7 Making a Difference: Indicators of Change

In previous sections, we have presented evidence from the evaluation which shows that the family group conferences themselves went some way towards empowering the majority of families who attended, although children tended to be more sceptical about the process than their parents and less likely to be fully committed to it. We noted also that, while most families were able to develop family plans, these did not appear to be fully integrated with ISPs and there seemed to have been a disconnection between FGC and YISP processes in some of the pilots. Nevertheless, YISP and FGC staff were fully supportive of the attempts to introduce FGC, even though there had been some initial concerns and resistance in some areas at the beginning of the initiative. By the end of the evaluation, staff were convinced of the value of FGC even though some were still struggling to integrate the processes fully, and optimistic that it would enhance YISP practice.

Our primary task was to evaluate the enhanced effectiveness of using family group conferencing in conjunction with YISPs to divert the highest-risk children from offending. We sought answers to a number of questions in order to make an assessment and to derive a series of basic hypotheses which we would test against the data available to us. These hypotheses were:

- family group conferencing ensures that ISPs developed by YISPs are more responsive to the needs and interests of children and their families
- families who participate in a family group conference co-operate more readily with their ISP because they have had a major involvement in its design
- families who participate in a family group conference are more likely than families whose YISP intervention does not include a conference to take up the services offered to them and to benefit from YISP intervention
- families who attend a family group conference will make changes that reduce the risk factors for children
- the risks of offending and antisocial behaviour will be reduced further as a result of attendance at a family group conference during YISP intervention.

Previous research relating to FGC in a range of settings had been generally positive about the potential benefits for children and families, but there was relatively little robust evidence about the longer-term outcomes (Barnsdale and Walker, 2007). There had been a tendency to focus on short-term outcomes which demonstrated participant satisfaction rather than on attempting to isolate the effects of FGC from those of other interventions. Without randomised controlled trials (RCTs) this would of course be difficult to do. We adopted a comparative methodology, believing that this would enable us to isolate the value added by FGC within YISPs by comparing YISP children who had a family group conference with those who did not. As we explained in Section 2,

however, the data available were limited and our comparative findings need to be read with considerable caution as to their generalisability.

Nevertheless, our quantitative and qualitative approaches have enabled us to shed some light on whether FGC has the potential to enhance YISP practice. In this section, we bring together the various strands of the evaluation which allow us to discuss the perceived effectiveness of FGC. First, however, we summarise the findings relating to outcomes from the national evaluation of YISPs which provided the baseline for this study of FGC.

### ***Previous Findings Relating to the Effectiveness of YISPs***

An important objective of the national evaluation of YISPs (Walker *et al.*, 2007b) was to attempt to assess whether YISP interventions make a difference in children's lives and, if so, how. In particular, we wanted to assess whether they might have the propensity to prevent or reduce antisocial and criminal behaviour. In the national evaluation, we approached the task of exploring what outcomes there might be in three main ways: first, by examining whether YISP interventions had promoted change in the levels of risk measured before and after YISP intervention, using ONSET assessment information (initial ONSET scores and closure ONSET scores); second, and more subjectively, by exploring levels of satisfaction for parents and children; and third, by considering the perspectives of the parents, children and keyworkers who were interviewed in the four case-study areas. The quantitative data relating to ONSET scores showed:

- the higher the child's starting risk score the greater the probable level of risk reduction following YISP intervention
- older children were less likely to experience a large reduction in risk
- the gender of the child and the level of deprivation in the home neighbourhood were not statistically related to risk reduction levels.

We concluded from the quantitative analyses that the value of the initial ONSET score can be regarded as the key influence on the likely scale of the measurable effect of the YISP intervention on the risk of antisocial or criminal behaviour, and suggested that YISPs would have the greatest effect if they were targeted at the highest-risk children.

Our qualitative data indicated that children and parents appeared to be well-satisfied with the service they received from their local YISP. Most parents felt that YISP intervention had helped their child, and most children generally felt positive about YISP involvement and had enjoyed doing the activities offered. In the national evaluation, problems at home and at school tended to be commonplace among the YISP children, and this finding was reflected in the current evaluation of FGC. Parents in the national evaluation generally felt that things had improved during YISP intervention and only a few young people reported that they had committed offences since the YISP referral. Some children had made great strides during YISP involvement and wanted to stay out of trouble. Others, however, were still living on the fringes of criminal behaviour. Being listened to, particularly by keyworkers and teachers, had been

an important trigger for change for some young people, as had learning new skills and making new friends.

In the national evaluation, YISP keyworkers emerged as a very important factor in the success of YISP intervention. Positive outcomes were facilitated through a constructive, supportive keyworker relationship, but the sustainability of these outcomes frequently depended on the extent to which other agencies continued the constructive work the YISPs had started. Keyworkers in the national evaluation were keen to celebrate the smallest of improvements in the behaviour of high-risk children, and we have seen this replicated in our current study. Whereas parents may have been looking for major changes in their child's behaviour, the YISP and FGC staff were positive about any change that indicated that the child was doing better at home or at school.

Our overall conclusions from the national evaluation were that:

- the younger children are when YISPs first intervene, the greater the chance that early intervention can have a positive impact
- tackling a range of risk factors at different levels is usually more effective than focusing solely on reducing one risk factor
- regular and intensive keyworker support is an important factor in the success of YISP intervention
- to be effective, YISP intervention needs to be both intensive and sustainable.

We noted, however, that many YISPs were not involving and empowering children as much as they might, and that more needed to be done to link rigorous assessment through the use of ONSET to the development of ISPs so that interventions were targeted at specific risk and/or protective factors. Nevertheless, the findings enabled us to be cautiously optimistic about the real potential for YISPs to play an important role in juvenile justice and to meet its key objectives.

We began our evaluation of the added value of FGC with these findings in mind, looking specifically at whether FGC could ensure greater involvement of children and their families in the YISP process and whether the development of family plans could significantly enhance the ISPs, thereby ensuring a closer tailoring of services to the risks associated with each child referred to a YISP. As we have shown in earlier sections, we have had to rely on the more qualitative data in our analyses to understand some of the more subtle aspects of implementing FGC within the YISPs.

Before turning to the evidence we have gathered in respect of outcomes, we discuss the kinds of interventions which children and young people received in this current study via YISP involvement in addition to their participation in a family group conference. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the effects of participating in FGC we asked parents, children, other family members and keyworkers, during extensive interviews, to tell us about the kinds of interventions which the families had been offered. We also asked them what they thought the YISP and FGC processes had achieved.

## *YISP Interventions*

It is important to remember that the FGC component was only one element in the YISP programme. It was expected to empower children, young people and families and to result in ISPs which would be more closely tailored to the child's specific needs, addressing the multiple risk factors that had been uncovered by ONSET assessments. We have noted, already, that family plans and ISPs were not usually joined up, so we were particularly keen to know what interventions children had received other than attending a family group conference. Unfortunately, YISP practitioners did not routinely record the interventions and services offered to the children and young people during YISP engagement, and the FGC facilitators were not normally involved in their delivery except in Welshboro and, latterly, in Midshire. We have relied, therefore, on what parents and children told us in our follow-up (Time 2) interviews. The picture that emerged was similar to that from the national evaluation of YISPs, which suggests that the recollections of the family members were likely to provide a fairly reliable account.

We found that interventions tended to fall into two distinct categories: direct work with children, and indirect work on behalf of children. Direct work with children included: one-to-one support; mentoring; issues-based sessions/programmes such as anger management; and structured activities, such as sports, arts, media and computing. Most activities had developmental and social learning aims as well as providing fun and diversion. The YISP keyworkers regarded these activities as helping to build self-esteem, improve social skills, offer one-to-one attention and enhance the social inclusion of YISP children. Direct one-to-one work had been offered in most of the original 13 pilots by the YISP keyworkers, who believed strongly that this one-to-one relationship was crucial to the success or failure of most ISPs. Nevertheless, we found significant variations between pilots in terms of what were regarded as appropriate interventions. Deciding whether keyworkers should be involved in direct service delivery to children and families and if so how was an issue with which many of the pilots had to grapple. Resource and workload considerations resulted in some keyworkers being unable to devote much time to delivering direct work to YISP children.

The indirect work on behalf of children often included: referrals to other agencies; and the keyworker acting as a link between home and school. Occasionally, children were fast-tracked into mainstream services such as CAMHS. An important element in YISP interventions in the national evaluation was the work of YISP keyworkers as mediators between home and school. Parents were particularly delighted to have help communicating and negotiating with schools when children had got into trouble, and parents in this current study expressed the same gratitude for having someone to bridge the home-school divide. The keyworkers in the national evaluation had clearly been instrumental in helping parents to deal with situations which were adding to the risks for children and to deal with agencies such as the police, housing authorities and social services. Keyworkers often perceived the need for parents to access help for themselves and frequently provided information about a range of professional services where parents could get help and support.



Although ISPs were individualised we did not always find it easy to identify the links between the interventions offered and the risks articulated in ONSET assessments. Frequently, the interventions had not been structured in terms of dosage, duration and order of delivery. As a result, few were focused on specific targets for change. We referred to similar vagueness in Sections 6 with respect to some of the ISPs examined in this study. In terms of identifying outcomes, therefore, it is not easy to see how they can be linked to specific actions in an ISP or to the interventions a child received.

We had every reason to believe that the kinds of interventions offered to children and young people in the FGC/YISP pilots would be broadly similar to those offered by the pilots in the national evaluation. Most parents interviewed for this study at Time 2 were able to recall a number of interventions that had been offered, although they did not necessarily regard all of them as appropriate. They mostly reported that their child had enjoyed leisure activities, although one parent had not allowed her son to attend any activities, since she did not feel his behaviour merited them. Another parent expressed concern that the activities had been run by two students, whom she felt lacked the experience necessary to handle a group of children with behavioural issues. Other activities that had been organised for children included visits to the local fire service and from a local cadet group. Some children had been offered targeted courses, such as on anger management, and one parent talked of a referral to a visual impairment service as a result of discussions at the family group conference, which had been very helpful for the child concerned.

Some parents mentioned participating in leisure activities which had involved the whole family, and these activities seem to have resulted directly from a family group conference. They included visits to a local sea life centre, and trips to safari parks and to the bowling alley. Parents also mentioned referrals to other services, such as CAMHS, and on the whole they were positive about the help that had been received. Four mothers told us about referrals to a parenting group, which had resulted from their family group conferences and which they had found very helpful. The following extracts from our interviews with parents highlight these positive opinions of YISP activities:

*[The Council] come and pick Guy up and they bring him back teatime-ish. And he's been different places, and he seems to be really enjoying it ... Every week they've got something for him to do ... And our life is great because he's not here. Because he's a hard child to live with.*

(Mother of Guy and Siobhan, aged 12 and 13)

*YISP have done loads of work with him ... They were great ... They done safety awareness with him because he'd been playing on Metro lines and lighting fires and things, so ... they had a fireman come ... That was really good actually.*

(Mother of Matt, aged 10)

A few of the parents we spoke to were less positive about the YISP experience. They told us that no activities had been offered, or that no referrals had been made, or that those suggested were in their view unsuitable. Some families had been keen to access specific activities which were either not available locally or

were too expensive, such as drama classes and karate lessons. Some parents said that their children had not wanted to go to the activities offered, and one mother said that the organisation she had contacted had never returned her call. It seemed to us that there were a number of things going on in the children's lives, such as regular contact visits with a non-custodial parent, which meant that it was not possible for them to commit to YISP activities, and that other children simply did not want to go to them:

*It was the kids didn't want to work with them really ... I mean, they offered them so much ... they organised trips for them ... but they just didn't want to go ...*

(Mother of Ben and Darcy, aged 11 and 13)

*We rang up and left messages [about going to a drama club] ... one woman got back to me and I was supposed to take him, but it was in the six weeks holiday and they're down London for four weeks with their dad ... so we couldn't do that.*

(Mother of Rory, aged 13)

We were struck by the fact that, on the whole, neither parents nor children talked much about the referrals that had been made. They were not always clear who had suggested activities or referrals, although we suspect it was usually the YISP keyworker. It would seem that the parents we spoke to fell largely into two groups: there were those who felt the activities and referrals had been 'brilliant' and spoke positively about them, and others who felt that very little had been offered and that they and their children had not received much help. One parent told us that her son had been 'palmed off with a mentor', and others said their children had been given leisure cards/passes which they had been unable to use for one reason or another.

### **The Children's Views**

Around half of the children we interviewed at Time 2 mentioned taking part in an activity. Their perceptions of the help offered closely resembled those of their parents: some children thought the activities had been enjoyable while others were critical. Two boys who had been offered boxing when they had hoped for football were disappointed and did not take up the offer. The other half of the children said that they had not been offered any structured activities but had been given cards with which to access the local leisure centre. Some were enthusiastic about the leisure card, others were not inclined to use it. George told us that what he had been offered just didn't get him 'excited'. By contrast, Guy had thoroughly enjoyed his weekly trips:

*They come and pick you up on the Saturday and you go places. They choose where they're going to but it's always exciting ... ice-skating, a forest park, a safari park, rock climbing, go-karting, skateboarding ...*

Other children had been referred to a Connexions advisor, but described this as a waste of time because they were too young for paid work and not very interested in doing some of the activities, such as pottery, that had been suggested. We found in the national evaluation that children and young people responded well to the activities and courses offered when they were well-motivated to participate in the YISP programme and when their parents were

similarly well-motivated. These findings were replicated here in the study of FGC/YISPs: some children and families remained enthusiastic and participated constructively, as did their parents, while others were disillusioned, particularly if they were not offered many interventions and if what was on offer seemed to them to be inappropriate or boring. Family activities in which everyone could participate seem to have been well-received, but not all families were able to take advantage of these, for a variety of reasons.

In this study, we heard less about one-to-one work between YISP keyworkers and the children and young people than we did in the national evaluation. In our previous evaluation the one-to-one relationship with the YISP worker had been an important element in the success of YISP intervention. While our data here relate to a relatively small sample, we wonder whether the system of having both an FGC co-ordinator and or facilitator *and* a YISP worker in most pilots meant that a less close bond developed between the children and the YISP keyworkers. It was not evident from our interviews with family members that having attended a family group conference had substantially enhanced their willingness to co-operate with an ISP or that the interventions offered were any more responsive to the needs and interests of the children concerned. As we have seen in earlier sections, there appeared to be a lack of linkage between the experience of FGC and the family's subsequent involvement in activities and with other support services.

Having noted the interventions offered, we turn now to examine the quantitative evidence available to us in order to consider whether and how FGC made a difference to outcomes. The quantitative evidence is drawn from three sources each of which we examine below: the MIS data sets provided by the pilots, the survey questionnaires returned by family members, and the scale measures used during our in-depth interviews with families.

### ***Modelling Using the MIS Data Sets***

Our modelling sought to assess the outcomes for children and young people who experienced FGC during their YISP involvement and to compare these with the outcomes for those who did not. In principle, there were several potentially relevant outcomes which could be assessed:

- greater commitment to education and improvements in school performance
- avoidance of involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour
- improved relationships between children and their parents
- reduced ONSET scores, indicating a lowering of the level of risk faced by the child or young person.

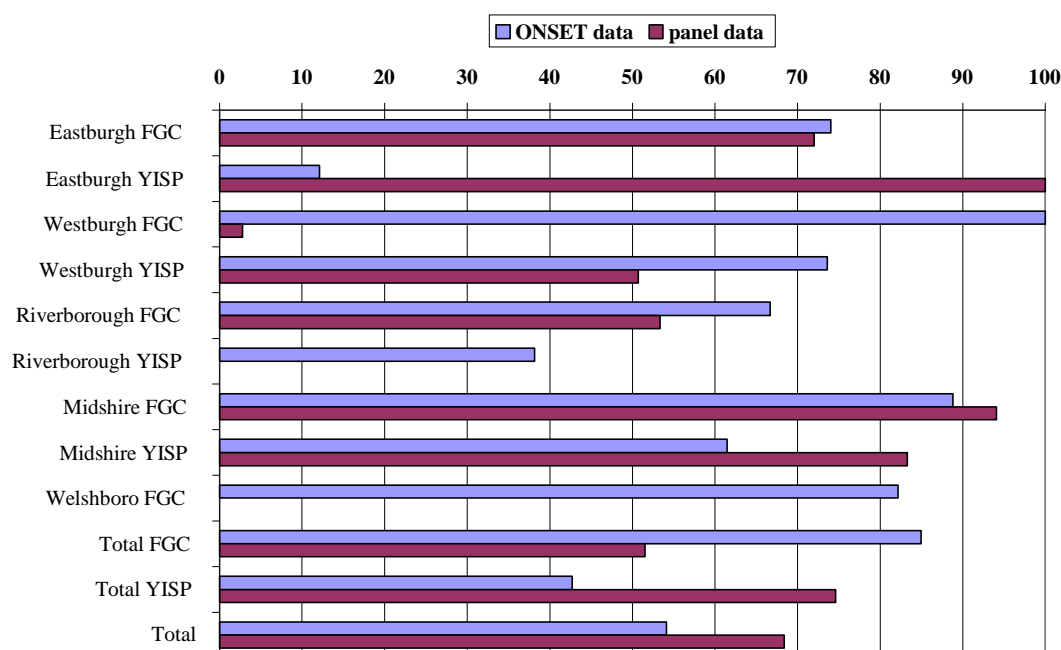
To assess the first two of these outcomes we needed robust data relating to school attendance and attainment and criminal behaviour on a case-by-case basis. These data were not easily obtainable at the individual level. The changes in relationships within families was an outcome we expected to consider at the more qualitative level. We were forced, therefore, to rely on one quantitative measure which could indicate any positive change as a result of

YISP and FGC intervention. In many ways the fourth outcome in the above list was, in any event, the most significant and critical outcome measure. It related to the change in ONSET scores, and we placed the most emphasis during data collection on maximising the number of cases for which both an initial and a closure ONSET score were available.

Figure 7.1 indicates the level of provision of ONSET scores. The overall data availability rate was 54 per cent, but there was a markedly lower likelihood of data provision for non-FGC cases than for FGC cases (43% and 85% respectively). There was an especially low rate of data provision for Eastburgh YISP (where separate recording processes were used for non-FGC and FGC cases). Elsewhere, the variation between the pilots was not particularly great. We had to make the assumption, however, that the 54 per cent of cases would be representative of all in-scope cases.

Figure 7.1 also indicates the data we received relating to YISP panel dates, since we had hypothesised that the time between the YISP referral and the panel meeting might be an important variable to consider: the less the delay, the greater the impact of YISP intervention. For almost a third of the in-scope cases there was no information about the panel date and, disappointingly, it is the FGC cases that had less of the relevant information. Westburgh and Welshboro pilots provided little or no panel date information, along with Riverborough YISP. Unfortunately, the collated data cannot provide robust estimates of the average time between referral and the YISP panel for FGC/YISP and non-FGC cases. The lack of data about the YISP panel in the FGC data sets appears to underline our contention made earlier in the report that the linkages between FGC and YISP panel processes had not been fully worked out in most of the pilots.

**Figure 7.1: Percentages of cases in each pilot for which *Onset* data and panel data were available**

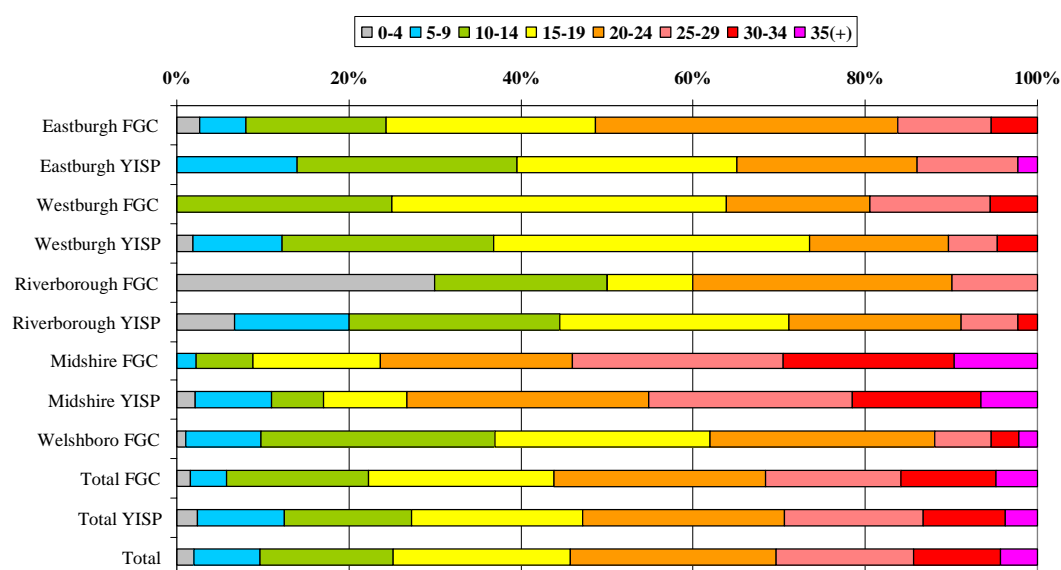


When assessing change in risk factors, we considered that it might be important to look at the variations both between pilots and between FGC/YISP and non-FGC cases, because some pilots may have been dealing with far more children and young people who were already known to the police, for example. Once again, however, the data we needed proved to be inadequate. Eastburgh and Midshire provided no usable information on this issue and, as they provided almost 70 per cent of the in-scope cases, this renders it impossible to regard the residual data as representative. The other pilots provided mainly anecdotal information and only Westburgh provided relatively complete data, indicating whether the child had been in contact with the police and the age at which this first occurred, but we clearly cannot generalise from just one site in one pilot. We were disappointed, also, to find that the bulk of the in-scope cases did not include information about the family context. Indeed, these data were missing for all Eastburgh and Midshire cases (both FGC and non-FGC). So, our study focused primarily on assessing the changes in ONSET scores.

### Variations in ONSET scores

Figure 7.2 indicates that the reported initial ONSET scores varied considerably. This variation was not between the FGC and the non-FGC cases, however: apart from a slightly lower proportion of FGC cases having very low initial ONSET scores (below 10), the distribution of scores between the children who had a family group conference and those who did not was very similar. The difference in initial scores was most marked between the pilots. Midshire stood at one end of a spectrum, with less than 25 per cent of cases having a score below 20 (shown by the bars in Figure 7.2 coloured grey/blue/green/yellow). By contrast, cases with lower scores made up around two-thirds of the cases in Riverborough and Westburgh, and over 60 per cent of the cases in Welshboro. It would appear that Midshire either scored risks higher than elsewhere, or that it was more effective than other pilots in targeting the highest-risk children.

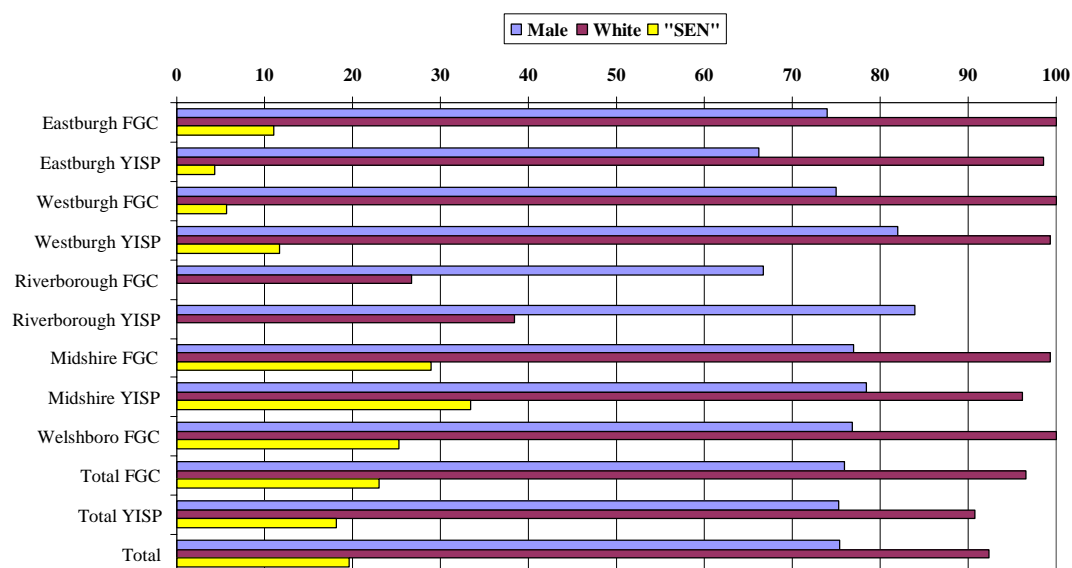
**Figure 7.2: Percentages of cases in each pilot by initial ONSET scores**



We examined a number of factors which might explain these variations. We found that the variations in ONSET score distributions were not due to differing age distributions, which were very similar across the pilots. We also examined the influence of other factors, including gender, ethnicity and educational status, which had been shown to be significant in our previous research (Figure 7.3). As we reported in Section 3, except in Riverborough, the children and young people were predominantly white and around 75 per cent were male. Given the strong distinction between Riverborough and the other pilots in relation to ethnicity we had to exclude cases from the modelling analyses for which no reliable ethnicity data were provided. We simply could not make any assumption about the ethnicity of children for whom the data were missing.

In Figure 7.3, the third set of bars (coloured yellow) relates to the proportion of children who appear to have been or who could be designated as having 'special educational needs' (SEN). We have used the 'SEN' label cautiously, since this category of cases had to be compiled in an imprecise way because most of the case data on pilots' information systems was recorded in free text. The figure includes children who may not have been officially designated by their schools as being of SEN status. Riverborough was the one pilot with a low level of response. The data available to us indicate that SEN children were more common among Midshire cases than elsewhere. This could help to explain the higher initial ONSET scores in Midshire. To test whether SEN status is important in enabling us to understand changes in ONSET scores we would need to include this variable in the modelling analyses. Since it appeared that SEN status affected a small minority of the children accepted by YISPs, we decided to assume that cases with missing information about SEN status were likely to relate to children with no special educational needs. This assumption could be problematic in relation to all the Riverborough cases for which we have no information, but there were so few cases from Riverborough that we could include in the modelling that we considered it unlikely that the lack of information from Riverborough would skew the findings.

**Figure 7.3: Percentages of cases in each pilot area that were male, White and had special educational needs**



### Changes in ONSET Scores

The key question which informed the modelling was, ‘Does FGC enhance the effectiveness of YISP intervention?’ If it does, which is what policy makers had expected, then we would expect to see a greater reduction in ONSET scores between initial assessment and case closure for those children whose YISP engagement included attendance at a family group conference. In order to answer the question, therefore, we compared the change in ONSET scores for FGC cases with the similar change in other YISP cases in which no family group conference was held. We were able to do this in all the pilots except Welshboro (where there were no non-FGC cases). We needed to discern whether there was a statistically significant difference between the two sets of cases *after* the influence of other factors has been taken into account. For example, we needed to know whether the FGC cases included a higher proportion of cases with a particular characteristic which could have resulted in better outcomes, irrespective of whether they experienced a family group conference. The approach we took was to build statistical models<sup>1</sup> which made it possible to identify whether there was a distinctive influence of FGC on the outcomes for children and young people.

The core of the modelling is the prediction of change in ONSET scores, so it was crucial to have an initial score and a final score. Not all the in-scope cases had both these scores recorded, however. There are four possible reasons why not all of the in-scope cases had a second ONSET score recorded for them:

1. The case was referred towards the end of our study period and a review or closure ONSET had not yet been undertaken.

<sup>1</sup> Linear regression in SPSSx (V14), using a STEPWISE option and 5 per cent as the criterion for inclusion.

2. The second ONSET score had not been recorded on the MIS database sent to the research team.
3. The case had closed/lapsed before a second ONSET had become relevant.
4. No closure ONSET was completed when the case was closed.

Whatever the reason, cases without a second ONSET score had to be dropped from the modelling analyses because we could not measure any change for these cases.

**Figure 7.4: Percentages of cases in each pilot area with a second ONSET score (ONSET2)**

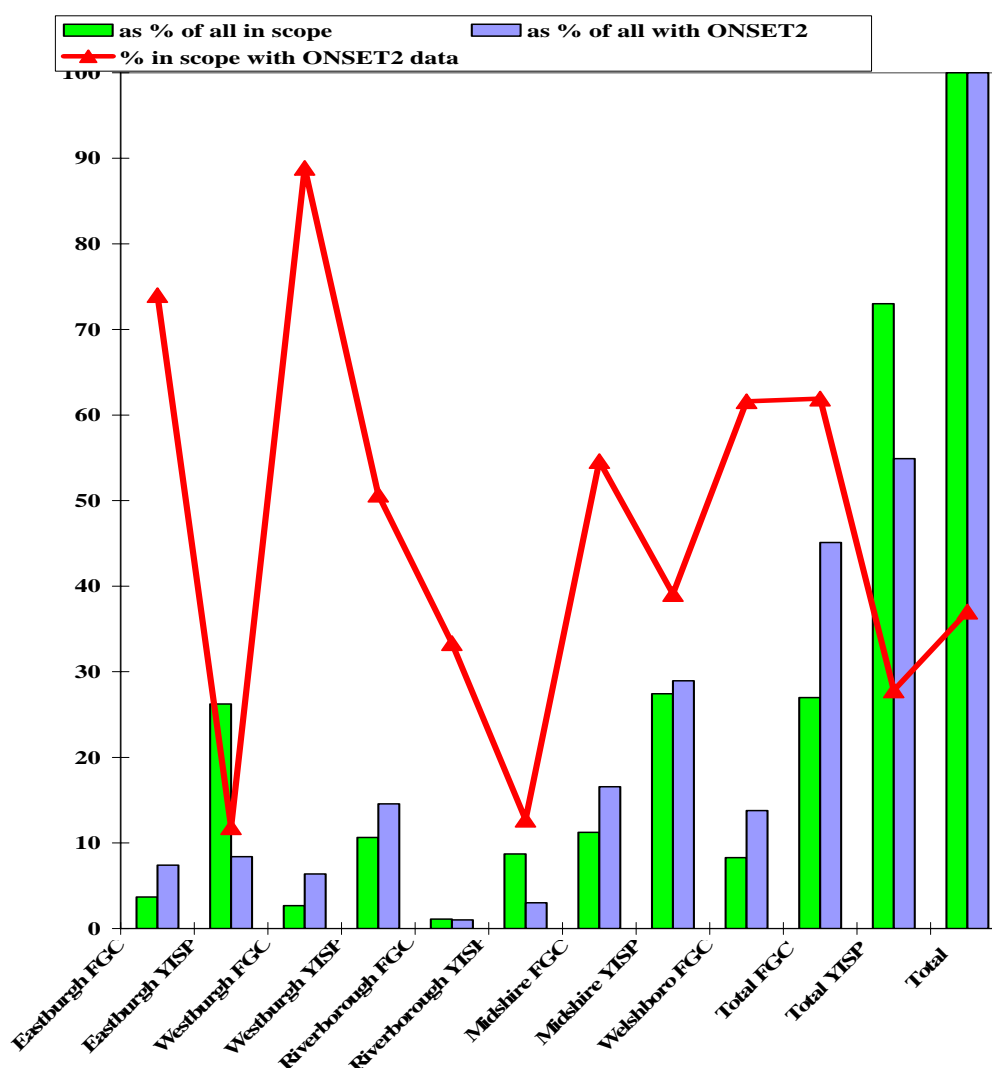


Figure 7.4 shows the effect of excluding the cases without a second ONSET score (referred to as ONSET2). The line on the graph shows the proportion of in-scope FGC and non-FGC cases (referred to as YISP-only cases) needed for the modelling. Sadly, less than 40 per cent of the in-scope cases could be included. There were very strong variations in this percentage, not only between the pilots but also between FGC and YISP-only cases. In all the pilots (except Welshboro), there was a lower proportion of ONSET2 scores for the YISP-only cases than for FGC cases. In aggregate, 68 per cent of the FGC in-scope cases recorded a second ONSET score, which was over twice as many cases as in the YISP-only group.

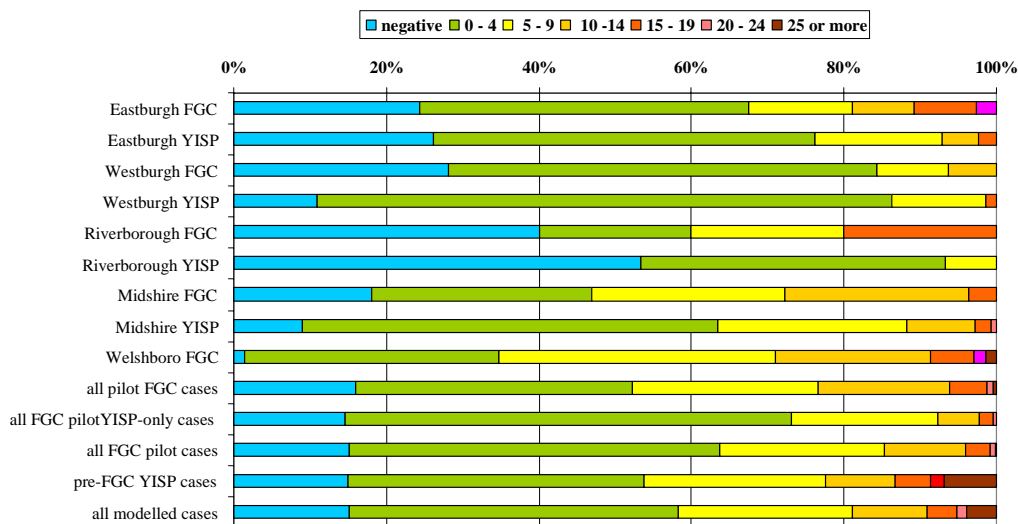


Figure 7.4 also shows, via the paired columns, the effect of this variation in ONSET2 availability. The green column indicates the contribution each pilot made to the total number of in-scope cases (both FGC and YISP-only), and the blue column shows the pilot's share of all the cases with second ONSET scores used in the modelling. While nearly three out of four in-scope cases were YISP-only cases, the contribution of these to the modelling was much reduced. In fact, the numbers of FGC and YISP-only cases where both ONSET scores were recorded and used in the modelling were very similar. In respect of the contribution made by each pilot, the main effect of excluding cases without a second ONSET score is that Eastburgh dropped from supplying nearly 30 per cent of the in-scope cases to supplying less than 10 per cent of cases with second ONSETs to be used in the modelling. Although the reduction in the number of cases available as a result of the requirement for both ONSET scores might have significantly changed the profile of the cases, the characteristics of the cases with both ONSET scores had very similar distributions of values relating to key factors such as age, gender and initial ONSET score to those of all the in-scope cases. We considered this to be encouraging.

The key variable for the modelling was the change in the ONSET score, measured by subtracting the value of ONSET2 from the initial ONSET score. Figure 7.5 shows the distribution of these ONSET change values. The distinctive results from Riverborough can be set aside, owing to the very small number of cases there with a second ONSET score (Figure 7.4). An overview of the data can be obtained by looking at the proportion of any set of cases with ONSET reductions of 4 or fewer. Figure 7.5 shows this in the sections of the bars coloured blue or green. For all pilots with both FGC and YISP-only cases, the proportion with these more modest ONSET reductions was higher for YISP-only than for FGC cases. This positive message about the value added by FGC is reinforced by the findings for Welshboro, where under 40 per cent of the FGC cases recorded a risk reduction of 4 or fewer. Figure 7.5 also shows the results for the FGC/YISP pilots alongside those from the national evaluation of YISPs. The cases analysed for the national evaluation are labelled pre-FGC/YISP cases here. It can be seen that the pre-FGC/YISP cases included a higher proportion with larger ONSET reductions than was found among the FGC/YISP pilots.

Unfortunately, several of the variables we had considered in the national evaluation of YISPs were simply unavailable in this present study because of the limitations associated with the FGC/YISPs' data set. This means that some of the other factors which may have influenced outcomes, which we would have wanted to have taken into account in the modelling so that they were not conflated with any FGC effect, could not be included. Nevertheless, we were able to take into account factors such as age, gender, SEN status and the initial ONSET score. In addition, we have identified the level of deprivation in the neighbourhoods where the children and young people lived. Using the home postcode, we were able to identify the deprivation score for the area: using the official Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). In the IMD, a higher value indicates an area where more people have greater social and economic problems.

**Figure 7.5: Distribution of cases in each pilot area by reduction of Onset scores**



**Measuring Change**

Table 7.1 shows the results of the modelling. The first column shows the main results produced by the modelling in the national evaluation of YISPs. The cases analysed were derived from the 13 YISP pilots (including Dockborough). In the national evaluation, the modelling suggested that three variables were significant in effecting the change to the ONSET score between the initial and second ONSET assessments in an average case:

1. For every point on the initial ONSET score (ONSET1), there was likely to be a 0.292 point reduction by the second ONSET assessment.
2. If the child or young person received a mentoring intervention, this was likely to reduce their ONSET score by slightly more than 2 points.
3. If the child had expressed discriminatory attitudes there was a rather stronger opposite effect, thus limiting or possibly reversing the reduction in the ONSET score over the intervention period.

The latter two variables were not available for the current data sets. The constant is negative, although this is not quite significant. In the national evaluation, the negative constant could be interpreted in different ways. It could be that simply being part of the YISP process had a slight alienating effect on the children and young people which the intervention then had to work hard at to eliminate; alternatively, the qualitative data had indicated that, as YISP keyworkers gained more knowledge about the child or young person during the YISP process, more risk factors were uncovered, which would then be included in the second ONSET assessment rather than in the initial assessment (when they were almost certainly present, but not yet identified). In other words, ‘additional’ risk factors emerged during the intervention, thus influencing the second ONSET scores.

The second column in Table 7.1 shows the results of the attempt to replicate the modelling undertaken in the national evaluation of YISPs, analysing the cases from the 13 YISP pilots, but including only the variables available for the cases from the FGC pilots. The findings are very similar with respect to the constant and the influence of the initial ONSET score (in other words, the higher the risks at the initial ONSET, the stronger the reduction in the ONSET score at case

closure). There is an additional significant effect relating to the deprivation level in the neighbourhood in which the child or young person lives. The influence of the IMD variable is relatively weak, but it indicates that coming from a more deprived neighbourhood is associated with a slightly higher reduction in ONSET score (all other things being equal).

Shifting the analyses to include the data from the FGC/YISP pilots (except Welshboro, which had no YISP-only cases) makes it possible to introduce the key variable which identifies any extra effect resulting from the inclusion of a family group conference in the YISP process. The third column of Table 7.1 records the results, and it is reassuring that they are not greatly dissimilar to the findings from the national evaluation. The negative effect of the constant – the effect of being part of the YISP programme – has become slightly stronger and significant. Although still significant, the initial ONSET effect is notably weaker, which seems to imply that the FGC/YISP pilots have been less successful than the YISP pilots in having the most impact on cases in which the initial risk factor scores were highest. That finding does have to be tempered, however, by the model demonstrating also that the FGC/YISP pilots achieved stronger reductions in the ONSET scores for boys, who, of course, represented the bulk of the cases.

There was no significant difference in ONSET reduction related to the level of deprivation in the home neighbourhood, the age of the child, or the possible SEN status. More importantly here, there was no differential effect for the FGC cases compared to the YISP-only cases in these pilots. In summary, the model did not find an extra effect, either positive or negative, on ONSET score reduction due specifically to the inclusion of a family group conference, when the other significant factors had been taken into account.

**Table 7.1: Results of the modelling – comparing statistically significant changes between initial and final ONSET scores for YISP and FGC cases**

Variables in model	All cases in the National Evaluation	All YISP-only cases in the FGC pilots*	All FGC cases in the FGC pilots	All three caseloads
<b>Constant</b>	(-1.378)	(-1.274)	-1.482	2.011
<b>Provision of a mentor</b>	2.078	X	X	X
<b>Discriminatory</b>	-2.405	X	X	X
<b>FGCera</b>	X	X	X	-4.157
<b>FGC mode</b>	X	X	-	2.206
<b>IMD</b>	-	0.049	-	X
<b>Initial ONSET score</b>	0.292	0.286	0.158	0.224
<b>Male</b>	n.s	n.s	1.245	n.s
<b>Age</b>	n.s	n.s	n.s	n.s
<b>Subject to a statement of special educational need.</b>	n.s	n.s	n.s	n.s

Notes: X denotes data not available for comparison, bold type denotes statistical significance, n.s denotes not significant.

\*Does not include Welshboro, which did not operate YISP without the FGC component.

In addition to the modelling described above, it was possible to pool the data on the FGC/YISP pilots' caseloads with equivalent data from the national evaluation to provide a sensitivity test for the results from the modelling. The pooling also enabled the model to assess whether, other things being equal, there was a marked difference in the reduction of ONSET scores between the two sets of cases. This was achieved by introducing a new variable, which we labelled 'FGCera', which enabled us to distinguish between the data from the national evaluation and the FGC data from this current study. We were able to include the Welshboro cases in the pooled analysis because the model we used did not require FGC pilots to include a YISP-only group of children. A consequence of including Welshboro, was that we could not include the IMD variable because it is not available for areas in Wales.

Table 7.1 shows the results of the pooled analysis in the final column. The effect of ONSET1 (the initial ONSET) has a value lying between those found for the two data sets separately, which is a very intuitively reasonable result. None of the other case-specific variables (gender, age and SEN) had a significant effect. Both the new FGCera variable and the FGC route through the YISPs variable are significant, and it is best to interpret these in combination with the constant:

- cases in the national evaluation pilots (pre-FGC/YISP cases) provide a baseline because they are only affected by the constant: this has become positive, and so suggests that these cases had a positive change in their ONSET score, which is just over 2 points more than the average for the pooled caseloads
- the next category comprises the YISP-only cases in the FGC/YISP pilots, the predicted outcome of which is affected by the constant plus the FGCera variable: summing these two suggests that these cases are likely to have seen a lower improvement (i.e. a smaller reduction) in their ONSET scores, by just over 2 points less than the average
- finally, the FGC cases are affected by the same two variables as the YISP-only cases, and also by the FGC route variable: the sum of these three effects suggests that these cases will have seen a reduction in the ONSET score, which is very close to, but slightly higher than, the average for all cases in the pooled data set.

In summary, then, the final model we used in our analyses suggests that:

- the FGC/YISP pilots were slightly less successful in achieving reductions in ONSET scores than the pilots in the national evaluation
- the children who attended a family group conference tended to see larger ONSET score reductions than the YISP-only children in the FGC/YISP pilots.

This latter finding can be interpreted as a positive result for FGC. It is important, however, to consider some caveats in relation to these findings. First, models such as this one seek only associations between the measured variables and cannot themselves establish a causal link – they are indicative only. Second, this model has very limited statistical power, as is to be expected, because very few models at the micro scale can reflect the huge range of differences between individual people, and their particular circumstances. Third, the modelling here

was limited by the data available to us, which did not include all the variables relating to factors which could influence outcomes. As a result of these limitations, it may be that at least some of the differential found by the modelling between the outcomes for FGC and YISP-only cases may actually be reflecting unobserved variations between these sets of cases – for example, those associated with family structure. The modelling in the national evaluation was also limited by the available data, which contained fewer variables than was hoped and a smaller number of cases than had been anticipated.

Bearing these limitations in mind, therefore, we can conclude, albeit with some caution, that, overall, the FGC/YISP pilots did not achieve as great a reduction in risk factor scores as we identified in the YISP pilots during the national evaluation. However, the children who attended a family group conference as part of their YISP involvement achieved a greater reduction in risk factor scores than those who did not. It would seem, therefore, that there was some added value associated with the FGC in these pilots.

### ***Follow-up Survey Questionnaires***

The evidence about the enhanced effectiveness of FGC drawn from the follow-up questionnaires is of a different kind from that which has resulted from the statistical modelling. It is drawn from the answers provided by parents and children who experienced a family group conference and does not contain any comparator data. Nevertheless, in our view, the consumers of FGC have an important contribution to make to an assessment of the value added by FGC.

#### **Parents**

On the whole, parents gave positive responses to questions they were asked about the FGC experience some months after they had attended a family group conference. They reported that things had got better for them and for their children who had been referred to the YISPs. Nevertheless, most parents indicated that their child had been in trouble of some kind since the family group conference had taken place. Over half said that their child had been in trouble at home; a quarter said their child had been in trouble with the police; nearly half reported that their child had been in trouble at school; and over a quarter said that their child had been in trouble in the local neighbourhood. Some children may well have been in trouble in several domains, but these findings nevertheless indicate that FGC and YISP interventions do not necessarily prevent poor behaviour. It is encouraging, however, that, despite continuing problems, most parents (62%) stated that their child's behaviour had improved to some extent, with 40 per cent of parents suggesting that the improvement had been considerable. These findings are important and chime with the views expressed by YISP and FGC professionals that small improvements should be celebrated even if problem behaviour has not been completely eradicated.

Parents were positive, also, about the FGC process, with over 80 per cent claiming that it had been a good thing for their family to take part in. Over a half of parents (53%) thought that their child had been helped by the family group conference, and 49 per cent said that their family had become stronger as a direct result of having gone to a conference.

### **Other Family Members**

Other family members also tended to report that things had improved since they had been to a family group conference: over half (59%) said that they thought the child's behaviour had improved in some way, and the same percentage thought that it had been a good thing for the family to take part. Over half (56%) of extended family members thought that the child concerned had been helped by the conference, but only 20 per cent thought that the family had become stronger as a result.

### **Children**

Although, as we have seen in previous sections, some of the children we spoke to had not been particularly positive about their conference, the majority (91%) who responded to the follow-up survey stated that the family group conference had helped them. In contrast to what their parents had reported, only a minority of children said they had been in trouble with the police, at school or in the community since their family group conference, although 47 per cent admitted that they had been in trouble at home since then. Only 12 per cent of children admitted to getting into trouble with the police, and 12 per cent said they had been in trouble on the streets. Just 21 per cent said they had been in trouble at school. There was, however, a distinct age difference in respect of the responses: children and young people aged 12 and 13 were more likely than younger children to tell us that they had been in trouble at school, and this finding was not related to gender or to ONSET scores. We cannot know whether children aged 12 and 13 are more likely to get into trouble at school or whether they are simply more likely to admit to this than younger children.

When we asked children and young people in the follow-up survey how they had felt about their lives since going to a family group conference, 61 per cent said they had felt better, 16 per cent said things had stayed the same, and 23 per cent indicated that things had got worse. These responses would seem to suggest that, although children and young people usually felt that the family group conference had helped them in some way and that they had not been getting into as much trouble since, they still regarded some areas of their lives as troublesome and difficult. This is consistent with the responses of parents indicating that, although there had been improvements in their child's behaviour, these had not been as great as had been hoped. Clearly, the survey responses indicate that FGC is not a magic wand and does not eradicate difficulties completely. It can be helpful and constructive, but by itself it is not a panacea for high-risk children and young people. Nevertheless, in respect of the satisfaction levels of parents and children, our findings here are very similar to those that emerged from the national evaluation of YISPs.

### **Parent and Child Satisfaction**

In addition to the information from the follow-up survey, we collected some data from the questionnaires we designed to measure the satisfaction of parents and children. As part of the qualitative element of the evaluation, hard copies of satisfaction questionnaires were collected from parents and children in Coburn when they were interviewed at Time 2. We received 15 satisfaction questionnaires completed by the children interviewed, and 12 completed by the parents of those children, mostly mothers. We analysed these questionnaires,

but because of the relatively small numbers caution should be employed when interpreting the findings.

Parents were asked how satisfied they were with the help their child received, and about the extent to which YISP services had helped them in their role as parents or carers. The majority of parents stated that they were either very satisfied (8) or fairly satisfied (3) with the help that their child had received. One parent stated that she was not at all satisfied with the YISP, however, and went on to say that this was because the YISP keyworker had been off sick. It would appear that no one else had picked up the work with that family and that her child's behaviour had got worse.

Most of the parents thought that YISP intervention had helped them. Six of the twelve said that it had helped them a lot, while a further five stated that it had helped them a little. One parent said it had not helped her at all, although she had been satisfied with the help her child had received:

*It's helped the situation, but not me personally because it was for [my child]. I just felt they were not there to support me.*

Parents who felt that YISP intervention had helped them referred to having had someone to talk to, having received extra support for themselves, and having been helped to re-evaluate their own parenting, as the following remark illustrates:

*It helped me to realise I'm not out on a limb – not on my own. I'm not the bad one in this. You can be a good mum and still have problems.*

Parents were also asked to assess how far they thought that their child's behaviour had improved as a result of their involvement with the YISP. The majority stated that their child's behaviour had improved a little, two that it had not improved at all, and two that it had improved a lot. Most parents said that they would recommend the YISP to another parent in the same circumstances as themselves. They commented as follows:

*You need somewhere to start – to try to help with things. They can help to put a new perspective on things.*

*[YISP can] try to get things out in the open – 'cos kids can't talk to their mothers. All can voice concerns – learn about different approaches.*

The children were asked to rate how much they had enjoyed taking part in the YISP programme, and the vast majority said that they had enjoyed it. They had liked being able to talk to someone and taking part in activities; they had also liked the food at the family group conference. Many stated that there was nothing they had not liked, but some said they had found some aspects of their intervention boring.

The children were also asked whether they thought YISP intervention had helped them with what had been going on in their life. The responses were generally positive: most (7) said that the YISP had helped 'a lot', while others (6) said it had helped a little. Only two children thought that it had not helped them

at all. Asked to explain the answer they gave, most children gave responses relating to their own behaviour:

*It keeps me out of trouble.*

*It helped me calm down.*

The children were asked to rate the YISP experience on a scale of one to ten, one being the lowest and ten the highest score. The responses were varied. One child who scored YISP intervention highly stated:

*They helped with everything and got me better than I was before.*

Another child who scored YISP intervention less highly stated:

*It didn't really do much for me.*

The children were also asked whether they would recommend the YISP to a friend in similar circumstances. The majority (12 of 15) were confident that they would, because it was 'good' and they had found it useful themselves.

Comments included the following:

*You should get involved with YISP – it's really good and you do projects all the time.*

*If they had a problem and wanted someone to talk to I'd advise them to go to YISP.*

Overall, the comments were positive, and on the basis of this very small sample we concluded that the majority of parents and children in our interview sample in Coburgh were satisfied with YISP intervention.

### ***The Evidence from Scale Measures***

We used two validated measures during our interviews with young people and their parents, but it is important to remember that these involved very small samples of families from just two case-study areas. We refer to each measure in turn. The findings can be seen as indicative rather than as providing any clear evidence about the changes associated with FGC intervention.

#### **Family Assessment Device**

The FAD measures six areas of family functioning, including problem solving and communication. It was designed originally as a 60-item questionnaire to be administered to family members aged over twelve. We used the shorter 12-item version, and asked parents to complete it at Time 1 and Time 2 face-to-face interviews in our case-study areas in order to assess changes in family functioning during YISP involvement. We obtained responses from 13 families at two points in time. Responses to each question are presented on a four-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Possible scores ranged from 0 to 36, with higher scores indicating higher family dysfunction. With just 13 complete sets of scales, any results should be taken as indicative and not conclusive, but family functioning showed a slight improvement between the Time 1 and Time 2 interviews. The median score for family functioning at Time 1 was 17, whereas at Time 2 it had dropped to 15, indicating that families tended to be functioning better.



### Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire is a short behavioural screening questionnaire that can be used in respect of children aged between three and sixteen. It consists of 25 items about psychological attributes, some positive and some negative, that can be subdivided into five scales: emotional symptoms; conduct problems; hyperactivity/inattention; peer relationship problems; and pro-social behaviour. Questionnaires can be completed by parents or teachers in respect of children, and there is a version for children to self-complete. High scores can indicate the possibility of mental health disorders. The SDQ was administered at two points in time in our two case-study areas with parents and children who took part in our interviews. We obtained ten complete sets of data relating to children, which is insufficient to conduct robust analyses of change, so we focused our analysis primarily on the SDQs completed by children at Time 1, which provide a descriptive account of the children interviewed.

An overall difficulties score can be obtained by summing the individual scales (excluding the pro-social scale). A rough rule of thumb in a community sample is that approximately 10 per cent of cases will score in the 'abnormal' range, indicating the likelihood of mental health disorders, while a further 10 per cent of cases will score in the 'borderline' category. When the total difficulties score was applied to the 19 children aged between nine and fourteen who had completed an SDQ soon after attending their family group conference, nearly a third scored in the abnormal range, and a further 20 per cent scored in the borderline range (Table 7.2). Closer examination indicated that these children scored highly on both the conduct problems score and the hyperactivity score, which is consistent with our fieldwork observations that many of the children had become involved in the YISPs because of problems with their behaviour, and that many had statements of special educational need or had been diagnosed with mental health difficulties such as ADHD.

**Table 7.2: SDQ scores for children interviewed (n = 19)**

<b>Scale</b>	<b>Normal score (%)</b>	<b>Borderline score (%)</b>	<b>Abnormal score (%)</b>
Total difficulties scale	47	21	32
Emotional symptoms score	74	5	21
Conduct problems score	21	32	47
Hyperactivity score	58	0	42
Peer problems score	74	0	26
Pro-social behaviour score	90	11	0

Although these measures cannot be used to generalise about our total sample of children and young people, they substantiate our general finding that most of them had fairly serious difficulties when they were referred to the YISPs. The evidence from the repeat SDQs at Time 2 shows a positive trajectory relating to change, which lends some weight to the finding from our national evaluation of the YISP pilots that the highest-risk children and young people are more likely to achieve a positive change relating to risk factors as a result of YISP intervention.

### ***Exploring the Effectiveness of FGC – Parents’ Perceptions***

The quantitative data relating to changes in ONSET scores provide some but not overwhelming evidence of value added as a result of FGC. However, we suspect that the potentially positive impacts are rather more subtle, and so we asked families and the children and young people themselves to describe the impacts on them, and the changes which had resulted from their FGC experience. We were aiming specifically to find out how the children and their families described any changes that had occurred as a direct result of their participating in a family group conference and the YISP.

The majority of the parents identified a range of positive changes since their engagement with the YISPs. Several months after the family group conference, most parents associated it with a feeling of relief at having had the opportunity to speak about their problems and to be heard by service providers and other professionals with responsibility for their child. This opportunity had had a significant impact, as Ben and Darcy’s mother reflected in her interview:

*You can all speak freely without the other person being there, but actually speaking your mind when you’ve got a family together is something completely different, and once your family can do that it breaks down a multitude of barriers.*

Another mother felt that the family group conference had been important because she had been able to put things in her terms to the professionals:

*So, they were there for me and the main thing was they were there for [my son] ... They could see my point of view of why he should change schools because of the bullies ... so they [the YISP keyworkers] explained it in posh language, as you put it, to the teachers ... and we just seemed to get everything out in the open and it all seemed to work fantastic.*

Enabling parents to talk openly about problems and to explain things from their own perspective are key attributes of the FGC process. The family group conference also helped parents to access the ‘big picture’, as some put it, and to understand better the nature of their child’s difficulties:

*Everything could be addressed within that one meeting, rather than having to go round to different relevant people. So, it’s not just time-saving, it’s the fact that everything is there at hand, any questions you want answering can be answered ... The education authority were invited and came along as well ... So, everybody that I needed to speak to, and had knowledge that I needed, were able to give me those answers there and then at the meeting.*

(Mother of Kieron, Charlie and Ellie, aged 8, 10 and 11)

As a result of the open discussions, parents felt that noticeable changes had occurred in the attitudes of services such as the police and schools: they spoke of an increased level of involvement and commitment to finding solutions to the family’s problems. One parent, for example, told us that the community police officer had kept in regular contact and had been proactive in countering negative perceptions of the family in the local neighbourhood. Naomi’s mother described how the school accepted the need to transfer Naomi to another

school, and since this had been actioned Naomi had been much happier about going to school. Naomi's mother was convinced that the transfer might not have happened, and certainly not as quickly, had there not been a family group conference.

Speaking openly in the presence of key professionals had clearly instigated a process of reconciliation between one family and their neighbours after their respective children had been fighting. The family group conference had enabled Guy and Siobhan's mother to talk about problems with neighbours in the presence of the antisocial behaviour officer. He had subsequently arranged a meeting between the two families and had mediated between them. This was described by Guy and Siobhan's mother as being 'really good', particularly since there had been no further problems with the neighbours. Other parents said that the family group conference had provided an opportunity to resolve differences in the family because they had been able to gain a better understanding of the points of view of other family members. For one family, the review meeting had restored relations between the carers and a set of grandparents, allowing contact to be restored between the child referred to the YISP and the grandparents.

Not only were parents able to 'get things out in the open' at a family group conference, but they felt that their children were sometimes helped to speak their mind. Ben and Darcy's mother thought that this had had a significant effect on the family:

*Darcy felt that I didn't love her as much as the others ... that shocked us ... Ben didn't like us shouting at him all the time ... When I look back, I suppose I just didn't see it ... they made things more aware to me.*

Understanding their child's point of view had resulted in positive improvements in home life for several parents. Stuart's mother, for example, told us:

*Me and Stuart can actually talk about our problems ... Stuart never actually came to me beforehand with any problems ... he's like me, he'd bottle it up and then he'd explode.*

Indeed, several parents talked about improvements at home and at school since the family group conference. Some parents had been helped to cope when children were offered activities at weekends, giving them much-needed respite from disruptive behaviour. Separated parents had been helped to improve their interaction, thus easing the tensions for the children. Three families told us that their child was much more willing to go to school, either because the teachers had a better understanding of the issues or because the child was more able to deal with things like bullying:

*Fraser now wants to try harder at school ... fantastic! You couldn't have a better outcome, even if that was the only outcome ... that is brilliant, you know.*

(Mother of Fraser, aged 13)

The parent who described the greatest change as a result of the family group conference had been on benefits while trying to cope with her children's

problems. She told us that things had improved to such an extent that she was able to go back to work, thereby transforming her financial circumstances and giving the family a degree of financial security:

*My life's completely changed, you know. I didn't think, eight months ago, that I would be saying I've been back in work and the changes would be like this. I was almost in the depths of despair to be honest.*

(Mother of Charlie, aged 10)

Charlie's mother was the only parent to talk about such major changes as a result of the family group conference. Most talked about small but significant changes in their child's behaviour, but were aware of ongoing difficulties which had not yet been resolved. George's mother, for instance, was positive about the family group conference because it had made her conscious of the need to praise her son more for good behaviour, but noted that although there had been some improvement in his school attendance there were still problems:

*I don't think it [the family group conference] made any difference at all, to be honest with you ... After the meeting he [George] still went and got himself into trouble. I don't think there's anything different.*

Parents gave several reasons for their perception that, although some changes for the better had occurred, the conference had not made a 'real' difference. They regarded the support provided by the YISP keyworker as the main reason for why things had changed, and saw the family group conference as just a minor part, albeit a valuable one, of a larger programme of intervention. They ascribed the positive impacts they reported, however, to the work of the YISP staff rather than to any benefits associated with the conference. Some parents felt they had got more from the discussions with the FGC co-ordinator in preparation for the conference than from the conference itself:

*We got more information out of the co-ordinator in the two meetings we actually met him, and the phone calls, than we did out of the family meeting.*

(Mother of Jason and Scott, aged 11 and 12)

Parents' praise for the YISP keyworkers mirrored that of the parents in the national evaluation of YISPs: some parents eulogised about their YISP keyworker's tireless efforts to secure activities, referrals to other agencies such as CAMHS, and changes of school. The family group conference was something they were happy to participate in as part of the YISP programme, but it was the efforts of YISP keyworkers which had made the 'real' difference. In this sense, YISP keyworkers, rather than the family itself, were regarded as the engines of change. In the view of some parents, then, the family group conference was less valuable and even expendable, as Tom and Victoria's mother explained:

*I think whether we'd have had the conference or not a lot of stuff still would have been done ... The [YISP worker] was not being fobbed off by anybody ... the amount of people she must have had a row with to sort of say 'You will do something for this family ... you will sort yourselves out'.*

At times, the disappointment which resulted from a lack of follow-up activity after interventions had been proposed at a family group conference limited the overall beneficial impacts of the conference in the eyes of the parents. They told us that activities had been promised which did not materialise or that the help which had been offered was inappropriate. Complaints were voiced about activities not continuing for long enough or about changes which were promised but which took far too long to implement. When promised activities and changes did not happen, parents began to doubt the usefulness of the family group conference and their initial enthusiasm diminished. Disappointment was also voiced that the family plan dealt only with changes at home and in the family and often did not address more serious concerns such as offending behaviour. Some parents took the view that, while there had been some improvements at home, these were less significant when no one had addressed a child's offending. One mother told us that, although her child had carried out most of what was required in the family plan (mainly household chores), these were trivial improvements and hardly signified a major change:

*I mean, to me, not doing his homework's nothing ... If that was all I'd got to worry about, I could cope with that quite easily.*

(Mother of George, aged 12)

George's mother felt that she was still living her life one day at a time in apprehension of her son reoffending with friends who were older than him. Other parents described a turn-around in relations with the school as a result of the family group conference, but were no better able to limit the damage their child was causing to family relations and to their home. Two parents in our sample described court cases involving family members which had taken place after the family group conference, which had negated any positive impacts from the conference and escalated the children's needs beyond anything which could be delivered via FGC.

It would seem that most parents could describe a number of beneficial effects resulting from the conference, but did not see any overall transformation for the better. Their responses varied, depending on whether they saw the conference as something which would herald changes in service delivery, changes in their child's behaviour or changes in the family as a whole. Parents had normally prioritised, at least in their own mind, the outcomes they wanted to achieve from attending a family group conference and these are discussed in turn.

#### **Change in Service Delivery**

Parents in six of the families interviewed were clearly looking to the family group conference to address what schools and/or other agencies were doing for their child. They were looking for solutions to be delivered by other agencies rather than via any efforts the family might make itself. All the parents believed that the problems had arisen through no fault of their own: the children concerned had been assessed by psychological services or had a history of service involvement prior to YISP referral. They regarded their child's behaviour as symptomatic of a medical/psychological condition or of a response to bullying by others. In other words, poor behaviour was not the child's fault and was beyond the child's control or power to change. To some extent, these parents

regarded their children as victims, and usually did not concede any need to receive help or intervention in the home. Although some of them had been offered parenting support or other parenting interventions, none had taken up these offers and all said that the family plan had been largely ignored since the conference. These parents rarely saw any need for the family to do things differently, and so regarded family time as a waste of time during the conference.

Most of these parents were relatively positive about the conference as a forum for confronting schools and other service providers and for opening the eyes of these agencies to the problems they were experiencing. They saw YISP staff as tireless champions with saint-like status, and the conference as the mechanism to deliver appropriate responses from other agencies. If the agencies failed to deliver or reneged on promises made at the conference, the conference was described as failing to make a difference.

#### **Change in the Child's Behaviour**

Five parents we interviewed clearly saw it as being the child's responsibility to change problematic behaviour. They evaluated the effectiveness of the family group conference by reference to its contribution to promoting changes in their child's behaviour. This attitude was most common among mothers living on their own with their children, who described their children's behaviour as disruptive and difficult and as 'a burden' that they were struggling to cope with alone. The family group conference gave these parents an opportunity to share the burden and thus it became a cathartic experience:

*Instead of me carrying it all about what he was doing ... his attitude, his temper and things like that ... other people knew what I was going through.*

(Mother of Stuart, aged 10)

Stuart's mother had found this very helpful. She and other mothers were also looking for respite or relief from the burden and for interventions which would help children 'to mend their ways':

*It would be ideal if there was something there for them ... to take them away from here ... to sort them out ... to explain right from wrong ... it would be better for them.*

(Mother of Leo, aged 9)

Mothers like Leo's were not seeking parenting advice – they just wanted someone else to take responsibility for changing their children. One mother had found it helpful to talk to a worker from a substance abuse organisation, but for the most part parents wanted help with their child. These parents tended not to be critical of schools or the way in which statutory organisations had dealt with their child. Their family plans tended to list behavioural changes the child had to make, often linked to some kind of reward system. None of the family plans had worked for these families, however, and these parents were the least satisfied with their conference, blaming the lack of beneficial impact on the non-delivery of hoped-for activities or to activities offered not being appropriate. These parents were not necessarily prepared to acknowledge other issues which might

be contributing to their child's behaviour, and some felt it inappropriate when other family members were approached to help.

### **Change in the Family**

The remaining six parents interviewed at Time 2 all talked about the conference as an opportunity for some or all of the household or family members to take collective responsibility for addressing problems associated with the child referred to the YISP, in collaboration with professionals. Some parents in this group were living alone with their children, some had new partners, and most invited other family members to the family group conference. It was these parents who talked about having been able to gain fresh insight into their child's problems, to hear other points of view, and to break down barriers within the family. The family group conference had helped these parents to realise that they had, perhaps, neglected to talk to their children, thereby reinforcing divisions within the household, or that they had been focusing exclusively on the child who had been referred to the YISP, at the expense of other children and family members. These significant insights enabled several families to promote considerable improvements in family functioning. Charlie's mother put it like this:

*The thing I liked about the family conference meeting was the children could put over the things that they liked and what they didn't like, that could make me look at how I could perhaps change the way I went about things. Because it wasn't just about the kids, it was about how we dealt with things individually and as a family. I think that made me see a bit more clearly that I was, and perhaps still do, pander to Charlie slightly. But with Charlie's problems ... If I don't treat him delicately than it's a knock-on effect for everybody ... in that he won't get out of bed and he'll make everyone late for school ...*

(Mother of Keiron, Charlie and Ellie, aged 8, 10 and 11)

Some of these parents had taken up the offer of parenting interventions and had learned new strategies to cope with the children:

*There's all sorts of things I've learnt. And because I've gone a little bit harder on her, she doesn't like the new mum! But ... she's got to learn that there's rules in life and she's got to follow them. And she's walking all over us basically. But, hopefully, now I'm getting some help. But I've took every bit of help ... I've had YISP, CAMHS, I'm actually seeing a therapist, a family therapist ... I've been on courses ...*

(Mother of Shellie, aged 12)

These parents held varying perceptions about the impact of FGC. Some were generally positive, perhaps more so than other groups of parents:

*I personally don't see the point of having a [YISP worker] if you're not going to have a family conference.*

(Mother of Ben and Darcy, aged 11 and 13)

This was the strongest endorsement of the added-value of FGC in the context of YISP intervention that we heard during the study. These parents had implemented their family plan with some degree of success and described

doing so as very much a family concern, a new deal brokered towards a better life together. When things did not work out, they tended to attribute this to a combination of factors, such as not getting everybody to attend the conference, family members not following through on agreements reached at the conference, or other family events getting in the way.

Overall, however, none of the parents interviewed at Time 2 thought that YISP intervention or the family group conference had had a negative impact, and only a few described it as having been a 'waste of time'. Only one mother said that there had been absolutely no change in any aspect of their child's difficulties since they had been referred to the YISP.

### ***Children's Perceptions of Impact***

As we have noted previously in this report, children and young people tended to have rather different views from their parents about FGC and their experience of it. Generally, they were less enthusiastic, not surprisingly, and less inclined to see FGC and YISP intervention as having much to offer them. The children who said that their involvement with YISP and FGC had made no difference whatsoever had not been expecting anything to change, primarily because they had not thought they needed any help anyway. The majority of the children and young people interviewed at Time 2 did, however, describe some changes in their lives, at home, at school, or in their locality, as well as some differences in themselves. Joseph, for example, thought that there had been some improvement in the interaction in his family:

*There's less arguments ... I can put it [his point of view] across more now than I was before ... Mum says we're having a lot of family meetings and everybody has to come and sit round the table.*

Joseph had found that these 'little meetings' had made it easier for him to talk. Other children said they had 'calmed down', giving examples such as not throwing things or slamming doors any more. Relationships with estranged family members had improved for some children.

Several children told us that things had improved at school, often as a result of their having changed schools. The children concerned were not always sure whether things had got better as a result of the family group conference or whether a transition from primary to secondary school had actually made the difference. The children who had changed their school as a direct result of the discussions in the conference were positive and happy about the change. One young person was disappointed, however, when a new head teacher ignored the measures that had been put in place to help him, undoing all the good that had been done previously. This case indicates just how important it is for changes to be sustained and for professionals to communicate with each other about ways of dealing with a troublesome youngster, especially when they have resulted from the FGC process in which the school has participated.

Changing schools, as we have seen from the parents' accounts, could have a very beneficial impact on children who had previously been very unhappy at school, but the children themselves were inclined to think that things would have got better even if they had not gone to a family group conference. By contrast, the changes children described as having happened at home and in



the community were changes they associated with going to the conference: they linked these changes to the discussions that had taken place during the family group conference, to the referrals that had been made, and to the family plan. Some young people thought they themselves had changed since their involvement with a YISP. They talked about feeling happier and more settled, and some said that they were calmer in themselves. One young person told us that he thought about his behaviour much more than he had done in the past, and another felt she had changed her behaviour, although she said her attitudes had not changed.

Several of the children we interviewed talked about changes in their lives brought about by the activities to which they had been referred. These had made life less boring and had allowed them to make new friends. Making new friends had been important for some of the young people, and one girl talked about the confidence this had given her to face going out in her area, something she had previously resisted. Others felt that they had stopped getting into trouble in the community because they no longer associated with their old friends.

Although most of the children and young people identified one or more positive changes in their lives, they nevertheless tended to say that the family group conference had made no 'real' difference to them, much like their parents. Moreover, some children described the impacts as having been short-lived. Maddie told us:

*At first the YISP was really helpful. Then, like now it's not really helpful. But ... I've not really [been yelling] and I don't throw things or slam doors any more.*

There appear to be some contradictions here. On the one hand, Maddie was saying that her YISP involvement was no longer helpful, although it previously had been; on the other, she admitted that her behaviour had improved. The YISPs were intended to offer brief, focused programmes of intervention, and it may be that the changes that were encouraged were small, incremental shifts which children and their parents could identify but which had not been as dramatic as they might have hoped. In some cases, the changes that had occurred were not what the young person had been seeking, or were seen as less important than some other issues in their lives. For instance, the young people might be engaging in activities at home and doing more about the house but nothing much might have changed in their lives beyond the household. Some were disappointed that external activities that had been promised had not materialised and others were still having problems at school even if things were better in the family. In some cases, it became clear that the differences resulting from the conference had been overshadowed by aspects of their lives which had not changed. George, for example, did not think the conference had made any difference to him or his family, and told us that his grandmother, to whom he appeared to be close, had since fallen out with his father, which meant that he did not see her any more. Although he had done the things mentioned in his family plan he did not regard them as having been helpful because the subsequent rift in the family had had such a negative impact.

It seems that some subtle but important shifts in behaviour had occurred between our Time 1 and our Time 2 interviews. Many of these could be attributed to the family group conference or to YISP involvement more generally but, overall, children and young people did not regard the changes as amounting to very much. They often saw these changes as minor and inconsequential within the overall context of their everyday lives. Some children were aware that the family group conference had not delivered what they had expected. What appears to have been important for many of them, however, was having had the chance to speak for themselves, to say how things were for them and tell family members and key professionals what had been bothering them. Even if the longer-term changes were not very great, the family group conference had certainly empowered many young people at the time, and this in itself should be seen as a positive outcome.

### ***Understanding Families' Responses***

In some ways, the interview responses are contradictory: parents and children were mostly positive about their experience of FGC and YISP involvement, yet inclined to say that the conference had not made any 'real' difference to the problems. They also described feelings of empowerment they had had during the conference because they could speak out, and they articulated some positive changes that had occurred at school, at home and in the community subsequently. These responses suggest that families did not witness any seismic changes and that the progress made was less than they might have been hoping for. Nevertheless, for most families there was some progress, and children's behaviour did change, as did the interaction in some of the families.

These findings suggest that the FGC component of YISP intervention is doing something positive: it can deliver incremental changes at the level of personal relationships, school, and the neighbourhood. We realised after our Time 1 interviews that families' expectations were usually far-reaching and unspecific, and possibly unrealistic given that YISP intervention is brief and focused and relies on the voluntary co-operation of children, young people and their families. If problems persist even after YISP intervention has ended, however, it is hardly surprising that many families felt that the conference had not made much difference.

For parents who were confident about their family life and parenting skills but felt that their child's treatment had been inappropriate, the family group conference appeared to have had an immediate and positive impact, primarily because they were able to state their case to professionals. Unfortunately subsequent delays in referrals to other agencies served to let them down. Similarly, parents who regarded their children as the source of their problems thought that the family group conference had a positive impact because they could articulate their difficulties and look to others to solve them and acknowledge the behavioural problems which were seemingly beyond parental control. These parents were subsequently disappointed if they were expected to make modifications to their own parenting and home life.

Parents who acknowledged their own need to change, and who took responsibility for their child's problems, were clearly relieved when they could express their points of view, hear those of other family members and rally the

family to offer support. If family members subsequently failed to implement plans agreed at the conference, the breakthrough which had been in their grasp was denied them and disappointment followed.

It is easy to see how the conference itself could be a moment of high expectation and the aftermath a period of disappointment when things did not work out as expected. The build-up to the conference and the conference itself raised expectations for most of the families about the scale of change possible and indicated that something good was about to happen. Later on, when some problems still persisted, it was difficult for parents to regard the tangible changes as having constituted a 'real' difference. Clearly, FGC is not going to please all of the families all of the time, and it seems that expectations regarding what it can achieve need to be both realistic and regularly reviewed. Only a minority of the parents we spoke to considered that they themselves needed to do something towards making substantive changes, and the one parent who was thrilled about the enormous changes she attributed to FGC had taken on board the need to learn new parenting strategies relating to discipline and the rewarding of good behaviour. For most parents, however, the ongoing realities and challenges in their everyday lives meant that it was difficult for them to single out the impact of the family group conference and YISP interventions, thus minimising the often significant progress that had been achieved.

### ***Professional Perspectives***

We reported in our national evaluation of YISPs that YISP staff were keen to celebrate small changes and improvements in behaviour and were not necessarily looking for or expecting YISP intervention to produce dramatic impacts. Since YISP was a relatively short, focused intervention, the goal has been to facilitate change in the right direction and ensure that in the future the children and their families are supported by mainstream services as necessary. In our interviews with YISP and FGC staff in the two case-study pilots they echoed these sentiments. Staff involved with families in the interview sample highlighted a number of outcomes which they regarded as particular to the FGC intervention: a breakthrough in family relations, the repair or re-establishment of relations with non-resident fathers, and securing the involvement of key agencies to help the family. Several professionals viewed the contribution of FGC as promoting an incremental change that could lead to further improvement, rather than as an intervention that directly brought about an overall transformation for the family. We examine each of these achievements in turn.

#### **Family Breakthrough**

The outcome most frequently attributed to a family group conference by practitioners was the achievement of a breakthrough in family relations. The opportunity for family members to come together and talk to one another at the conference appeared, in many cases, to offer a watershed. For example, separated parents were able to renew communications, parents were able to understand their children's points of view, and members of the family were able to realise the consequences of their own attitudes or behaviour. One YISP

keyworker, for instance, found that in many of her cases the family group conference was the first occasion on which family members had been able to sit down and talk without berating each other, and that this novel situation had changed their perceptions of themselves. Ben and Darcy's keyworker told us:

*I think it got them talking. I think it got some people being honest and I think they started thinking of some things that they needed to do as a family. I think it helped them realise where the positives were, what the good things were, and that compared to some other families they're very close.*

Some practitioners described this aspect of family group conferences as especially important in situations where they felt the child's problems derived essentially from the parents' behaviour or attitudes. A demonstration to the child of parental co-operation could be a significant event for them, as Stuart's keyworker told us:

*... I think it was a positive that they were all sitting there and willing to take part and that they all wanted the best for Stuart ... actually had people who were working together to try and help Stuart with some of his behaviour issues ... I think he knows that the family's there to support him and I think they know that they were there specifically for him for that specific moment in that meeting and that people were there to try and help him and they wanted the best for him. I think he was aware of that.*

Some YISP keyworkers had noted a visible impact on a child's appearance in the course of such a conference. Matt's keyworker described the impact on Matt of family members offering to help him, as follows:

*It [the FGC] improved communication, it got Gran on board, sort of officially offering to help, where mam knew she could go to her and she was offering help to the dad, which was good. It got both sets of step-parents talking to each other and it just improved the family relationships, but it was more of the pleasure on Matt's face, seeing the five adults together talking, which was what made the whole thing worthwhile.*

Others registered an important change within families when family members saw each other as – in the words of one worker – 'singing from the same hymn book'. This shift enabled family members to think differently about themselves. Keyworkers recognised that the conference, as well as bringing into the open issues or views that had not been expressed before, was rewarding for family members, who could have their say in a public forum, and that this could boost their sense of self-worth:

*I think it's beneficial for the family ... They feel valued and they feel that ... 'I know Johnny's behaving terribly but now people are taking it seriously – we're going to be able to talk around the table and people are listening.'*

(Naomi's keyworker)

Several YISP keyworkers saw such achievements as empowering those they worked with:

*What I like about it is, I feel as though it empowers the family. They feel as though they've got some control, they've got some investment in what they've actually put together – a plan that they've put together – and they can see that it's for their benefit, for nobody else's benefit, and that nobody's actually imposing anything on them. So that they can actually come out of a family group conference a lot of the time feeling quite positive that they've actually sat round and been able to talk about it. Sometimes the first time they've actually been able to sit round a table and talk without things kicking off big-style.*

(Stuart's keyworker)

One keyworker found that all her families reported a big improvement in family life following the family group conference, citing Ashleigh's family as one for whom the ownership and control they had taken at their conference had given them the impetus to improve their family situation and restore their daughter's attendance at school.

Putting the child's needs in the foreground of a co-operative discussion was seen as having the potential to improve family relations beyond the conference. Adrian's FGC co-ordinator, for example, felt that his conference had led Adrian to start getting on with his mother. Getting Matt's parents and step-parents to talk with him was described by his worker as having led to improvements in the facilitation of contact arrangements, and to a subsequent sharing of responsibility for discipline and decision-making in relation to his sister. The airing of issues at Matt's conference had led Matt's stepfather to realise that some aspects of his own behaviour distressed Matt, and had led Matt himself to reconsider some of his actions. Matt's YISP keyworker told us:

*And his temper did calm down he stopped smashing up the house. Because they put over the dangers to the baby. When he was throwing things around that could harm the baby as well. So I think when Matt started thinking about her he changed his mind a little.*

These shifts in family dynamics were regarded by staff as extremely positive; one keyworker described them as the best changes a conference can make. The professionals we interviewed were firmly of the view that a great deal of the problem behaviour exhibited by children resulted from things which happened in their family. So, if FGC can empower family members to think about their own behaviour and improve relationships, this will have a positive effect on the child's risk factors. One keyworker described family group conferences as cathartic.

### **Improving Relationships with Fathers**

Perhaps one of the most critical aspects of family relationships is the relationship children have with a non-resident parent. An increasing body of research has demonstrated the importance of fathers in a child's life (Cowan and Cowan, 2007; Goldman, 2005; O'Brien, 2004), and the absence of a father as a result of parental separation and divorce is regarded as potentially highly problematic for a child. Indeed, the lack of father engagement can have negative impacts on a child's educational attainment and well-being. Not surprisingly, therefore, some practitioners regarded the repair of father-child

relationships as a very important goal. One YISP keyworker told us that a high proportion of the children and young people with whom she worked had lost contact with their fathers, and she regarded this as a source of many of the problems the children faced:

*We have a lot of little lads that are left with mum and dad's staying out of the scene and they're targeting mum in particular. There are loads of cases where that happens.*

She went on to describe a case where she felt that the conference had been vital in establishing that the child wanted to see his father, his mother having maintained or assumed that this was not the case. One of the FGC co-ordinators described a case where the initiation of a 'really good relationship' between the child and his father was a positive outcome that offset a rise in the overall ONSET score. In our sample of cases, Harry's keyworker described his eventual relocation to live with his father as an outcome of the conference that had triggered an end to his nuisance calls to the police; and Toby's keyworker described Toby's conference as being the first occasion on which his biological father had acknowledged his paternal status, which had had a profound effect on Toby.

These kinds of outcomes were seen by keyworkers as empowering families to make changes which would support their children. Family members could take some control of the situation and share the responsibility for the future. Children, too, could have their say, and some found the family group conference to be a forum in which difficult topics, such as contact with a non-resident parent, could be raised and acknowledged.

### **Engaging with Key Agencies**

While describing their work, practitioners highlighted the general shortage of services to which they could refer families for long-term support. For instance, one worker found that an overwhelming demand for interventions addressing domestic violence meant that services operating in the area prioritised high-risk cases and tended to work with those currently experiencing violence rather than with those trying to cope with past violence in the family. Given these concerns, securing a referral or referrals, particularly a referral to social services, was hailed by some of the practitioners we interviewed as a key outcome of FGC. The YISP staff working with Harry, Toby and Naomi all felt that the allocation of a social worker to their families was the best thing that could have happened, but described these referrals as exit strategies in the face of a return to an escalation in risk or problematic behaviour. Naomi's keyworker commented as follows:

*... everything just took a bit of a dive and it went back to [being a nightmare], and at that point I've made the referral to social services ... so since social services have been out to see her things are looking up again, but she hasn't got a social worker from social services yet ... this is just in the early stages.*

Adrian's FGC co-ordinator, on the other hand, saw Adrian's referral to social services as having been a direct outcome of the family group conference at which the social worker had made the referral, having been convinced of the need to do this.

The keyworkers were also very positive about referrals to improve parenting skills. As we saw in our national evaluation of the YISPs, keyworkers believed that it was as important to help the parents as to help the children who had been referred to the YISPs. Some keyworkers expressed the view that it ought to be possible to mandate parenting interventions for some families. In this study, keyworkers also looked to enhance parenting skills wherever they could. Stuart's keyworker told us that Stuart's mother was

*... more able to deal with Stuart, and she felt as though she was better equipped to deal with his behaviour, but, also, she was quite positive that there was going to be support for her from the parenting programme.*

Toby's keyworker found that referring him and his mother to a service which could help with substance misuse problems had helped the mother to cope through difficult times, and on this basis judged that the case had been a success. Keyworkers and co-ordinators regarded the bringing together of professionals and the family in a family group conference as integral to securing these kinds of referral and also to securing the commitment of other services, not least because it put other agencies on the spot in front of the family and their own colleagues:

*They [professionals] see other people and I think they can't get away with saying to mam 'Oh I'll do this' and then mam will come and say 'They said they would do this but nothing's happened'. They've said it in front of other professionals, they'll do it. It's a bit of a blackmail situation.*

(Toby's keyworker)

Some practitioners described family group conferences as having secured the 'buy-in' of schools. Fraser's keyworker, for instance, described Fraser's conference as critical in making agencies aware that a great deal relied on them; he considered that the representative from education had gone on from the conference to 'bang heads together' in order to achieve change for the family, leading to what he judged to have been a very successful outcome for Fraser. Rory's keyworker described how the conference had allowed Rory's mother and teacher to communicate to beneficial effect:

*And because we all sat and had a cup of tea and we had a bit of a natter together before we started the meeting, and I think she [Rory's mother] listened to [Rory's teacher] a lot more. So she realised she was part of the problem ... And Rory was doing what she was telling him to do in school, but it wasn't appropriate behaviour for him to do that ... And if he had any problems, rather than just kick off at school he had to go to see [his teacher]. If he felt he was being treated unfairly by the teachers, rather than just shouting at the teachers he had to go and tell [his teacher] and he would liaise and that between them, and discuss any problems and that with the mum. And it actually improved the relationship between the school and mum ... and his attendance started to go up.*

The YISP keyworker felt that this increased understanding had led directly to the institution of a reward system for pocket money, to Rory's mother's taking up a parenting group referral, and, ultimately, to Rory's improvement at school. Likewise, Naomi's YISP keyworker found that the conference had made the school take Naomi's case seriously, leading to greatly improved attendance:

*I don't think Naomi actually said a lot, but I think when people see a meeting taking place, I think people do take it a bit more seriously ... I know it's likewise for myself ... if I'm round a table and I'm given something to do ... well, I'd make sure to do it ... Sometimes it could either be a phone call you can forget or there's always tomorrow, but I think things are dealt with a bit more priority when you set up this meeting.*

The family group conference could also change the actions being taken by some agencies. George's keyworker saw it as instrumental in getting the police and the housing department to stop their action and back off from the family.

The YISP and FGC staff saw these changes as being very helpful for the children and families concerned. They regarded improvements in the relationship between families and the agencies with which they came into contact as a major step forward. We noted in our previous evaluation the importance of helping parents to bridge the gap with professionals, particularly school staff, and it was evident in this study that the family group conferences could act as a critical catalyst for change in this respect. It was particularly disappointing for FGC co-ordinators and families, therefore, when key agencies, such as education, failed to attend a conference.

When relationships were improved as a result of discussion at a conference, FGC staff felt that levels of trust between families and professionals had increased, making it more likely that families would take up the offer of different interventions and engage with agencies. We were told of situations in which interventions, such as mediation, which had been refused prior to a family group conference were accepted by the family after the conference. Moreover, these positive changes had helped to foster goodwill and enhance the personal commitment of professionals to work with the families concerned. In turn, multi-agency co-operation was seen to improve, and confidence was enhanced.

### **Longer-term Achievements**

As we indicated above, the positive shifts which were regarded as resulting from family group conferences were described as incremental rather than as global changes. The YISP and FGC staff were often unsure about the longevity of such changes, and emphasised that, because the children and their families were all very different, longer-term outcomes were difficult to predict. All of them stressed that the receptiveness of family members to making changes and accepting interventions and their motivation to do so were prerequisites of FGC being effective. Although short-term outcomes were seemingly very positive, views about longer-term outcomes remained tentative. Ben and Darcy's keyworker, for example, described how the conference had enabled the family to see themselves as part of the process, but the changes were relatively modest:



*The stuff that was in there wasn't earth-shattering. It wasn't world-changing but it was stuff that they were part of.*

Similarly, Rory's keyworker commented:

*I don't think we would perform miracles. That's never going to happen, because we don't know what happens in the family. There's different things happening all the time, but I think we made a significant change within the family.*

Naomi's keyworker saw the conference as a forum where the family were able to talk and listen; 'hopefully after the meeting', she said, 'things might start to change'. The staff conveyed their sense that FGC delivers the beginnings of change, rather than providing a transformation of family circumstances. Toby's keyworker talked of change occurring 'in little ways'.

Practitioners tended not to be confident about the long-term stability of any of the outcomes. Often, accounts of change would be offset by descriptions of a reversion to the way things had been before, or of events overtaking what had been achieved. Jason's keyworker described how Jason had improved at school, but had then been rereferred for having used cannabis. Matt, George and Naomi's keyworkers found that the children's parents had all failed to maintain their good relations after a promising start. George's keyworker noted that, while FGC could achieve some successes, it had not proved able to address concerns held by family members about George's mother's alcohol abuse. He told us:

*[George's parents] were separated and they were apart ... I don't think [the family group conference] did too much to bring them into a situation where they can work together for George any better ... at the end ... he was seeing his dad a lot less ... his dad had ... allegedly met another woman and George weren't too happy about that ...*

We know from our Time 2 interviews with children and parents that some of the positive improvements resulting from a family group conference did not necessarily stand the test of time, and the professionals to whom we spoke were of the view that FGC works for some families and not for others. Some families were better able than others to capitalise on the progress made during a family group conference. While some keyworkers thought it was nevertheless worth offering FGC to everyone, others were less certain of the value of offering conferences irrespective of the circumstances. These practitioners had found it frustrating when families had not taken up the help and support offered to them. Toby's keyworker explained:

*I've done family group conferencing for many years ... and when I first came to the YISP I was looking for the families that would best benefit from family group conferencing, and I don't think it's carte blanche that everybody would have benefited from it. I don't think it is the answer for everybody and everything, but then over time and it became a pilot and that's what was asked of us.*

Rory's keyworker, meanwhile, emphasised that factors militating against a family's success might include their characteristics as individuals, and the

particular social circumstances in which they find themselves at the time FGC is being offered. Family events such as illness, or loss or gain of employment, can have a significant impact on whether a family is ready to make the most of the FGC opportunity.

Many of the professionals we interviewed described the good work that had been achieved through FGC with the children referred to the YISP. This could not be sustained, however, in the face of parents' lack of commitment to change or inability to get on with each other. Stuart's keyworker found that the aggressive parental environment that Stuart went back to in the evenings cancelled out any beneficial effects of their one-to-one work together. Teri's keyworker reported that, while Teri's mother had found being listened to beneficial, she had made no effort to adhere to the family plan. Maxine's worker felt that, although Maxine had made an effort to change her peer group, her mother had made no effort to instigate changes round the house, one consequence of which seemed to be that Maxine's previous drinking on the street was being replaced by drinking at home. Natalie's keyworker thought that Natalie's mother had supported her daughter's truancy from school:

*She [Natalie] more or less said to me that she was using it [a claim of bullying] to stay off school with mam, and I said, 'I think you need to be fair to mam, Natalie, and to tell her this,' and I spoke to mam about it but mam wanted an excuse to keep Natalie off, I think, and we just couldn't get anywhere and that was it.*

Jason's keyworker also felt that FGC would not work when a dominant parent took control of the process.

### ***Drawing the Evidence Together***

Determining what difference any intervention makes in the lives of children and young people at risk of offending is difficult. In our national evaluation of YISPs we were cautious about delineating impacts, preferring to look for indicators of potential positive change and to determine the kinds of outcomes which might be associated with YISP intervention. Nevertheless, the findings showed that YISPs may well have the greatest effect if they are targeted at the highest-risk children and that keyworkers are critically important in the success of YISP intervention. We noted, also, that it was impossible to know whether short-term reductions in risk scores would be sustained in the longer term.

Our task in this study has been to tease out the value added to YISP intervention by offering children, young people and their families the chance to attend a family group conference. Unfortunately, the pilots were able to supply fewer cases for our quantitative modelling than we had hoped, so we need to be cautious about generalising from the findings. It would seem, nevertheless, that the children and young people referred to the FGC/YISP pilots achieved a smaller reduction in risk than those in the pilots taking part in the national evaluation, but there is evidence that children and young people in this current study who had a family group conference achieved a greater reduction in risk than those who did not. These findings may indicate that FGC adds value.

The findings from surveys and interviews seem to support this conclusion. Parents and keyworkers were generally positive about the FGC experience,

although the views of children and young people were more mixed. Most families were pleased they had taken part in a family group conference, and could point to improvements in children's behaviour which they attributed to the experience. In this sense, the outcomes tend to be positive. However, it has been difficult to discern the link between the impact of going to a conference and other packages of support a child might have received via the YISP, irrespective of whether there had been a conference.

As in our national evaluation of YISPs, professionals were at pains to point out the small, but in their view significant, positive changes in a child's life and to argue that small steps in the right direction need to be celebrated. They felt that YISP intervention alone is unlikely to reduce risk factors substantially and over a sustained period of time, but that it can begin to turn children's lives around and get them moving in a more positive direction. Families in this study also tended to be taking one day at a time when we followed them up at Time 2, uncertain about whether improvements would last, but positive that the help they had received from the YISP and via a family group conference had been worthwhile. Going to a family group conference was an opportunity for families to contribute to the changes that needed to be made, but most families were somewhat unaware of the connection between the conference and the work of the YISP panel.

In many cases, of course, the conference was an intervention alongside others organised for the child, rather than an integral part of the YISP process of assessment and the development of a tailored ISP. Undoubtedly, the preparation before and the experience of the conference had raised expectations in families and some were disappointed subsequently when major changes did not occur and when agencies failed to deliver promised services. This would suggest that there is much to be gained from better integration of FGC within YISP processes and from a commitment from YISP/FGC staff and other agencies to ensuring that support is available following a conference and not just in the period beforehand. In this regard, practitioners highlighted the general shortage of services to which they could refer families for long-term support. The ability and willingness of social workers to accept referrals from the YISPs would appear to be a key factor in ensuring that families are not let down once the family group conference and/or YISP involvement has ended.

A key finding in this study and also in the national evaluation of YISPs is the ability of YISP intervention to bridge relationships between home and school and to ensure that families can develop more constructive ways of working with teachers, who are key players in the lives of children and young people. When teachers attended family group conferences their presence was generally found to be very helpful, and the evidence would suggest that their attendance should be encouraged. The commitment of parents and of the children concerned remains central to YISP intervention being successful and to the outcomes from FGC being positive.

In the final section we set out our findings about the effectiveness of FGC and its ability to make a positive difference in a child's life alongside our earlier observations about the processes pilots developed to introduce FGC into the

work of the YISPs. We then consider a number of recommendations relating to policy and practice which flow from the evaluation.

## 8 The Potential for Enhancing YISP Practice

In the previous sections, we have examined the processes the FGC/YISP pilots adopted for introducing family group conferences into their YISPs, and reported on the extent to which these appeared to empower families and enhance the effectiveness of YISP intervention in the lives of 8–13-year-olds at risk of offending and antisocial behaviour. In this final section, we reflect on the findings, and consider the recommendations that flow from the evaluation.

We have referred throughout the report to the limitations of the evaluation and these need to be borne in mind when considering the learning arising from it. We are not in a position to address the key question as to whether integrating FGC within the YISPs would enhance their ability to prevent offending and antisocial behaviour among high-risk children and young people, primarily because the data we needed to do this were simply not available or the data quality remained problematic. Data recording was variable and, often, critical information about ONSET scores and the interventions provided was not routinely recorded. The staff in the FGC pilots, in common with their colleagues in the 13 pilots in the national evaluation of YISPs, did not necessarily make the connection between ONSET assessments and their role in offering measurable evidence of change. Closure ONSETs, therefore, were not routinely undertaken or recorded on management information systems. There are lessons to be learned about the importance of embedding appropriate data collection mechanisms into the setting-up procedures when pilot programmes are being established.

Softer measures, such as assessments of family satisfaction and practitioners' own perceptions of improved behaviour among the young people involved, were most often relied on by professionals to provide evidence of effectiveness. This is not unusual and other evaluations of new programmes have struggled to ensure that robust quantitative data are available. We suggest that when pilots are being set up in the future, sites selected should be required to demonstrate that they can reach minimum data reporting standards before they are included in any national evaluation.

At best, we sought to make comparisons between children and young people who experienced FGC as part of their YISP involvement and children and young people who did not have a family group conference while they participated in a YISP. Unfortunately, we were unable to assess the preventative capacity of FGC when combined with YISP intervention to reduce the numbers of highest-risk children becoming involved in offending and antisocial behaviour. We were able, however, to examine the ways in which family and community resources were mobilised, the ways in which family members were involved in the design and implementation of family plans and ISPs, and the use of restorative justice approaches. This allowed us to consider the aspects of FGC that might contribute to promising practice in YISPs in the future, and to draw some conclusions about what appeared to work well for families and where improvements to processes and interventions might be made.

As we noted in Section 1, family group conferences have been widely used in child welfare and child protection for over 25 years, but there has been less experience of their use within preventative programmes in youth justice. The YJB had expected that FGC would enhance YISP practice by ensuring that the children and their families who volunteer for YISP intervention would be more actively engaged in generating solutions to address the specific risk factors in a child's life which place him or her at high risk of offending or antisocial behaviour. The FGC approach was regarded as an additional component in the YISP process, which involves rigorous assessment and the development of a personalised ISP. It has the potential to increase the effectiveness of YISPs by empowering families to make their own plans and draw on resources and support from within the family network as well as from a range of other agencies and the YISP keyworker.

In recent years there has been a growing body of research relating to FGC, although few studies have been able to take a longitudinal approach or to adopt the kind of rigorous methods which might enable researchers to say with some degree of confidence that FGC is effective in preventing youth crime. Nevertheless, a synopsis of the available research (Merkel-Holguin *et al.*, 2003) identified three broad themes which have emerged from a range of studies of FGC in child welfare. These are issues relating to:

- the implementation of FGC
- FGC processes
- outcomes associated with FGC.

These themes helpfully capture the key areas of interest emerging from this current evaluation of FGC within the YISPs and provide a useful framework within which to summarise the key findings which have been discussed in previous sections and consider their implications.

### ***Issues Relating to the Implementation of FGC***

#### **Model Integrity**

As FGC has been merged into existing structures in both child welfare and youth justice in a number of jurisdictions, the original New Zealand model has inevitably been tweaked and modified. The YJB was keen that the YISPs should retain the integrity of the original model, recognising, nevertheless, that the YISPs would have to decide how best to integrate a new approach with existing YISP processes, particularly as the YISPs are focused on targeting a younger age range than has traditionally been the case in FGC elsewhere.

One aspect of the model which has received considerable attention is the separation of roles and responsibilities between FGC convenors/facilitators and the keyworkers who offer support to the families before and after a family group conference. Conventional wisdom has suggested that the co-ordinator's/facilitator's role in the FGC process directly correlates to outcomes and that FGC works best when the facilitator is seen to be independent of the agencies which are working with the family. This allows the facilitators to focus on preparing family members for a conference and chairing it, without necessarily knowing about the child's history or all the issues which are of

concern (Hughes, 1996). As we have seen, two of the YISP pilots adopted this approach and three did not. It is notable, however, that the two pilots which sought to ensure the independence of the facilitator (Riverborough and Dockborough) were those that experienced the most difficulty in establishing FGC and getting it off the ground. Neither of those YISPs was able to integrate FGC fully during the course of our study, and the use of independent facilitators proved to be a very expensive option in at least one of the pilots.

Although Coburgh and Midshire had appointed designated FGC co-ordinators/facilitators, they were employed by the YISPs rather than being independent of them. Midshire subsequently shifted its practice and combined the facilitator and keyworker roles part-way through the evaluation. The wide geographical area covered by the pilot meant that facilitators and YISP keyworkers had been travelling large distances prior to the integration of the roles, so their modification to practice was largely pragmatic, but subsequently much welcomed by the practitioners concerned. While Midshire initially combined the role of FGC facilitator with that of YISP keyworker in order to offer a more efficient and better-managed service in a large pilot area, the staff believed that the decision was a good one: the time taken to undertake an ONSET assessment and prepare the family for a conference had been reduced, and the combined responsibilities focused the worker on ensuring that sustainable support was put in place for the family.

The YISP staff in Coburgh were less enthusiastic about merging the roles, believing that the FGC facilitator must maintain an independent view of the issues and ensure that the family group conference does not simply become just another meeting with professionals. The extent of the independence of the facilitators in Coburgh could be questioned, however, in respect of the more directorial role they played within wider YISP processes and within the conferences.

In Welshboro there had never been any division of responsibility: the FGC facilitator took on the role of YISP keyworker after the conference, providing the ongoing support for the family. Thus, the same practitioners managed the entire YISP/FGC process from referral to the YISP through to case closure. The staff in Welshboro and Midshire expressed a strong belief that both they and the families benefited from this integrated approach to practice. Our evidence indicates that none of the families who participated in the research expressed any dissatisfaction with the combined model. Moreover, some families clearly welcomed the fact that the same practitioner had worked with them throughout the process and had got to know the family well, and were relieved that they did not have to change to a new worker once the conference had been held. By contrast, some families expressed disappointment and dissatisfaction when YISP staff did not follow up on progress after the family group conference, and families were left to implement the family plan with little ongoing support, once the FGC facilitator had passed the case back to the YISP staff.

This view is consistent with our previous finding from the national evaluation of YISPs, that families were most dissatisfied when the keyworker changed during YISP intervention. The role of the keyworker has emerged in both studies as critical to the success of YISP intervention. We recognise that this deflection

from model integrity raises issues which might be seen as contentious, but it would appear that modifications to the pure model are regarded as beneficial in certain circumstances by professionals and families alike. During the focus groups with YISP staff there was general agreement that it is not efficient to have an independent facilitator and that having the facilitator co-located within the YISP team means that information-sharing is more effective and that the whole process can be more flexible and more responsive to the needs of individual families.

It would seem, therefore, that there is some merit associated with a deviation from the 'pure' FGC model within the YISP context, and we recommend the following:

- the pros and cons of integrated roles should be considered carefully if FGC is to be further integrated within preventative programmes
- mechanisms should be put in place to ensure effective transition of support for families from the FGC facilitator to the keyworker if the FGC facilitator does not continue involvement with the family after the conference.

### **Implementing a New Approach**

A common theme to emerge in all the studies reviewed by Merkel-Holguin and her colleagues is that implementing FGC takes time and perseverance. Furthermore, various activities such as building support among professionals and in communities, providing information and training and developing protocols are essential prerequisites for underpinning the sustainability of FGC. This theme emerged also in our study of FGC within the YISPs. Not all the YISP staff or other professionals were necessarily positive about FGC at the start of the pilots, and the FGC/YISP co-ordinators had to work hard to sell the idea to their colleagues.

We noted in the national evaluation of YISPs that referrals remained low in the early stages and did not pick up until the service was better-known and respected locally. A similar pattern was seen in respect of FGC. 'Local faith' in FGC was said to be an important influence on referral rates. The co-ordinators nevertheless felt under pressure to meet YJB targets and some pilots responded to this by increasing the age range for referrals, finding it easier to attract referrals for young people above the age of 13. Most YISP staff regarded it as important to include a wider age range in their target group, although the findings from the national evaluation suggested that YISP intervention might be more likely to reduce the risk factors of children at the lower end of the 8–13 age range. Because adolescents are more visible, however, they are more likely to be referred for YISP intervention, particularly when they come into contact with the police. Pilot staff acknowledged that they had to work harder to receive referrals for younger children, specifically those aged 8–10, and to put more effort into preparing these children for a family group conference.

Given that the policy objective is to intervene early when there is evidence of high risk of offending and antisocial behaviour but before children and young people have entered the criminal justice system, we recommend that some further consideration should be given to the following:



- how 8–13-year-olds can be more effectively targeted for FGC intervention in future
- the support needed by pilots to implement new programmes to policy intent
- the targets set for case throughput in the early stages of implementation
- the lead-in time required in local areas to put new initiatives on the ground, introduce them to and gain the support of other key agencies and practitioners, and ensure that they are fully and appropriately staffed and resourced
- the additional training and support required by the practitioners tasked with establishing a new programme, such as FGC, within existing (and evolving) YISP and other preventative programmes practice.

### **The Power of Choice**

The YJB had expected that all the children and their families who were referred to the pilot YISPs would be offered a family group conference. Only in Welshboro was this expectation realised. Elsewhere, the offer of a conference was selective and relatively few of the YISP cases involved one. The YISP keyworkers and FGC facilitators exercised their judgement about the suitability of cases, taking into account such matters as presenting problems, levels of risk and their perception of each family's ability to manage/benefit from the experience. Moreover, in at least one YISP, FGC was seen as an intervention in its own right, for use in certain circumstances and cases, and was often put into effect late in the period of YISP intervention when everything else had been tried.

The research review conducted by Merkel-Holguin et al. indicated that, despite considerable interest in the use of FGC, its place in youth justice has continued to be somewhat marginalised. Our study has found that, while YISP staff tended to be very much in favour of the idea of FGC, many remained sceptical about its value in all cases, regarding it as a useful tool/approach to be used with certain kinds of children and families. Its implementation in all the pilots except Welshboro was somewhat slow and guarded, therefore. Towards the end of our study, most YISP staff were feeling less threatened by the introduction of FGC and more keen to find ways of embracing it, albeit selectively. The merging of roles in some pilots, of course, did much to eradicate fears that FGC would diminish the role of the YISP keyworker.

When we discussed the relatively low use of FGC with YISP staff during the focus groups they indicated that a large number of variables had influenced this, including: the ability of YISP workers to sell the idea of FGC to families; whether there were any extended members of the family to invite; whether there had been domestic violence prior to the YISP referral; and the capacity of the staff to deliver FGC across the board.

While Midshire and Eastburgh attempted to offer a conference to every family, it was clear that this was not always possible, particularly during the early stages of the pilot when there was some resistance to the idea among YISP staff. Moreover, children with relatively low risk scores, or whose risks were

associated solely with school work, were not necessarily seen as needing a family group conference, especially if the parents were well-engaged with the YISP anyway or if they might find a conference too challenging. Westburgh staff were concerned that if all families were to be offered a conference, the agency might simply not have the capacity to deliver and this would add to families' experiences of service failure. Midshire staff were of the view that if social services were already involved with a family, it was their responsibility to offer a family group conference and not that of the YISPs.

There was no clear consensus among the pilots about whether/when all the children should be offered a family group conference. This remains an important issue, however, and has implications for the principle of family empowerment which underpins FGC practice. Whether children and families, rather than YISP keyworkers, should be exercising choice about the potential benefits of FGC is a key question to emerge from the study, particularly as most of the families we spoke to had been willing to try anything in order to resolve their child's problems.

Parents usually reacted positively when they were offered a family group conference. Some, as we have seen, hoped it would be the magic wand which alleviated all their worries and concerns. They felt that they had nothing to lose and that the conference would be a clear indication that someone was prepared to help them and their child. In other words, FGC was seen as representing a real opportunity to promote change in their child's behaviour, relationships and education.

While many children and young people were generally less enthusiastic and rather more ambivalent than their parents about the potential benefits of having a family group conference, only a very few had felt coerced to attend. The extent to which children were willing participants was less clear since the majority found themselves in the situation where a parent had accepted the offer on their behalf. Not surprisingly, therefore, we found that children tended to have lower expectations than their parents about what a conference might achieve, and often had very little real idea about what going to one might mean prior to their preparation for it. Even after preparation, some 25 per cent of children indicated on their exit questionnaire that they had not wanted to go to the conference and nearly a third had felt scared.

Giving children and parents the power to choose whether to participate, on the basis of clear and unambiguous information about the purpose of FGC, would seem to be a fundamental demonstration that family empowerment is taken seriously by professionals. Most studies of FGC reveal an absence of families' voices in building and sustaining it (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2003), and it has been suggested that determining the extent to which children, families and communities can be more fully involved in developing FGC processes from the outset remains a key challenge.

From the evidence available, we recommend the following:

- further consideration should be given to whether all the children and young people, and their families, referred for YISP intervention should routinely be offered a family group conference and enabled to make an informed choice about whether this might be helpful and appropriate for them

- clear information about FGC should be accessible to families (the video in Midshire had been seen as useful in this respect), and this should make clear the processes involved, and what families are expected to do and what professionals will offer
- consideration should be given to the resource implications of encouraging a greater take-up of FGC
- if FGC is to be offered selectively, the criteria for selection should be clearly articulated and unambiguous.

### **Restorative Justice**

Although the YJB had hoped that restorative justice would be promoted by the use of FGC, as we reported in Section 5 relatively few conferences involved a restorative element or included any meaningful victim–offender dialogue. The YISP staff had difficulty identifying specific incidents in which a victim could be identified and felt that the YJB’s expectations for FGC had been overly challenging in a process which focuses on early intervention in order to deal with a range of risk factors associated with offending rather than offending behaviour itself. In their review of restorative justice programmes in the UK, Sherman and Strang (2007) reflected that youth justice is not predominantly delivered in ways that are based on restorative justice principles. It is not surprising, therefore, that the FGC/YISP pilots were not very familiar with the processes and requirements associated with restorative practice and were unsure as to how to implement it within a preventative programme.

We found little evidence in this study that, when victims were identified and invited to a family group conference, their presence was in any way restorative. Some victims were confused about their role at the conference, particularly if they were attending in a professional capacity also. Moreover, victims rarely stayed throughout the family group conference but tended to leave after information exchanged. A great deal more effort would need to be devoted to a consideration of how restorative justice processes can be an effective element in FGC within YISPs before we could know whether their implementation should be prioritised.

It is possible that, when the target group includes young people over the age of 13, it will be easier to identify victims, because it is more likely that the young people might already be involved in criminal activities or antisocial behaviour. In the light of the evidence from this evaluation, we would offer the following recommendations:

- when FGC is used with younger children who have not yet become involved in criminal activities, more thought needs to be given to whether, when and how a restorative justice approach should be considered relevant
- the definition of ‘victim’ needs to be clarified
- preparation of victims for a family group conference needs to be thorough and their role explained to all participants
- it is not necessarily helpful for practitioners to attend a family group conference in dual roles (professional plus ‘victim’)

- in family group conferences the victim–offender dialogue requires skilled facilitation and should include an element of apology
- the desired outcomes for both victims and offenders attending a family group conference need to be articulated and monitored.

### *Issues Relating to FGC Processes*

#### **Promoting Family Empowerment**

A theme which dominates the FGC literature and which is fundamental to the principles underpinning the approach is that of family empowerment and a shift in the power relationship between professionals and family members. Family empowerment is, in many respects, an elusive concept (Gallagher and Jasper, 2003) and one which is open to a range of interpretations (Lupton, 1998). Whether there has been a paradigm shift in respect of the relationship between families in trouble and professionals who seek to intervene to prevent problems escalating is open to debate.

Lupton (1998) highlighted several potential barriers to real family empowerment. These were: insufficient preparation for the conference; professional lack of compliance with FGC processes; attempts by professionals to impose pre-determined decisions on families; a failure to provide information about all the possible sources of support to enable families to make informed choices about next steps; the failure of agencies to deliver agreed support services and interventions; and the failure to monitor and review family plans. Lupton found evidence of all these barriers in her own study in the UK, and we paid particular attention to them in this evaluation.

Our findings show that parents and children felt that they had been appropriately consulted about the various aspects of the conference and had been adequately prepared for the occasion. There was, however, a discrepancy between the views of mothers and fathers, with fathers generally feeling less well-prepared and remaining on the fringes of FGC. This was particularly noticeable when parents had separated and fathers were the non-resident parent. The efforts made by the FGC facilitator to engage fathers were frequently less intensive than those employed to engage mothers, who were regarded as the primary parent in most cases. There was general agreement among YISP keyworkers that it is easier to communicate with mothers and that fathers are often reluctant to get involved in FGC and tend to leave parenting matters to mothers.

In our report of the national evaluation of YISPs, we discussed the important role fathers play in the upbringing of children, particularly in respect of children's educational achievement, and suggested that more attention should be given to involving them in YISP processes. We have reached the same conclusion here: fathers were rarely regarded as key players in family group conferences, particularly if they were not living with their children, but some of the difficulties the children and young people were facing at home and at school might have benefited from a greater input from their fathers. This suggests that more time needs to be given by key workers and FGC co-ordinators to establishing rapport with fathers and to preparing them for a family group conference.

There appeared to be an over-reliance on mothers being open and receptive and a tendency to ignore or downplay the potentially valuable role that fathers can play. The FGC co-ordinator recognised that some fathers may not attend because they cannot get time off work, but generally seemed to think that fathers do not readily engage with the process. When they do, the benefits are said to be tangible. There is a tendency for YISP staff to talk about empowering 'parents' when in fact it is only the mothers who are key players in the FGC process. We have noticed, also, that much of the literature and research relating to FGC fails to differentiate between the roles played by mothers and by fathers, referring generically to 'parents'.

Extended family members and friends were also inclined to say that they had not known what to expect at the conference, but had been prepared to offer whatever support they could to the family. They did not demonstrate the same sense of ownership of the conference as mothers had done, and were more inclined to want to be supportive than to be actively involved in being part of the solution. They were more likely, also, to be unsure about how they should contribute to family time and to the development of the family plan.

The FGC co-ordinators and facilitators were keen to let family members decide who should attend conferences, but admitted that parents' views normally overrode those of children. The facilitators often had to ensure that there was a balance between family members and professionals in attendance. We found quite often that the family would leave it up to the facilitator to decide who should attend, and that FGC facilitators were apt to ensure that key professionals were invited. They nevertheless had also to establish a balance between professional participation and family control (Lupton and Nixon, 1999). It was particularly disappointing for families in our study when key professionals, such as social workers or teachers, failed to attend a family group conference, having been expressly invited by the family.

Preparing professionals for family group conferences is as important as preparing family members, although the literature on the preparation of professionals is scant. It appeared, however, that a degree of pre-planning had usually taken place concerning what resources professionals might offer and what might be recorded in the family plan, which is a subtle way for the professionals to retain control during the information exchange at the start of each conference. It may be necessary to increase the amount of decision-making responsibility that is truly shared between family members and professionals (Lupton and Nixon, 1999).

The FGC staff took the preparation of conference participants very seriously and were not prepared to sacrifice the quality of their work to meet targets set by the YJB. Nevertheless, we believe that a number of recommendations could enhance the empowerment of families during the preparation stage:

- face-to-face preparation with all family members, friends and neighbours who expect to attend a family group conference is likely to increase their participation during the conference and constitutes better practice than more remote modes of preparation (e.g. via telephone contact)

- the FGC co-ordinators and facilitators should pay more attention to the role fathers can play in a family group conference, irrespective of whether they are resident with the child concerned
- decisions about who should attend a family group conference may need to be negotiated with the family rather than imposed by the FGC co-ordinators
- professionals nominated by the family as key players in a family group conference should be adequately prepared for and committed to attending the conference and the review meetings.

### **Structuring the Family Group Conference**

Family empowerment must, of course, permeate all aspects of FGC processes, and during the conferences practice varied. Since the emergence of FGC, the conference itself has been highly structured. The facilitator's task is to chair the conference, act as a link between the professionals and the family members, and ensure that all stages of the meeting are given appropriate importance. As we saw in Section 4, the facilitators interpreted their role variously and did not always respect the family's right to private family time. Moreover, the professionals involved did not always stay for the final stage to agree and endorse the family plan. Indeed, in the conferences we observed, the final phase of the conference tended to be the least important and to be given scant regard.

Parents and children in our sample felt that their family group conference had provided a safe, supportive environment for shared decision-making, and children valued the opportunity to express their own concerns and to be listened to by family members and the professionals. Nevertheless, there was some discrepancy between the extent to which children and parents were empowered. Children were generally less keen on being the focus of attention, and less likely to contribute substantially to family time. Indeed, it was the use of family time which emerged as a key issue during the evaluation.

We observed that some families found it difficult to use private family time constructively, and some facilitators chose to stay with the family during this phase of the conference. Those that stayed clearly influenced the discussion and the formulation of the family plan. During our focus groups, some YISP staff defended this position and argued first that families should be left to choose whether the facilitator participates in family time, and second that rigid rules about privacy are unhelpful. The view was expressed that some families cannot cope with private family time and that the conference 'can degenerate into madness' if there are several young children present. In such circumstances, we were told, the facilitator might need to maintain some semblance of order and help the process along.

Other YISP staff felt that the success of family time depends on family members being well-prepared beforehand, and expressed the view that every family should be accorded the respect of having time alone. Some families in our sample welcomed this, while others preferred to have the ongoing support of the FGC facilitator. There is evidence from other studies that many family members are keen to follow professional advice and that families have a tendency to defer to professionals (Graber *et al.*, 1996; Robertson, 1996; Swain, 1993). There is clearly a fine line between informing families and

supporting them in making their own decisions and influencing their decision-making (Lupton and Nixon, 1999).

The FGC facilitators in our study acknowledged a number of tensions and challenges, including those of remaining neutral and dealing effectively with professionals and with disruptive family members. The vast majority of families in our study, nevertheless, left their conference feeling positive about the experience, thinking that it had been worthwhile, and hoping that things would change for the better. The family plan, however, did not appear to be a particularly important document and professionals did not always participate in its approval.

We suggest that:

- the recognised stages in a family group conference need to be accorded equal importance
- family time should be an opportunity for family members to formulate a family plan in private, so more consideration needs to be given to the preparation of family members for that phase and to the role played by facilitators in supporting families rather than directing/influencing their decision-making
- the tensions and challenges identified by the FGC facilitators should be discussed and addressed so that they are clearer about their remit during the conference and also able to maintain an appropriate level of control over the proceedings as a whole
- the time set aside to agree and endorse the family plan should not be rushed, and best practice suggests that all the conference participants should be present and should participate in this final phase of the conference
- ensuring that everyone is signed up to the plan and clear about the expectations on them to offer support and make the plan work should be a crucial aspect of the conference process.

#### **Advocates for Children**

We asked YISP/FGC staff whether they regarded the family group conference as being focused on the child referred to the YISP or on the child's family. In Coburgh, the focus was described as being on the family unit rather than on the child who had been referred. In Midshire, there was a view that the family and the child need to own the family group conference and, to that end, every child was offered an advocate.

As we reported in Section 4, the role of advocate was not always clearly defined, and some children were critical of advocates who barely knew them. We noted, also, that family members nominated as advocates by children were rarely able to fulfil the role effectively. The Midshire pilot had realised that advocates need training and should take on the preparation of the child for the conference so that they can support a child who might feel intimidated by the meeting and help them to put forward their views. There was a general belief expressed by YISPs that FGC facilitators and YISP keyworkers should not

attempt to act as advocates for the child and that advocates should be independent of the other participants, particularly the professionals.

While some children in our study clearly felt empowered and able to have their say at their family group conference, others did not play an active part or make a significant contribution. Having a skilled and independent advocate might help this group of children (Dalrymple, 2002). It is increasingly recognised that if professionals are to enhance and take seriously the participation of children, they need to change the way they perceive children as social agents. Our finding that some review meetings were held without children being present raises the question of the extent to which children were always regarded as key players in YISP and FGC processes.

We recommend the following:

- if advocates are to be used, they need to be appropriately trained for the task, independent of the family and the agency staff, and able to spend sufficient time with the child prior to the family group conference to ensure that they can represent the child's views effectively
- consideration should be given to whether it is appropriate for family members to adopt the role of advocate
- more thought needs to be given to how to encourage the participation of children and young people of all ages in a family group conference, particularly those who are reluctant or who may feel coerced into attending, and how to ensure that their voices are heard and their views respected and taken fully into account
- more thought needs to be given to finding ways of addressing difficult, sensitive issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse in the family, which almost certainly contribute to heightened risk factors for children, rather than ignoring them in the context of a family group conference.

#### **Taking Ownership of the Family Plan**

All the YISP staff were in agreement that families should be enabled to take ownership of problem-solving and that they need to mobilise family resources and develop coherent family plans. There is a tension here, however. Most parents who agreed to a YISP referral tended to be looking for professional intervention that would address their child's problems because they were finding it difficult to cope and wanted someone else to take responsibility. To a large extent, these parents seemed to distance themselves from the family plan and the majority of families tended to ignore it after the conference.

Our evidence suggests that extended family members were rarely mobilised to actually offer additional support, and keyworkers acknowledged that mobilising family members is not easy, particularly when parents do not want other family members to know their problems. In this sense, cultural differences between families in the UK and Maori families in New Zealand are almost certainly significant. Family ties are said to be much more deep-rooted in Maori culture and there is less reluctance to discuss difficult issues openly (Pitama *et al.*, 2002). The focus in the conferences in this study was primarily on parents (usually mothers) and their children rather than on mobilising the extended kinship network.



The YISP keyworkers told us that if the family plan is to be helpful, the family must understand its purpose and be committed to fulfilling the promises made. Some keyworkers were of the view that families prefer to find their own solutions, but the evidence from our research does not support this. Without support in implementing the family plan and regular monitoring, many families clearly find it difficult to make it work and so abandon it. The family group conference needs to do more than just get problems out into the open.

During the focus groups discussions, some YISP staff suggested that the family plan is merely a document and less important than the family being willing to make changes. Others felt that plans must be realistic and achievable, because otherwise family members quickly lose heart. Review processes were regarded as being very important and small steps needed to be noted and actions prioritised. The YISP keyworkers agreed that plans were often harder to implement when families got back home after the conference and had to make changes by themselves. Recognising when a family plan is not working is important and suggests that plans need to be robust and clear. Non-specific plans were clearly unhelpful.

Gallagher and Jasper's study of FGC within child protection found numerous examples of family plans breaking down and uncertainty about who was responsible for their implementation and monitoring. Evidence from other studies suggests that monitoring is inconsistent but that families can, with appropriate support, take responsibility for making the family plan work (Branken and Batley, 1998; Lupton and Nixon, 1999). Our study suggests that initial satisfaction with family plans tended to disappear in the weeks and months following a family group conference. Some parents blamed their children and some children blamed their parents for failures to implement the family plan.

Review meetings provide a useful mechanism for reviewing implementation and progress, but these tended to be very informal and frequently did not involve the professionals or extended family members. Many families felt that there had been a vacuum after the family group conference, and the evidence from this study relating to family plans is therefore somewhat negative. The participants in our focus groups expressed some disagreement about the best way to organise review meetings and about whether professionals should attend and be held to account if they had not delivered on their commitments to families. Some saw this as too intimidating for families and others felt that it was the task of the YISP panel to monitor professional input. It is not clear from the evidence available to us that panels fulfilled this role, however. Some staff felt that review processes were difficult to maintain and that agency targets and caseloads could impact negatively on the staff's ability to monitor cases effectively. Others believed that setting dates for reviews can act as an incentive to the key players to fulfil their responsibilities and render all conference participants accountable for outcomes. We noted a number of unresolved tensions relating to effective review processes, which could serve to erode families' sense of empowerment.

In the light of the evidence we would suggest that there are a number of steps that might be taken to enhance the usefulness of family plans and ensure that

they are regularly reviewed and modified. We recommend the following measures:

- family plans need to be specific and the responsibilities/actions of family members and professionals should be achievable: vague expectations, particularly relating to changes family members are expected to make, are unlikely to be fulfilled, so FGC facilitators need to check that what has been agreed and is recorded is clear, understood and accepted by everyone concerned
- family plans should be drawn up by the FGC facilitator in such a way that all the contents meet the requirements to be SMART, and one important element of the final stage of the conference could be to translate the plans drawn up by the family into clear, achievable objectives which family members can monitor regularly. This should serve to enhance the family's sense of ownership of the plan, and help families to have realistic expectations of who can achieve what and by when rather than expecting step changes which may be impossible to achieve
- more consideration needs to be given to how plans will be reviewed, how frequently this will happen, and who needs to be involved in review meetings
- the use made of family plans in the weeks following a family group conference should be monitored and family members should be helped to implement the agreed actions and modify them if necessary.

#### **Family Plans and Integrated Support Plans**

Whether participating in a family group conference represents a truly empowering experience depends on both the processes and the outcomes achieved. The YJB regarded the FGC approach as capable of enhancing the empowerment of families not only via the meeting with professionals and the formulation of a family plan, but also because it would increase the families' involvement in the formulation of an ISP, thus extending the benefits that could be derived from the YISP panel process.

As we have seen, the FGC/YISP pilots implemented FGC in a variety of ways. All except Welshboro introduced FGC into an established YISP and had to find ways of embedding it into a process which was itself fairly novel. Most of them struggled to mesh FGC into a seamless process. During the period of our evaluation, therefore, introduction of FGC did not appear to impact greatly on the role, remit and structure of the existing YISP panels.

The participants in our focus groups in Coburgh and Midshire agreed that the role of the YISP panels had remained ambiguous, and that FGC had reduced, rather than enhanced, their role. They put forward the following views:

- it is easier to get the right professionals to attend conferences than to get them to attend panel meetings
- FGC engenders more commitment from key professionals than YISP panels
- FGC has provided an excuse for panel members to refrain from offering services to families

- families are better able to discuss issues with and challenge professionals at a family group conference than at a panel meeting
- other than ratifying family plans or ISPs, YISP panels have few roles.

The FGC/YISP staff felt that FGC and YISP processes had not fitted well together and that there were simply too many multi-agency panels in children's services for the YISP panel to make a difference. Rather than enhance the work of the panels, therefore, our evidence suggests that FGC may have undermined it. Tensions had continued to exist and some panels had become part of what one YISP worker described as a 'nodding process'. Knowing when to hold panels when a case is referred for a family group conference has also presented a challenge, especially when ISPs have been developed before panels are convened, leaving little for panel members to do. Moreover, we were told that panel members were not always sufficiently senior in their agencies to offer and authorise the provision of additional services to a family in any case.

In short, the pilots, other than Welshboro, saw little added value in having YISP panels and were ready to concede that most work was done outside of panels, particularly when panel membership was variable and inconsistent. We noted in our national evaluation of YISPs that there was a danger that YISP panels could become 'talking shops', offering an opportunity for networking and information-sharing but providing little in the way of support for families. It would seem that this situation was reached in most of the FGC/YISP pilots when FGC was involved and that the real contribution made by professionals was via family group conferences and not via YISP panels.

Not surprisingly, then, ISPs and family plans were rarely integrated and families often had two separate documents. The pilot staff tended to regard the ISP as the output from the ONSET assessment and the family plan as the output from a family group conference. This perspective serves to illustrate clearly the lack of integration of FGC into YISP processes and the rather limited role played by the assessment process. The distinction between actions to be taken by the family (recorded in the family plan) and actions to be taken by professionals (recorded in the ISP) would seem to detract from any notion of partnership between families and professionals in agreeing interventions and activities that can reduce risk factors associated with offending and antisocial behaviour.

Family group conferencing does not appear to have enhanced families' contribution to ISPs or their engagement with the YISP panels, and panels do not seem to have benefited from FGC. The development of an enhanced ISP was not a feature of the pilots, and in most of them the role of the panels was diminished. This may have undermined the potential to harness resources from agencies which were not represented at family group conferences but did send a representative to panel meetings. The research literature indicates that FGC does not diminish the need for services provided by statutory and community-based agencies and that FGC is not a substitute for providing quality services to children and families (Merkel-Holguin, 2003).

The evidence from the study indicates a number of learning points for both policymakers and practitioners, and leads us to make the following recommendations:

- there needs to be a way of improving the fit between resources released from within the family and resources provided by external agencies, thus ensuring that ISPs/family plans are flexible and can respond to the families' identified needs: ideally there should be one document, not two
- the YISPs need to decide how best to implement FGC into the YISP process, and to consider whether a family group conference should be an element in the processes of assessment and of designing an integrated ISP which includes the family plan, or whether it should be an intervention in its own right and listed as an action within an ISP
- the relationship between the role played by the YISP panel and the output of a family group conference needs to be more clearly defined and articulated: if multi-agency panels are to fulfil their potential and not to become redundant, their work needs to be more clearly integrated with the use of FGC and families need to be made aware of the distinctions between the conference and the panel meeting (and able to participate in both)
- the YISPs need to decide who is responsible for monitoring the ISP and whether/how review meetings should focus on both the family plan element and the support and interventions promised by the YISP and by other agencies
- at the policy level, more thought is needed about how FGC fits within the remit for programmes such as YISPs, and clear guidelines should be given on how it should be used in order to enhance preventative practice rather than detract from it.

### ***Issues Relating to the Outcomes Associated with FGC***

#### **Reducing the Risk of Offending and Antisocial Behaviour**

Two of our main findings – that the introduction of FGC in the YISP pilots did not appear to increase the involvement of children and their families in the design and delivery of ISPs, and moreover did not enhance the YISP process as such – inevitably have implications for any outcomes which might be associated with FGC within YISP programmes. It is perhaps not surprising that some families felt let down after the family group conference had taken place when family members and agencies failed to follow through on commitments made. It is evident that a considerable degree of momentum was created in the run-up to and during a family group conference, but that this was easily lost if there were long delays subsequently in delivering interventions and support. The YISP staff readily acknowledged that services need to be delivered swiftly.

While mobilising family support might be especially relevant in addressing child welfare concerns, it seems clear that children at risk of offending and antisocial behaviour exhibit a wide range of risk factors, which may require more resources than those available within the family. The contributions of a range of agencies are important, as is the one-to-one work of the child's keyworker. The mobilisation of family resources needs to be viewed as an additional opportunity to tackle risk factors, not as a substitute for other more professional interventions. Had FGC been more closely integrated with the YISP panel process, its ability to reduce risk factors might have been enhanced. It is

important to note that the YISPs which participated in the earlier national evaluation achieved greater reductions in risk than those which emerged in the FGC/YISP pilots.

Delineating outcomes associated with FGC and with YISP intervention was difficult, however, and we have to be cautious about any claims made relating to the effectiveness of the pilots. In this respect, it is vitally important that future evaluations are able to conduct a more robust outcome study which would include a longer time-frame in which to measure sustainable changes in behaviour, including any reductions in antisocial or criminal activities. The programmes themselves need to pay more attention to ensuring that sufficient outcome data are collected on each child and young person so that they can assess whether FGC is actually making a substantive difference in the lives of young people.

We examined changes in risk factors as evidenced by repeat ONSET assessments as the most accessible measure of effectiveness. There is some evidence from the evaluation that children and young people who had a family group conference achieved a greater reduction in risk factors than those who did not. The pilot staff said that they were also able to detect this difference and that the ability of FGC to impact on ONSET scores had increased as their experience in delivering family group conferences had grown. They also felt that a key factor in reducing risk scores is the extent of family involvement and their commitment to make changes. This view echoes our finding from the national evaluation of YISPs that the effectiveness of YISP intervention depends largely on the children's and the parents' willingness and ability to accept support and be willing to make changes.

For the most part, in this study, we had to rely on softer, qualitative measures of change via our interviews with children and young people, their parents and the YISP staff who worked with them. Most parents in the study could identify improvements in their child's behaviour, which they attributed to involvement in FGC. Nevertheless, many were uncertain about whether these improvements would be sustained. As in our national evaluation, the YISP staff celebrated small, incremental changes in the right direction and were not necessarily expecting enormous shifts. Families, on the other hand, had had their expectations of what could be achieved raised and were inclined to be disappointed when major improvements did not occur. Most pilots identified gaps in services as a problem, notably parenting support services.

Findings from a range of studies show a considerable consensus that families tend to be highly satisfied with most aspects of FGC. Families in our study were primarily positive about the preparation for the family group conference and the conference itself. Most families left the conference feeling positive and optimistic that things would change for the better as a result, and that the conference was a good thing. Later on, most were still pleased that a conference had been held even when outcomes had proved to be disappointing.

Professionals' satisfaction with achievements they attributed to FGC was also high. The outcome they were most pleased about was being able to make a breakthrough in family relations. One of the assumptions underpinning the

promotion of FGC is that families can find their own solutions to problems by harnessing the resources already available within the wider family network. The YISP staff believed this to be the case and were pleased when they could see that family relationships had improved. The Midshire pilot had found from its local evaluation that improvements in family relationships emerged as the biggest outcome. The YISP staff also noted improvements in parenting skills and in relationships between home and school. They tended not to be confident about the long-term durability of any of the outcomes they observed, however, recognising that family circumstances are subject to change and that risk factors vary over time.

The limited data available to us relating to a small number of cases in a very small number of pilots has made us cautious about proffering recommendations from the evaluation with respect to outcomes. We certainly do not have the evidence to recommend that FGC should become an integral part of YISP intervention. However, we venture to offer the following recommendations:

- agencies and practitioners in the youth justice field need to consider what outcome measures they will employ to assess the effectiveness of various programmes and interventions and to ensure that they are able to collect the appropriate data at the case level for analysis both internally and via external evaluations
- while soft measures of effectiveness are important indicators, they do not provide sufficient evidence on which to base policy decisions, so practitioners need to look beyond their clients' and their own perceptions of what has been achieved
- if ONSET is to be used as an assessment tool, all elements of the suite of instruments should be utilised and ONSET scores systematically recorded; if other assessment tools are used, they too should be linked to outcomes and used to guide the contents of ISPs
- if FGC is to be used effectively and if outcomes are to improved, more thought needs to be given to finding ways of harnessing the resources and support of extended family members and to integrating the inputs of families and professionals to meet desired outcomes
- all professionals need to articulate exactly the outcomes they wish to achieve via FGC and consider how these will be measured.

### ***Promoting Promising Practice***

The introduction of FGC within YISPs was both novel and far-reaching. This evaluation captured the experiences of YISP and FGC staff and children and families during the formative years of FGC, enabling us to consider elements of promising practice, in consultation with the staff involved. Many of these elements reflect the findings of other studies, adding further weight to the emerging evidence base. In summary, there is evidence of a number of elements of promising practice, and we offer the following recommendations:

- the skills of FGC facilitators and of keyworkers are critical to family empowerment and need to be fostered

- family group conferences have the potential to provide families with children at high risk of offending with a valuable lifeline and the opportunity to engage directly with key professionals
- responsibility for the review and monitoring of family plans and ISPs needs to be agreed and families need to be clear about who will support them to make changes
- implementing new initiatives, such as FGC, requires models of working to be clearly articulated, guidelines to be tight and consistent, and targets to be achievable.

One of the challenges for all the YISPs has been how to intervene early enough in the lives of children who are at risk of future offending. Ethical concerns about labelling and stigma remain and carrying out assessments of future risk is a particularly sensitive area of practice (McCarthy *et al.*, 2004). The YISPs have paved the way for rigorous assessment to be undertaken and for information-sharing, and the challenge for the FGC/YISPs is how to ensure that ONSET assessments can inform the YISP panels, the family group conferences and the development on an integrated support/family plan.

We asked YISP staff in our case-study areas to reflect on their FGC/YISP practice and to look ahead within the context of the changing landscape of children's services. We noted that one of the pilots, Midshire, had been closed and the team disbanded. This led, we were told, to a great loss of expertise in FGC, and considerable disappointment within the YISP team that the pilot had not been sustainable at a time when YISPs appeared to have much to contribute. The other pilots had been trying to secure further funding for the YISPs and were aware that they might have to shift direction to take up new money. This could, in their view, weaken and dilute the potential of FGC to enhance YISP processes, thus losing the uniqueness of the service that had been developing over the previous three years. Some YISP workers were left wondering what the point of the pilot was.

Nevertheless, the messages to emerge from the focus group discussions held at the end of the evaluation were varied but optimistic. The pilots had derived considerable learning from the FGC/YISP experiment which could be used to shape how FGC is integrated in the future. The main messages we received from the participants in the focus groups were:

- FGC should be flexible, tailored to the needs of individual families and not bound by a 'traditional' model of working
- FGC will not cure all the ills associated with offending and antisocial behaviour and should not be seen as a panacea for all families
- the possibilities for developing FGC are considerable, but the age range should be extended beyond the 8–13 age group, and families should always be at the centre of the process
- FGC has the potential to change the power relationships between families and the agencies working with them, but family members and professionals need to learn new skills in order to promote and benefit from such a change

- the short-term nature of pilots and uncertainties about future funding can undermine the lessons learned and the ability of agencies to smarten their practice and become more effective.

There is a need to reflect on the models of FGC introduced into the YISPs and consider which elements may be most effective within a preventative youth justice agenda. The potential for developing FGC is considerable, but careful consideration needs to be given to the evidence for extending the age range beyond 13. In addition, consideration needs to be given to the skills required by the practitioners if they, in turn, are going to increase the ability of family members to address risk factors and take more responsibility for finding and implementing their own solutions, with the help of a keyworker and other support services.

### ***Looking Ahead***

The YISPs constituted one element in a complex and multi-faceted matrix of new policies and practices which were designed to improve the lives of children and families and to reduce the prevalence of youth crime and antisocial behaviour. The focus has increasingly been on prevention and early intervention, particularly with children deemed to be at high risk.

### **Supporting Parents and Supporting Children**

Recognising that families play a critical role in the healthy development of children and young people, successive governments have placed increasing emphasis not only on reshaping children's services but also on providing better support for parents so that they can provide better support for their children. Ensuring that parents are able to take responsibility for their children's health, well-being and development is regarded as particularly important in preventing children and young people from becoming involved in crime and antisocial behaviour. The emphasis is on multi-agency approaches which tackle all the risks associated with offending and low achievements. Services need to be shaped by and responsive to children, young people and families, not designed around professional boundaries. The expectation is one of promoting more seamless service delivery, with decision-making brought as close to the child as possible in order to promote family empowerment. The YISPs and FGC have had an important role to play in achieving this kind of vision.

While family members in this study valued the opportunity to get together in a family group conference, they nevertheless wanted professional help. Many were at the end of their tether trying to cope with children's unruly and difficult behaviour and did not believe that they had the necessary resources to make things better. If youth justice agencies work closely with other programmes in local communities, they are likely to be able to co-ordinate the kind of parenting support many families want. In this way they could do much to bridge the gap between children's services and adult services, bringing them together in coherent and comprehensive packages of support, reflected in integrated support/family plans. Many keyworkers would have welcomed this emphasis.

Evidence from this study and the national evaluation of YISPs indicates that the majority of children welcomed the opportunities provided by the YISPs to engage in recreational activities, and parents were reassured to know that their



children were safe and doing something positive rather than hanging about the streets. In the future, local communities are likely to need to develop strategies for tackling youth crime and antisocial behaviour which address the risk factors existing in their own areas, promoting positive activities for young people, and creating safer neighbourhoods. Multi-agency engagement is key and the commitment to effective multi-agency working, already evidenced in the YISPs, will need to be strengthened and fostered.

There are many lessons to be learned from the evaluation of FGC within the YISPs, including the increasingly vital role played by keyworkers in co-ordinating and managing the delivery of personalised, tailored services – both universal and targeted. Keyworkers and lead professionals are central to seamless service delivery. Undoubtedly, the landscape of social care and youth justice will continue to change, and evidence of what works will be central to policy decisions both nationally and locally. It is highly likely that social care, health, education, the police and youth justice agencies will be required to co-ordinate their efforts and to equip professionals to deliver structured, evidence-based programmes, ensuring that parenting support interventions include fathers as well as mothers.

The FGC model displays a visible commitment to involving children, young people and their families in planning crime prevention interventions and participating in and reviewing all aspects of delivery. Harnessing this opportunity presented challenges to the YISPs participating in the FGC pilots, but the potential benefits of doing so in the future are considerable.

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## Appendix 1: Data obtained for the evaluation

In Section 2 we summarised the data we were able to collect and the limitations they posed. In this appendix we discuss in more detail the processes we employed to collect data for each element of the evaluation.

### *Collection and Analysis of Baseline Quantitative Micro-level Data*

#### **Planned Data Collection**

The core focus for the quantitative data compilation and analysis was to compare the outcomes for children and young people who experienced a family group conference as part of their YISP intervention with the outcomes for those who did not. Our task was to obtain detailed information prospectively about each child/young person referred to the five pilot YISPs over a 24-month period. Our original intention had been to collect retrospective data also, relating to each child who had been referred to the five pilots for a 12-month period prior to the implementation of FGC, and to analyse referral forms, ONSET assessments, ISPs, case-monitoring records and panel reviews, using the data contained in their management information systems. This would have given us a more robust comparative group of children, since they would be likely to be similar to the total population referred to the YISPs during our study period but none of them could have received the FGC intervention. It would have provided a 'before FGC' group to compare with an 'after FGC' group.

During the scoping it became clear that this ambition could not be achieved in three of the pilots: Welshboro had no pre-existing YISP data as it had just become a YISP and neither Riverborough nor Midshire had captured the constituent elements of ONSET within their pre-FGC YISP databases. There was a mixed picture in Coburgh: Westburgh had captured the relevant information electronically but was not able to export it to the research team, and Eastburgh data were patchy, with only a few cases having many of the necessary data fields completed. These difficulties clearly hampered our ability to develop a pre-FGC database for comparative purposes since the only pilot able to provide data relating to pre-FGC cases was Dockborough.

Unfortunately, Dockborough experienced a range of difficulties in implementing FGC within its YISP, and it appeared to be operating a FGC programme that was not integrated with the YISP process. Two separate services were being offered in a way which was far from joined up. This pilot continued to struggle to implement FGC and the lack of progress led the YJB to decide to withdraw funding from the pilot. We ceased the collection of research data from Dockborough in January 2006, thus reducing the number of pilots in the evaluation to four. As a result, it was not possible to compile a pre-FGC YISP database as a comparator for the evaluation, and this aspect of the evaluation had to be abandoned.

We agreed, therefore, to focus on the collection of prospective data (within the same categories as the desired retrospective data), in order to:

- describe the characteristics of children and families

- ascertain any inherent selection biases
- monitor throughput of referrals
- allow comparison within YISPs between enhanced FGC/YISP and YISP-only services whenever possible.

The aspiration was to compile data on the cases referred to the pilots so as to include information about:

- the children and young people's characteristics
- their family background
- their levels of risk
- their previous history of offending and antisocial behaviour
- family plans developed at a family group conference if one was held
- panel decisions
- the contents of ISPs
- the services offered and received
- changes in risk assessment following YISP (and FGC) interventions
- compliance with family plans and ISPs and the take-up of services
- the time taken to process referrals and provide services.

We supplied lists to the pilots of the key data variables we needed for each child referred to the YISP and each child referred for a family group conference. We had wanted to draw distinctions between children who had been in trouble already (up to reprimand stage) and those who had not, for whom YISP and FGC was essentially a preventative pre-offending intervention. Our experience in the national evaluation of YISPs and our scoping work for this study suggested that we would not have a very large cohort of cases available as evidence, so more intensive and in-depth analyses would be needed to derive the maximum intelligence from the cases which, within a fixed period of time, would have reached the stage needed for an evaluation of the full process and its short-term outcomes to be possible. Much of the quantitative data gathering was in support of research into the ways the pilots implemented the FGC process, linked to in-depth understanding from the qualitative research.

During the scoping period, we had noted the likelihood of selection bias which would make FGC cases distinctive from non-FGC cases. We aimed to identify and measure each such bias (which we expected would vary from pilot to pilot), but this did not mean that it was going to be possible to discount statistically the effect of any bias on the analyses. We expected to minimise the effect of this problem by, for example, analysing 'types' of cases which could be shown to be similar in relevant ways. The critical limitation here, however, was the number of cases in the study, because this needed to be sufficiently large to enable us to identify subsets of cases, which may suffer less from problems of bias, and to analyse them with real confidence.

## *Planned Data Analyses*

### **Establishing Effectiveness**

Establishing the key outcomes of the FGC element and the enhanced effectiveness of the YISP intervention presented the biggest challenge for the quantitative element of the evaluation. The principal relevant outcomes relating to the children going to a family group conference are the same as those for YISPs more generally:

- greater commitment to education and improvements in school performance
- avoidance of identified crime or antisocial behaviour
- improved relationships between children and their parents
- reduced crime risk-factor scores.

For some measures the unit of analysis would be the child, whereas for others it would be other family members, or perhaps others involved in the FGC process: we recognised that there would be a range of participants who could say whether the FGC process worked for them. The outcomes to be measured may well differ between these various participants, but clearly the central focus for our analysis here was the child and we anticipated that the most vital outcome of interest would be measured in terms of change to the child's ONSET score or, more precisely, change to the relevant elements of the ONSET score.

We recognised that the overall ONSET score is a composite measure, meaning that it does not measure any one specific characteristic precisely. We regarded it as likely that more confidence be placed in this score than in the individual components of the ONSET assessment because the latter are much more directly sensitive to the effects of change in the way they have been compiled. We were aware from our national evaluation of YISPs that the way ONSET assessments are completed is somewhat subjective and so the best evidence of change would be derived from the difference between the child's initial and closing ONSET scores where both assessments were conducted by the same professional. We knew from the national evaluation and from the scoping study that the same professional may not conduct the opening and closing assessments, so the difference between the scores may be affected by this factor. It was clear, also, that data collection and assessment procedures varied among the FGC/YISP pilots, particularly in pilots with several referral routes, and that these processes can influence the values/scores attributed to a range of risk factors. We had learned in the national evaluation that professionals from different backgrounds may well score differently.

We were hopeful that, with a large data set, we could include statistical modelling in order to try to separate out the influence on outcomes of a wide range of contextual factors (e.g. family structure, ethnicity, levels of deprivation in the neighbourhood), but our national evaluation of YISPs and our scoping work for this evaluation suggested that we would be unlikely to have the number of cases in our samples required for multi-variate modelling. This assumption proved to be correct and the number of cases in the four FGC pilots which completed the pilot work was far from sufficient for multi-variate modelling of this kind. Given the limited number of cases, the appropriate approach was to analyse all available and relevant cases together rather than to subset them by



a classification or typology and then compare the results from parallel analyses carried out on different types of case. We planned, therefore, and were able to undertake more straightforward analyses in which selected outcome measures were tabulated against specific factors, such as a child's age, which could be expected to shape the response not only to YISP and FGC interventions but to any interventions of this kind. Nevertheless, as had been the case in our national evaluation of YISPs, we were dependent on practitioners undertaking and recording risk assessments at certain stages of the child's involvement with the YISP programme, and not all did so.

### **Deriving Data**

Although we set out with the intention of conducting a robust comparative study in order to ascertain the enhanced effectiveness of FGC within the YISP context, we had to revise our expectations of what could be achieved as a result of the scoping study. Nevertheless, we remained optimistic that the pilots could and would deliver data which would ensure that most, if not all, of the planned elements would be possible. Not all our hopes were realised, however. We describe the micro-level data we obtained during the evaluation and the data from the national evaluation of YISPs we have been able to use for comparative purposes.

In order to monitor activity in each pilot, we asked each to provide monthly returns indicating all new referrals, number of family group conferences held, and so on, in addition to their MIS data sets. We planned to compare these monthly returns from the pilots with the data recorded on their management information systems in order to check for discrepancies. Tables A1.1–A1.4 summarise the information given to us by the pilots via monthly monitoring forms, which they returned from September 2005 until December 2006.

Table A1.2 indicates that, according to returns from the pilots, 767 children aged 8–13 were offered a family group conference between September 2005 and December 2006 (inclusive), and that 327 conferences were held in the same period. From the data provided by the pilots we assessed that approximately 21 per cent of all YISP referrals for children aged between 8–13 resulted in a family group conference, although there were significant variations between pilots. Of course, some of the YISP referrals may not have met the criteria for YISP intervention, and thus would not have been eligible for a family group conference. Moreover, we sensed that more than one child may have been subject to a single conference (e.g. in the case of siblings or other related family members).

**Table A1.1: YISP referrals for children aged 8 to 13 received by pilots (monthly monitoring data)**

Pilot	2005				2006												Total
	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
<b>Coburgh</b>	11	88	90	19	23	16	33	38	32	35	22	17	28	34	32	32	<b>550</b>
<b>Riverborough</b>	73	60	39	43	47	15	23	22	27	15	12	4	18	23	16	14	<b>451</b>
<b>Dockborough</b>	0	2	27	15	15	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<b>59</b>
<b>Midshire</b>	7	19	31	21	18	30	24	15	16	30	23	6	9	27	60	33	<b>369</b>
<b>Welshboro</b>	12	9	10	10	13	9	10	2	6	6	8	2	8	5	9	5	<b>124</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>1,553</b>

**Table A1.2: Number of YISP children aged 8–13 offered a family group conference (monthly monitoring data)**

Pilot	2005				2006												Total
	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May.	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
<b>Coburgh</b>	11	88	16	8	8	4	8	0	18	3	3	3	5	13	u/k	u/k	<b>188</b>
<b>Riverborough</b>	32	15	23	21	21	0	0	22	25	15	12	4	18	23	16	14	<b>261</b>
<b>Dockborough</b>	0	1	27	15	21	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<b>64</b>
<b>Midshire</b>	4	5	21	10	10	13	19	12	-	9	10	9	1	6	6	8	<b>143</b>
<b>Welshboro</b>	8	4	5	6	11	12	8	5	6	6	8	7	8	5	10	2	<b>111</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>767</b>

**Table A1.3: Number of families agreeing to a family group conference (monthly monitoring data)**

Pilot	2005				2006								Total				
	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.		Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
<b>Coburgh</b>	8	33	9	8	14	4	12	1	2	7	3	6	4	13	10	5	<b>139</b>
<b>Riverborough</b>	10	12	11	13	11	0	0	0	0	7	3	3	2	2	1	1	<b>76</b>
<b>Dockborough*</b>	5	6	11	4	7	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<b>33</b>
<b>Midshire</b>	6	2	5	7	5	5	2	1	6	5	4	7	1	4	4	4	<b>68</b>
<b>Welshboro</b>	11	4	4	6	8	8	7	5	5	5	6	7	8	5	7	2	<b>98</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>414</b>

\*Dockborough included non-YISP referrals.

**Table A1.4: Number of family group conferences held with children aged 8–13 (monthly monitoring data)**

Pilot	2005				2006								Total				
	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.		Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
<b>Coburgh</b>	7	3	7	8	5	4	8	7	3	6	3	3	6	6	7	12	<b>95</b>
<b>Riverborough</b>	6	9	6	5	5	3	3	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	1	1	<b>43</b>
<b>Dockborough</b>	8	4	6	2	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<b>22</b>
<b>Midshire</b>	0	7	9	2	6	7	10	2	3	7	5	0	6	3	3	0	<b>70</b>
<b>Welshboro</b>	5	4	4	7	5	11	9	1	9	9	5	6	4	9	5	4	<b>97</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>327</b>

## ***Problems and Limitations***

We worked with each pilot to explain how the case-level data should be stored electronically and transmitted to the research team. In the end, our strategy for the analysis of the quantitative case-level data centred on comparing cases referred to each pilot during the study period in which a family group conference had taken place with those cases in which a conference was not held during the period of YISP intervention. Inevitably, we could not do this in Welshboro because all the children accepted by the YISP were included in the FGC process. We had intended, also, to make comparisons with the YISP cases in our earlier national evaluation. The YISPMIS data available for the national evaluation had provided the template for the data to be obtained from the FGC/YISP pilots. Regrettably, the data supplied by the FGC pilots had limited commonalities with the original YISPMIS data set, but a degree of data 'pooling' was still possible.

One of the key lessons which emerged from the national evaluation of YISPs was that many pilots had difficulties installing and utilising a new management information system. Few pilots had made sufficient allowance in their planning for the time it takes to: identify the appropriate procedures for implementing the YISPMIS; ensure that staff with the relevant skills are available to use the YISPMIS; adopt current practices to ensure that all the relevant data are captured; and work out how to submit data regularly for evaluation purposes. We hoped that lessons had been learned from the national evaluation so that data collection and transmission in this study would be far less problematic both for the pilots and the evaluators. Although the YJB did not insist on the use of YISPMIS in the FGC/YISP pilots several pilots still struggled to implement an effective management information system (MIS) and most were not able to routinely record all the case-level information we needed. The lack of technical expertise and staffing instability were significant problems. One pilot sub-contracted the work, and this also led to difficulties.

We had identified our information requirements during the scoping phase, and pilots had told us that they did not expect these to present them with undue difficulties. However, pilots were very busy implementing the FGC element and it is unlikely that many of them spent a great deal of time at that stage working out how to capture and deliver the required data. In the event, the quantitative data set available for the FGC evaluation was considerably more limited than had been anticipated, owing to a combination of factors:

- the Dockborough pilot ceased to operate at an early stage
- most pilots dealt with fewer cases than had been expected
- pilots did not always record information that may have been of value to the research
- some information was recorded by pilots on paper only
- some pilots had information in their MIS which they could not export
- pilots exported case records which included invalid or incomplete information.

The strategy for compiling quantitative data for the evaluation hinged on the pilots delivering the specified information in the agreed electronic format. It appears that the pilots were unprepared for the challenge of data supply, with the consequence that the data supplied frequently arrived much later than requested. Often, very partial records were sent when the pilots felt pressured to prove the existence of the number of referrals they had claimed. The end result was that the pilots which were struggling to supply data had to be asked by the research team to resupply data on many occasions, which further increased the database workload those pilots were struggling with. We were very sympathetic to the problems they were experiencing, but without the required data we could not proceed with the evaluation. Although the research team was minimally resourced for data preparation work, we decided to check each new data delivery in great detail and work with each of the pilots to garner as much information on as many cases as possible. This substantial amount of additional work was all the more difficult to justify because it could never fully resolve all the problems.

Some pilots provided little or no data for many months and the most frequently cited explanation was that they either did not or could not collect all the information from keyworkers and others involved in the cases. So, key information for the evaluation team, such as the postcode, age, or gender of a child, was frequently missing and a good deal of time was spent chasing information. Several pilots did not have sufficiently sophisticated or joined-up MIS-based processes to allow them to input data once, and once only, for both their own use and the research. This meant that even basic information such as age or gender was entered repeatedly, sometimes not only on to more than one MIS but also, first, on paper. For the frontline FGC staff, entering data several times was unnecessary and time-consuming work and, inevitably, they saw the work to meet the needs of the research as entirely outwith their main workload.

These problems would have been eased if all the pilots had been able to link the YISP and FGC databases satisfactorily, but several could not, even at the end of the pilot period. The result was that these pilots sent the research team separate databases, relying on us to make the linkage by finding matching records in different files to create a full record of that case. The problem then was that any errors in the data fields being used to make the match resulted in an incomplete case record and, of course, the research team had no information to resolve the problem. This meant that the research team had to alert pilot staff to the problem and hope that they would use their personal knowledge or paper records to correct the errors, after which the research team had to try again to match the records of the single case in two datasets.

Another major problem was that not every type of MIS used across the pilots was able to export data. In other words, the MIS may have held all the data required for the research but it was impossible to extract the information. For many pilots, the MIS had to service other projects as well as the YISP and the ability to export data was not required in the other projects. As a result, data in the MIS could only be retrieved on screen on a case-by-case basis using the software's fixed functions. The solution was to compile the research data separately within a parallel database using a simple spreadsheet.

The final outcome of all the above factors was that the research team had to devise processes to deal with data sent in a variety of mediums, including: single Excel spreadsheets; single CSV files; multiple Excel spreadsheets, and Access database files. All these had to be interrogated to create the database needed for the analysis program (SPSSx), which required a single, flat matrix with one record per case and one column per variable. One key to this process was linking, via a unique identifier, all the data for each case, all of which were anonymised.

In the case of one pilot, it was necessary to match records in different files using name and date of birth. This is an error-prone process. False negatives and false positives were minimised by manual checking of cases, a very time-consuming process which had not been envisaged when planning the research. Not to have done this would effectively have removed all that pilot's data from the research. In another pilot, dates of birth were held in two different places, so these could be used as a test of the quality of data entry. In over 10 per cent of cases – linked using their unique case identifiers – a different date of birth was given in the two places. This particular data field's quality of coding was then improved by the pilot after much manual work. The reason for noting this here is that it serves as a reminder that other data-quality problems probably remain in the database: time did not permit a similar quality check of all the other data fields. One particular unforeseen consequence of the pilots' difficulties in implementing their MIS and data supply protocols was that successive data returns from several pilots were in different formats. This erratic data delivery resulted in a continual need to rewrite the programs we used in compiling our research database for the analyses.

Throughout our efforts to maximise the data available for analysis an unavoidable trade-off emerged between the number of cases to be analysed and the richness of the data available on those cases. Pilots struggling to compile data could either spend time seeking the *n*th variable about a relatively small set of cases, or they could cover more cases in a rather less comprehensive way. Given the need of any statistically robust analysis for sufficient cases, the research team's preference might well have been to capture less data about more cases. As it happened, this was the strategy that was implicitly adopted by the pilots.

As the research developed, it became clear that data items could be grouped into distinct categories, such as:

- verificatory data (e.g. the referral date or the age of the child or young person)
- outcome information (primarily an ONSET score at referral, and another later)
- potential explanatory factors (e.g. characteristics of the child or the family)
- process information, perhaps related to the referral or the FGC event itself.

In practice, the data categories above show the order of priority we adopted in response to the data compilation dilemma (either seeking more complete data on relatively few cases, or seeking the maximum number of cases, even though less information may be known about those cases). This led to a low emphasis

on process information, not least because this was very rarely provided. In fact, when it was provided, it was often in text form, which was not readily usable for quantitative analysis. The highest priority was placed on the basic data needed to individuate the case, along with information such as the referral date, which determined whether the case was 'in scope' for the evaluation.

The implicit priority on maximising the number of cases, at the expense of requiring more complete data albeit on fewer cases, emerged during the research data compilation. This general principle still left open the question of how many variables from the third category above – potential explanatory variables – should be deemed to be essential before a case could be accepted into the research database. We did not know while we were compiling the data just which variables would be available for enough cases for robust analysis to be possible, and which of these variables would be deemed to be essential. This uncertainty added to the burden of constantly rewriting the data collation software owing to changing data input formats. The consequence was that it was not possible to create a set of data analysis programmes until after all data collection had been concluded. This in turn has meant that the original intention to process data on an ongoing basis in order to provide feedback was thwarted.

A considerable amount of effort went into collecting the research data and collating the database, so it seems important that lessons are learned about the data collection process. We are extremely grateful to all the pilots for endeavouring to meet the research requirements and for painstakingly working at full stretch to ensure that they could contribute to the evaluation. We know that staff had to review and refine their data entry several times over. As a result, we have been able to conduct some important analyses, but the study is inevitably weakened by the continuing gaps and inconsistencies in the data.

Ensuring that management information systems are able to collect data routinely for use in evaluations as well as for use by the pilots remains a challenge, it seems. We are well aware that recording accurate case-level data is not easy at a time of considerable change in the delivery of services for children and young people and the drive towards multi-agency partnership working. Constructing and implementing systems which are workable and useful would seem to be a major priority if evaluations of new initiatives are to be robust and provide a reliable evidence base which can inform future policy and practice decisions. Similar future policy initiatives might benefit from requiring all the organisations that are bidding to deliver the initiative to prove their ability to deliver data for research, perhaps having the funding for dedicated staff ring-fenced along with other resources needed to deliver the research data fully and on time.

### **Survey Data**

Exit questionnaires, administered by the FGC staff to each participant at the end of each conference, provided an additional insight (both quantitative and qualitative) into the self-reported impact of the experience. The exit questionnaires were completed on the spot at the conference venue and each respondent placed the questionnaire into a sealed envelope to be collected and returned to the research team. They sought participants' thoughts about their

preparation for the conference, the stages of the conference and their own participation in it, and their expectations of what would happen next. This survey provided a baseline for conducting the follow-up study with the participants who had given written consent on the exit questionnaire to further research contact.

We began to receive exit questionnaires in October 2005 and completed the data collection in December 2006. Table A1.5 records the numbers of conferences held per month from which exit data were returned, and Table A1.6 shows the numbers of conference participants who completed exit questionnaires during the same period.



**Table A1.5: Number of conferences held in each month from which research data were received**

Pilot	2005			2006												Total
	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
<b>Coburgh</b>	0	4	7	3	4	5	4	1	3	1	2	5	5	5	9	<b>58</b>
<b>Riverborough</b>	0	1	5	2	3	2	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	1	1	<b>19</b>
<b>Dockborough</b>	0	0	0	2	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<b>4</b>
<b>Midshire</b>	1	4	2	4	3	6	2	3	7	6	0	5	1	2	0	<b>46</b>
<b>Welshboro</b>	1	3	4	4	9	5	1	7	1	8	2	0	8	2	0	<b>55</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>182</b>

**Table A1.6: Number of exit forms completed by family group conference participants**

	Coburgh	Riverborough	Dockborough	Midshire	Welshboro	Total
<b>Children*</b>	67	16	2	51	58	<b>194</b>
<b>Other children</b>	48	0	0	11	5	<b>64</b>
<b>Parent/carer</b>	80	18	5	59	59	<b>221</b>
<b>Professional</b>	210	29	7	213	143	<b>602</b>
<b>Victim</b>	4	0	0	1	4	<b>9</b>
<b>Family members, friends, neighbours</b>	24	17	5	47	18	<b>111</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>433</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>1,201</b>

\*Includes only those children who had been referred to the family group conference.

Although Riverborough and Dockborough returned far fewer exit questionnaires, we were able to obtain an overall sample of 1,201 questionnaires. It is clear from Table A1.6, however, that very few victims attended family group conferences during the study period.

At the end of the exit questionnaire, respondents were asked if they were willing to participate further in the research. Those in the two case-study pilots were asked, in addition, if they were willing to talk to us about their experiences. Tables A1.7 and A1.8 indicate the response rates, which were very encouraging. Some 88 per cent of parents/carers and 83 per cent of children were willing to participate further across the five pilots, and 65 per cent of parents and 75 per cent of children in the case-study pilots consented to talk to the research team.

**Table A1.7: Number of family members willing to complete a follow-up questionnaire\***

	<b>Coburgh</b>	<b>Riverborough</b>	<b>Dockborough</b>	<b>Midshire</b>	<b>Welshboro</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Children</b>	59	13	2	43	45	<b>162</b>
<b>Non-subject children</b>	37	0	0	9	4	<b>50</b>
<b>Parent/carer</b>	69	12	3	58	52	<b>194</b>
<b>Other family members/friends</b>	21	10	3	42	18	<b>94</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>500</b>

\*These figures also include some of those who consented to talk to the research team.

**Table A1.8: Number of participants willing to talk to the research team in the two case-study pilots**

	<b>Midshire</b>	<b>Coburgh</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Children*</b>	38	51	<b>89</b>
<b>Non-referred children</b>	9	35	<b>44</b>
<b>Parent/carers</b>	41	50	<b>91</b>
<b>Other family members/friends</b>	30	20	<b>50</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>274</b>

\*Includes only those children aged 8–13 who were the subject of a family group conference.

During the evaluation, pilot staff asked if we could devise exit questionnaires to be used at the conclusion of review conferences. We met this request and Table A1.9 indicates the exit data received from review conferences. We received no review conference questionnaires from either Riverborough or Dockborough.

**Table A1.9: Exit questionnaires received after review conferences**

Pilot site	Number of review questionnaires
Coburgh	23
Midshire	13
Welshboro	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>

### Follow-up Survey

Some nine months after attending a family group conference, participants who consented to further research participation were sent a follow-up questionnaire. Towards the end of the study, these questionnaires were sent three months after the conference so that we could include more participants prior to the end of the data collection period. We took account of these time variations in our analyses. Table A1.10 indicates the numbers of follow-up questionnaires distributed and the numbers returned. Unfortunately, we were unable to distribute follow-up questionnaires to all who consented to participate, for three main reasons. First, we could send questionnaires only when we had a full, legible address recorded on the consent form; second, we did not send questionnaires to children whose parents had not consented; and third, we did not include Dockborough in this part of the research, as it had ceased to participate as a pilot.

Somewhat disappointingly, the overall response rate was only 26 per cent, despite our sending several reminders. Notably, other family members and friends (32%) were more likely than parents (26%) and children (21%) to return the questionnaire. The response rate in Welshboro was considerably higher than the rate elsewhere; Coburgh had the lowest response rate.

**Table A1.10: Follow-up questionnaires sent and returned (R)**

Area	Sent to parent/ carer	R	Sent to children	R	Sent to family members/ friends	R	Total sent	Total R	Response (%)
Coburgh	48	10	68	10	17	5	133	25	19
Riverborough	11	2	9	3	9	3	29	8	28
Midshire	55	15	49	8	38	9	140	32	23
Welshboro	45	14	40	13	14	8	99	35	35
<b>Total</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>25</b>

### **Qualitative Approaches**

We conducted qualitative enquiry across all five pilots, but put particular focus on deriving in-depth interview responses from family group conference participants in just two of them. An essential ingredient in our qualitative study was first-hand observation of conferences and YISP panels. Our observation of YISP panels in the earlier national evaluation enabled us to understand how they operated and the differences between the pilots. By replicating this method we were able to determine whether the panels in the FGC pilots were working similarly and then observe how the introduction of an FGC element impacted on the work of the panels. We were particularly keen, also, to observe family group conferences in order to:

- determine the levels of child and family participation
- determine the role played by the conference facilitator
- witness the decision-making process and the development of a family plan
- note the adherence to FGC objectives and principles of practice
- observe the immediate impact of the conference on the child and family members.

We modified the observation protocol used in the YISP national evaluation to fit the new circumstances.

### **Sample of Children and Families**

We selected two pilots for our in-depth study of children and families. We considered which of the pilots would offer us the best opportunity to investigate the enhanced effectiveness of FGC when combined with the YISP. During our scoping study, we were concerned about the lack of integration between the FGC element and the YISP in Dockborough. The referral routes into the FGC process were rather unclear in Riverborough, and the number of conferences being organised was low; and in Welshboro there was no separate YISP process to provide a comparison. For these reasons we rejected Dockborough, Riverborough and Welshboro as potential case-study pilots and selected Coburgh and Midshire, both of which were operating FGC within the context of fully functioning YISPs. These two pilots offered contrasting geographical locations, management structures and processes.

Our aim was to draw a sample of up to 12 families in each of the two pilots and to track them through to case closure, interviewing them face to face at two points in time:

- Time 1, shortly after the family group conference had taken place

- Time 2, six months after the conference had taken place.

We reserved the option of a Time 3 telephone interview nine months after the conference if the case was ongoing at Time 2. We hoped that our selection of families could be conceptually and theoretically driven, taking into account a range of variables such as the age of the child, risk factor scores, family structure and ethnicity. We wanted to understand in greater depth the conditions under which FGC could be most effective and the factors which influence engagement and compliance.

Time 1 interviews were designed to focus on participants' experiences of referral, assessment, preparation for a family group conference and the conference itself. We were particularly interested in the involvement of victims and attempts at restorative justice. The Time 2 interviews focused primarily on what had happened since the conference, the services and support offered to the family and the perceived impact of the conference itself and outcomes which participants attributed to the YISP intervention and the process in general, and to the conference in particular. Time 2 interviews offered participants a chance to reflect on the processes, interventions and outcomes and to offer predictions for the future in terms of the child's involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour. We were keen to examine changes – in attitudes, behaviour, family functioning, school performance and self-perception – and to ascertain satisfaction with the YISP and with FGC involvement. At Time 2 we interviewed each child's YISP keyworker to explore their experience of the child's progress and engagement and their prognosis for the future.

We planned to use a range of validated scales during our interviews to provide measures of change between Time 1 and Time 2. We have found in earlier studies that it is possible to introduce these during qualitative in-depth interviews and that they offer the opportunity to obtain more robust indicators of change, albeit using very small samples. During the Time 1 and Time 2 interviews with children and young people we asked them to complete the SDQ. This is a well-standardised, brief behavioural screening instrument used primarily in the mental health arena. It covers both positive and negative behaviours and assesses the impact of identified difficulties on the child and the family. In our interviews with parents at both Time 1 and Time 2, we used the FAD. This is a well-validated instrument which measures six areas of family functioning, including problem solving and communication.

#### **Qualitative Data Obtained**

Our original plan was to observe two YISP panels and two family group conferences in each pilot. However, we abandoned observations in Dockborough when the pilot was closed early. We completed nine observations of YISP panels

(four in Coburgh – two each in Eastburgh and Westburgh – and two each in Midshire and Welshboro and one in Riverborough) and 10 family group conferences (four in Coburgh, three in Midshire, two in Welshboro and one in Riverborough). In addition, we observed two review meetings in Coburgh.

In respect of interviews with families, our target was to select 12 families in each of the two case-study pilots. In the event, in Midshire we completed interviews with 45 individuals from 13 families at Time 1 (including at least one parent/carer and the referred child in each family). In Coburgh we completed interviews with 21 individuals from six families in Eastburgh and 27 interviews with members of nine families in Westburgh at Time 1. Thus, we exceeded our target and included 28 families at Time 1 across the two pilot sites.

During our previous national evaluation of YISPs we gave children and young people a disposable camera during the Time 1 interview and we decided to repeat this during the current study of FGC/YISPs. We provided each child with a disposable camera and asked them to record what happened in their lives following the family group conference. The aim was to encourage each child to keep a visual record of what they had done while they were involved with the YISP. We have found that this provides a focus for our interviews, particularly with young children and keeps them involved with the research. We provided the children with stamped addressed envelopes to return the cameras to us, or we collected them at the Time 2 interview.

Once we had received the cameras, two sets of prints were developed, one of which we kept and one of which we sent back to the family. We were unable to collect all the cameras, however, as some children had lost them by the time we revisited. At Time 1 we gave out 17 cameras in Coburgh, 9 of which were returned; and in Midshire we gave out 21 cameras, 10 of which were returned. When cameras were returned in time for the film to be developed before the second interview, the photographs were used while talking to the young person as an aid to their reflection about the preceding months. They used the cameras to take pictures around their houses of friends, parents, siblings and grandparents; pets; favourite or new toys such as a bike or a trampoline; and holidays or trips. The films provided an additional insight into the children's lives and were a useful tool for us during our follow-up interviews.

At Time 2, we were able to re-interview 18 members of eight of the families in Midshire, but it proved impossible to re-interview the child in four of these families. A further four families were uncontactable at Time 2 and another family repeatedly delayed the interview arrangements. In Eastburgh we were able to re-interview 19 members of the original six families and in Westburgh we re-interviewed 12 members of five families. It proved to be impossible to contact two Westburgh families at time 2: one family withdrew from the research because of

family illness; and another family repeatedly failed to keep appointments for interview. In total, then, we interviewed 48 members of 15 families in Coburgh at Time 1 and 31 of these members from 11 families at Time 2.

During our interviews with children and young people who were the subject of the family group conference, we collected 20 SDQs at Time 1 and 14 at Time 2. Twenty-three parents completed the FAD at time 1 and 17 at time 2. In addition, from Coburgh, at Time 2 we received 10 user satisfaction questionnaires completed by parents and 13 completed by children and young people.

We interviewed three YISP keyworkers in Midshire at Time 2 whose role included the co-ordination of family group conferences, and eleven YISP keyworkers and three FGC co-ordinators in Coburgh. All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

### ***Qualitative Data Analysis***

Our qualitative analysis followed the principles of grounded theory, a widely used and systematic means of generating a coherent understanding of the research area that is rooted in multiple perspectives (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992; 2004). An abbreviated version, which involves sequential coding and interpretation of one set of data rather than repeated data-gathering exercises, is endorsed for time-delimited projects such as this (Willig, 2001). The interview transcripts and notes from the observations and focus groups were first coded for emergent themes through repeated reading by the researchers. These fine-grain codes were then refined through comparison within data sources (e.g. bringing together different workers' understandings of the role of the panel) and across data sources (e.g. reviewing our notes on the conferences observed and comparing our observations with the recollections of the family members and practitioners involved). The researchers then discussed the coding scheme in order to identify broad emergent themes and examine how these were informed by instances of divergence. Through this process, a coherent account of the data as a whole was developed and subsequently written up in a framework reflecting the FGC process, with one of the researchers concentrating on the initial stages of FGC intervention (Time 1 data) and another on delivery and outcomes (Time 2 data). In order to assist the process of thematic analysis, NVivo was used to code the material from the interview transcripts, observations of family group conferences and YISP panels, and the focus groups.

Inevitably, the researchers carrying out the analyses were close to the data in that they had been largely responsible for gathering them, and each had taken responsibility for conducting interviews in one of the pilot areas. Because we recognised that this may have limited their individual frame of reference during

the analytical process, the researchers read and coded all the material in order to derive a broader picture of the interview data. Discussion of the findings emerging from the analyses took place at periodic team meetings to allow for wider triangulation, and to ensure that the qualitative findings were able to inform and be informed by the analyses in other elements of the study.



## **Appendix 2: Profiles of the children in the interview sample**

The interview sample was drawn from two pilot sites: Coburgh (comprising Westburgh and Eastburgh) and Midshire. Most families in Coburgh lived in rented accommodation on municipal housing estates within an urban conurbation; one family lived in privately owned accommodation. Three-quarters of the families in the sample lived in households where the mother lived alone with her children; two children referred to the YISP lived with both parents; and three lived with their mother and her partner. Most of the families in Westburgh had witnessed, or were experiencing, domestic violence in the home. There was a parent in employment in less than half the families; and most of these parents had part-time jobs, such as cleaner, factory worker, shop assistant or clerical worker. Six children had received a reprimand from the police for offences such as shoplifting, selling drugs and racial harassment, four had received a verbal warning for antisocial behaviour, and two had been in contact with the police as a result of having gone missing from home. Concerns relating to these children centred on problems at home and at school.

All but one of the families in Midshire lived on housing estates in large towns; just one family lived in a small village. Over half of the children in our sample lived with their mother in a lone-parent household. One child lived with his mother and her partner, four children lived with both their parents, and one child lived with his brother at his grandparents' home. Children in three Midshire households had witnessed domestic violence. In about half of the households at least one parent was in full- or part-time employment. Two boys in the sample were subject to Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs). Most of the children were exhibiting problematic behaviour at school and at home.

### ***Mick, Vanessa and Jeff***

Mick, aged 8, Vanessa, aged 11, and Jeff, aged 13, lived with their mother and one younger sibling. Jeff had been referred to the YISP by the Education Welfare Officer because he was aggressive, rude to staff at the Pupil Referral Unit he attended, and did nothing constructive in his spare time. He had also refused to eat while he was at the PRU. He was involved in fighting and had emotional problems. Both Mick and Vanessa referred themselves to the YISP. All three children were known to social services, and Vanessa had a statement of SEN. Mick's initial ONSET score was the lowest of the three children's (18) and this

had dropped to 16 at case closure. Vanessa's initial ONSET score was 24 and this had gone up to 29 at case closure. Jeff's initial ONSET score was extremely high (38), but this had gone down a little, to 34, at case closure.

### ***Kieron, Charlie and Ellie***

Kieron, aged 8, Charlie, aged 10, and Ellie, aged 11, lived with their mother. Charlie had been referred to the YISP by his school because of his behavioural problems at school and at home. Kieron and Ellie referred themselves because of the impact of Charlie's aggressive behaviour. There were concerns that Kieron might copy his brother. Kieron's initial ONSET score was low (14), and had dropped to 9 at the end of YISP intervention. Ellie's initial ONSET score was 18 and had dropped to 10 at case closure. Charlie's initial ONSET score was high in comparison with those of his siblings: it was 32 initially and fell to 21 by case closure. Charlie had a statement of SEN at the time of his YISP referral and was known to the police. All three children were known to social services.

### ***Penny and Alan***

Penny, aged 8, and Alan, aged 9, were the eldest of three children. Their sister Isla was 6. They lived with their mother and her partner. Both Penny and Alan were known to social services. Alan had been referred to the YISP by his school because of his troublesome behaviour, and Penny had been referred by a children's charity because she had been stealing from her mother, had few friends, and was inclined to be violent in the home. Penny had a statement of SEN and was known to the police. Both children had witnessed domestic violence. Alan's initial ONSET score was 25, and this had increased very slightly, to 26, at the end of YISP involvement. Penny's initial ONSET score was 21 and this had risen to 25 by case closure.

### ***Leo and Natalie***

Leo, aged 9, and Natalie, aged 12, lived with their mother. They had both been referred to the YISP by the police. They were disruptive at home and had witnessed domestic violence, and there were concerns about possible parental neglect. They had come to the attention of the police because of their antisocial behaviour, and both had peer groups who were involved in antisocial activities. Both were known to social services. Concerns had been expressed about Leo's emotional well-being and Natalie's mental and emotional health. Both children were doing little in the way of positive activities at the time of their YISP referral, and Natalie was truanting from school. Leo had a statement of SEN and his initial

ONSET score was 18, which had dropped to 16 at case closure. Natalie's initial score was 20 and this had increased to 22 at case closure.

### ***Matt***

Matt, aged 10, had been referred to the YISP by the education welfare officer. He was disruptive at home and at school and had been excluded on several occasions. He associated with antisocial peers, but was not known to the police or social services. His initial ONSET score was 20. There is no recorded closure score.

### ***Nial***

Nial was 10 at the time of his referral to the YISP by social services. He lived with his mother and was the youngest of three children. He was being disruptive at home and had witnessed domestic violence. His initial ONSET score was 20 and this had not changed at case closure.

### ***Stuart***

Stuart was 10 at the time of his YISP referral, and lived with his parents and two younger siblings. He was known to social services, and had been referred to the YISP by his school because of his disruptive behaviour at home and at school, where he had a statement of SEN. He was involved in few positive activities and had emotional and mental health problems. He had also witnessed domestic violence. His initial ONSET score was 12, which was fairly low, and this had dropped to 9 by case closure.

### ***Keith***

Keith had been 10 when he had been referred to the YISP by the local YOT. He lived with his mother and one older sibling. His behaviour at home was poor and he had been excluded from school several times because of his bad behaviour. His initial ONSET score was 27, but this had dropped considerably (to 15) at case closure.

### ***Victoria and Tom***

Victoria, aged 10, and Tom, aged 12, lived with their parents. Tom had been excluded from school and had a statement of SEN. He was experiencing problems associated with a brain injury, had difficulty sleeping and was depressed. The reasons for his sister's referral to the YISP are unclear, but Tom's

problems were clearly causing stress within the family. Both children were known to the police and to social services. Victoria's initial ONSET score was relatively low (14) and was unchanged at case closure. Tom's initial ONSET score, by contrast, was relatively high (31), and it too was unchanged at case closure.

### ***Adrian***

Adrian was 11 at the time of his referral to the YISP because of his disruptive behaviour at home and lack of positive activities. He had witnessed domestic violence. He lived with his mother and one younger sibling, and was known to social services. He had also been given a verbal warning by the police. Adrian's initial ONSET score was 10, which was the lowest in our Westburgh sample, and this had reduced to 7 at case closure.

### ***Maddie***

Maddie, aged 11, had been referred to the YISP by a health visitor. She lived with her mother and two younger siblings. She had been disruptive at home and at one point had gone missing. She had emotional and mental health problems, had witnessed domestic violence, and was known to social services. She had an initial ONSET score of 15. No closure ONSET score was recorded for her.

### ***Duncan***

Duncan had been 11 when he had been referred to the YISP by social services. He lived with his mother and one younger sibling. He was described as being aggressive and difficult at home, his school attendance was poor, and he was involved in substance misuse. His initial ONSET score was high, at 37. His closure ONSET score was not available.

### ***George***

George, aged 12, was an only child and lived with his mother. He had been referred to the YISP by the police, having already been given an ABC for vandalism and pestering his neighbours. He was also known to social services. George's initial ONSET score was 20. No closure ONSET score was available.

### ***Elliot and Joel***

Elliot, aged 10 and Joel, aged 12, and had both been referred to the YISP while they had been living with their grandparents after their mother had died. Both were known to social services, which had referred Elliot to the YISP, and Joel

was subject to an ABC. They had both been getting into trouble with their neighbours and were bullying other children. Joel's initial ONSET score was 20, and this had dropped to 14 at case closure. Elliot's initial score was 25 and this had reduced to 17 at case closure.

### ***Alex***

Alex was 12, and had been referred to the YISP by the education welfare officer because he was bordering on being permanently excluded from school. He was said to be part of an antisocial peer group and was involved in substance misuse. He was also disruptive at home, where he lived with his parents and one younger sibling. He was subject to a police reprimand at the time of his YISP referral and had an initial ONSET score of 30, which is considered high. This had increased to 33 by the time of the closure ONSET.

### ***Boyd***

Boyd had been 12 when he had been referred to the YISP because of his disruptive behaviour at home and at school. He had experienced several school exclusions, and had emotional and mental health difficulties. He had been referred by a national children's charity. Boyd lived with his mother and one older sibling. His initial ONSET score was 16, and this had reduced to 9 at case closure.

### ***Jason and Scott***

Jason was 11 and Scott was 12 when they were both referred to the YISP by the education welfare officer. They lived with their mother and her partner and six siblings, and were second- and third-eldest in the family respectively. They had both been reprimanded by the police. They mixed with peer groups involved in antisocial behaviour and were involved in drugs. Scott had a statement of SEN. His initial ONSET score was 22, and this went down to 18 by case closure. Jason's initial score was 16, and this had reduced to 9 by case closure.

### ***Shellie***

Shellie had been 12 when she had been referred to the YISP by Women's Aid. She had witnessed domestic violence at home and had been violent herself towards other children. Her behaviour at school was also causing concern. She lived with her mother and one younger sibling. She had a statement of SEN and was known to both the police and social services. Her initial ONSET score was 32, and this had gone down to 22 by the end of her YISP involvement.

### ***Ben and Darcy***

Ben was 11 and Darcy was 13 when they had been referred to the YISP by the BEST. They lived with their mother and were the eldest of four children. They were both disruptive at home and both had witnessed domestic violence. Darcy was truanting from school, her educational achievement was low, and she was subject to a SEN. Ben was assessed as having emotional and mental health problems. Darcy had not been in contact with the police, but Ben had received a verbal warning. Both children were known to social services. At the time of their referral Darcy's ONSET score was 14, and this had dropped to 12 by case closure. Ben had a higher initial ONSET score of 18, and this had reduced to 13 by case closure.

### ***Naomi***

Naomi was 13 and had been referred by the education welfare officer because of her disruptive behaviour at home, her truanting from school and her poor temper control. She lacked constructive activities. She lived with her mother and was known to social services. She had also received a police reprimand. Her initial ONSET score was 18 and her closure ONSET score was 16.

### ***Maxine and Harry***

Harry was 12 and Maxine was 13 when they had been referred to the YISP. Harry had been referred by the police following a police reprimand; Maxine had referred herself. They had an older sibling and lived with their mother. Maxine was disruptive at home; she refused to go to school, mixed with antisocial peers and had emotional and mental health problems. Harry was disruptive at home and at school and had poor temper control. He had a statement of SEN. He mixed with antisocial peers and had been the victim of bullying. Both children lacked constructive activities and had witnessed domestic violence, and there were concerns about parental neglect. They were both known to social services, and Maxine had at one stage been missing from home. Maxine's initial ONSET score was 28, and there had been no change by case closure. Harry's initial score was 24, and this had gone up to 31 by case closure.

### ***Rory***

Rory had been 13 when he had been referred to the YISP by his school. He lived with his mother and her partner and four younger siblings. He had been referred because of his disruptive behaviour at home and at school. He had problems with truancy, was engaged in few constructive activities, and had been the victim of

bullying. He had witnessed domestic violence. His initial ONSET score was 16, and his closure ONSET score was 12.

### ***Tara***

Tara, aged 13, had been referred to the YISP by the police following a reprimand. She lived with her mother and was known to social services. Tara had been truanting and mixing with antisocial peers. She was also disruptive at home and at school. Her initial ONSET score was low (13). No closure ONSET score was recorded.

### ***Teri***

Teri, who was 13, lived with her mother. She had one older and two younger siblings. She was known to social services, but had been referred to the YISP by the education welfare officer because of her disruptive behaviour at school and at home and her bullying of other children. She had emotional and mental health problems. Her initial ONSET score was 19, and this had increased to 21 by case closure.

### ***Toby***

Toby, aged 13, had been referred by the education welfare officer because of his disruptive behaviour and his refusal to go to school. He had emotional and mental health problems but was not known to the police or social services. Toby was the middle child of three children who lived with their mother. His initial ONSET score was 21 and this had reduced to 19 by case closure.

### ***Ashleigh***

Ashleigh, aged 13, had been living with her parents and one older brother, who was involved in criminal activities, when she had been referred to the YISP by social services. She had poor school attendance and had been involved in theft. She had a statement of SEN. Her initial ONSET score was 28 and this had reduced to 21 at case closure.

### ***Fraser***

Fraser was 13 and lived with his mother and two older and three younger siblings. He was known to the police and social services and had a statement of SEN. His school attendance was deteriorating and he had been excluded. He had emotional problems and was being bullied by his brothers. He had been

referred to the YISP by a voluntary organisation. His initial ONSET score was 23. His closure ONSET score was not recorded.

### ***Joseph***

Joseph, aged 13, was the middle child of three children, who lived with his parents. His parents had made the referral to the YISP because of his argumentative behaviour and disobedience at home and his poor behaviour in school. He had not been in any trouble previously. His initial ONSET score was 25, which had reduced to 14 at case closure.

### ***Guy and Siobhan***

Guy, aged 12 and Siobhan, aged 13, were two of five siblings who lived with both parents. Siobhan was the eldest child. Guy had a statement of SEN and was known to social services, and had been referred to the YISP by a voluntary organisation. Siobhan's initial ONSET score was 17, which had reduced to 10 at case closure. Guy had an initial ONSET score of 30, which had gone down to 19 at case closure.