

Artikkel 1

Children's participation in Family Group

Conference as a resolution model

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Children's participation in Family Group Conference as a resolution model

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Abstract

Family Group Conference (FGC) is a resolution model which is implemented by Child Welfare in many countries throughout the world. Some of them have the right to be offered an FGC established by law. In an FGC the family and its network are given the opportunity to discuss and find what they consider to be the best solutions for the child.

An FGC focuses on the child's situation who remains in the centre of the discussion. Decisions shall be in the best interest of the child, and the solution of the network must be approved by the Child Welfare Act in general. In the FGC it is also an aim to let children attend and participate in discussions regarding their own future. This article aims to draw attention to children's possibility to participate in FGC and the support figure's role to encourage the child to participate. The main issues are: What is the *child perspective* in FGC? What does it mean to participate in an FGC? In what ways can children participate in an FGC?

Key words: Family Group Conference, children's participation, the child's perspective

Introduction and objectives

Considerable attention has been given during the last ten years or so to matters concerning children's rights and interests. Children are given the right to express their view in all countries which have legislated The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989. The child's right to express their view was also a main issue for the legislator during the drafting of Norwegian Child Welfare Act of 17th July 1992. In spite of increased attention to children's right to participate, children very rarely do so when decisions are made by the child welfare authorities. Family Group Conferences (FGCs) were introduced in Norway at the end of the 1990s with the intention involving both the child and the family in the decision-making process.

While it was never the intention to provide solutions to family conflicts without family involvement, the introduction of the FGC was seen as a challenge to the family to find the best solution (Andersson & Bjerkman, 1999; Lupton 2000). This article discusses various aspects of importance involving children as participants in FGCs and where the main issues are: What is the *child perspective* in the FGC? What does it mean to participate in an FGC? In what forms can children participate in an FGC? Attention is also given to the conditions enabling participation and the different standards of participation. Finally the article raises questions at to why children should participate in the FGC and under those circumstances that seem to be

significant for enabling the child's participation in the FGC. Prior to an FGC the child has the opportunity to choose a person – an adult who will assist him/her in presenting their interests, and generally referred to as a *support figure*. This person participates in the FGC and will *prepare the child emotionally* for the FGC. The support figure must put an effort in assisting the child to express his or her thoughts and emotions in the discussions in the FGC.

The article is written at the start of the doctoral project "Children and Youth in Family Group Conferences". This project studies children's participation in FGCs and how any agreements determined during the discussion are put into practice. The research is qualitative and the methods are observations and interviews. The article is based on participation in seven family group conferences where two interviews were held with the child, the parents and the support figure. The first of the two interviews was held at the first opportunity following the conference, and the second between six and twelve months after the FGC. Most of the interviews took place at the informants' homes while a few were made in cafeterias. Much of the information in this article is based on interviews with the children and where the interview took place within a broader context. This included diverse activities prior to, or following, the interview and included playing football, baking cakes, making pizza, driving in the car, and shopping. The intention was to make the interview setting more comfortable for the child, but it also enabled supplementary information to be obtained. At the present time the interview programme has not been concluded but upon completion in 2005, it is intended that 14 interviews will have been undertaken with children (of which 9 undertaken to date), and 32 interviews with adults (20 to date). In addition, further information has been gathered when observing the FGCs. This article thus summarises the provisional findings.

A case study, *Peter's FGC*, will be used as a basis for discussing certain aspects of child participation in the conferences. This case study will also enable a presentation of the FGC model required as a basis for following the process and discussion.

Peter (8 years old)

One Saturday *Peter's* mother, father, uncle, aunt, cousin, grandmother, grandfather, grandfather's girlfriend and mother's aunt, were situated in a conference room in a kindergarten. The reason for assembling *Peter's* FGC was based on the concern expressed by *Peter's* school that he, this 8-year-old boy, was all too often late for school, and that some days he didn't come at all. *Peter* lives with his mother. She sleeps a lot and one consequence is that she isn't able to get *Peter* to school in the morning. She is diagnosed as depressive. One year previously she had tried to commit suicide.

In a room next to the conference room the co-ordinator for this FGC, the representative and a student trainee from the child welfare authority, *Peter's* teacher and I, the researcher and author of the present article, were placed. The co-ordinator had been commissioned by the child welfare authority to arrange this FGC together with *Peter* and his mother. The co-ordinator had baked buns, made coffee and bought Coke and candies to *Peter*. *Peter* was also present. He was more than busy playing with toys and he spent some considerable time making rather complex railway constructions. He played football, watched videos and even helped to arrange the coffee table. Now and then he was looking through the glass wall to where his family was sitting discussing the questions which the child welfare authority had prepared. Occasionally he visited the conference room where his family was sitting, but most of the time he spent with us in the room next door playing.

Having the role as an observer in an FGC, I try to adopt the role as the child's playmate. This gives me an opportunity to get to know the child and this benefits the conversation *Peter* and I will have after the FGC. While I am playing with the child I receive some interesting information about what it is like to be a child in an FGC. *Peter's* FGC lasted for 6 hours. During

this period the trainee also played with him. Sometimes I joined them playing, but most of the time I became an observer to their playing and chatting. While they were playing the trainee asked *Peter* if he knew why all these people had been brought together and what they were talking about. *Peter* shrugged his shoulders and kept on with his railway constructions. Then she asked *Peter* if he would like to know what all this was about. *Peter* stopped playing, looked at her and said that he'd like to know. The student said they were there to help his mother so that he could come to school on time. They also wanted to find a way to support him with his homework, and finally find someone who could get him to his sports club on Tuesdays. "What? Is that so?" *Peter* answered, rather impressed. He watched them through the glass-wall and he smiled.

During the last part of the FGC where the family network presented its plan to the representative from the child welfare authority *Peter* kept on working on his railway in the room next door. The family network was asked to be specific about one of their suggestions in the plan and the representatives of the authorities left the conference room again. The student sat down beside *Peter*. She asked him if he knew what they had decided in the conference room. *Peter* said no, he didn't know anything about that. The student asked him again if he wanted to know more about their new plan. *Peter* was more than eager to know. The first thing she told him was that no longer would he be with his father from Wednesday to Thursday, but from Tuesday to Wednesday, because his father would be able to drive him to the sports club on Tuesday evening. *Peter's* mother did not have a car. The student was sure that this was good news for *Peter*, but *Peter* replied:

"I don't want that."

"Why not?", the student asked.

"Well, you see, we have our weekly excursion at school on Thursdays and Dad makes hot chocolate, and Mum *does not*. I'd rather be with dad from Wednesday to Thursday."

It was important for *Peter* to bring his hot chocolate for the school trip on Thursdays like the other children in his class, but the adults focused on what was best regarding transport to and from the sports club. During the discussion nobody had asked *Peter's* opinion.

The child perspective in FGC

When arranging an FGC it is emphasized that both family and professional participants focus on the child. The child must be the focus of the discussions and through the FGC the expanded family must strive to reach a plan that is beneficial to the child.

What is best for the child is a normative question. Deliberative theory is founded on assumptions for linguistic communication and deals exactly with questions concerning normative issues by following argumentation procedures. Deliberative theory is based on a Habermasian discourse theory. In much research four conditions or criteria are necessary in order to make a deliberative process. First is inclusion of the parties involved. Secondly, a meeting place must be established. The third condition concerns the structures dealing with the power balance, and fourthly, is the publicity of the deliberation. Skivenes and Eriksen's (2002) conclusion is that structurally the FGC has democratic qualities in accordance with the four criteria in deliberative theory. Focusing on children as participants in FGC it is especially the first and third conditions, involving the concerned parties and structures for power balance, which require more detailed investigation. To a large degree the child is an involved part when the FGC is to determine what is beneficial to the child. When investigating this the child perspective is essential. "Child perspective" is a concept first used in research of children in the 1990s and refers to a view of children as *active subjects and producers of their own reality*.

In very few research projects about FGC is the child perspective and children's participation in FGC debated. Many point to the need for theoretical discussions and empirical studies of children's participation in FGC. Andersson and Bjerkman (1999) define child perspective in FGC. In the evaluation of the Swedish FGC, Anderson and Bjerkman found three different categories of FGCs. In the most frequently used category the FGC was organised in a child perspective. In the view of Andersson and Bjerkman, adopting a child perspective in the first place includes trying to see things from the child's point of view. The child's point of view must be sought as well as his or her experiences and thoughts concerning the future. This aspect of the child perspective must seek to be described as authentically as possible without any adult filter. The next component of the child perspective is adults 'having the child in their viewpoint' meaning that it is necessary for adults to see and understand the child (Andersson & Bjerkman, 1999). This is not an objective description but, at best, a child perspective based on wisdom, experience and the desire to act in the child's best interests. The decision-making process in a child perspective can be illustrated as follows:

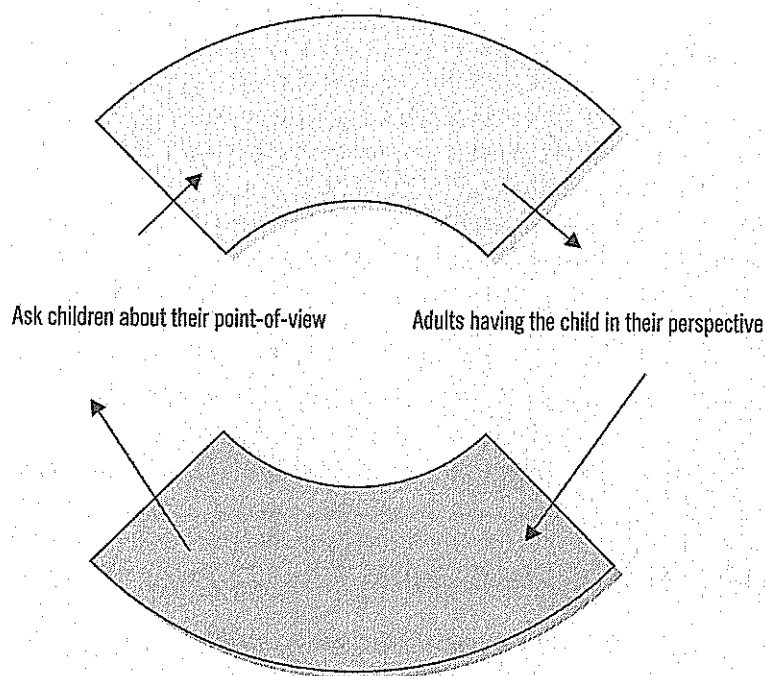


Figure 1
The decision-making process in a child perspective

Having a child perspective in a FGC means that one is continually alternating between the child's perspective and different adult perspectives. As described here, the child perspective corresponds to that of The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The dominant idea here is that all children are entitled to an adolescence which benefits the child. This is stated in Article 3 in the Convention: "In all actions concerning children (...) the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration". Consequent to this article, Article 12 was framed – the most central rights about children's participation in the Convention. Article 12 was drafted to ensure the child's point of view being taken into consideration.

Parents have the responsibility for their children's upbringing and development. As addressed in The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child the benefit of the child is the basic element on how responsibility is practiced. This indicates that the authority of the parents must be a result of a conscientious and competent care for the best interests of the child. The question about the best interests of the child in the FGC is supposed to be answered as an outcome of rational discussion, which includes both the voice of the child and those of the adults.

Children's participation in FGC

When arranging an FGC it is an ideal that children shall participate in the discussions. Children are usually present in the FGCs. A review of three different quantitative investigations shows that children younger than 10 years old participated in about half of the FGCs, while those older than 10 usually were present.

The surveys did not focus on *how* the children participated, levels of participation or which principles must be fulfilled when stating that the children really participated.

Table 1

Children's participation in FGC (based on data from Morthorst & Hansen, 2002, p. 19)

Age group	Sundell & Häggmann (1999) N = 74 (Sweden)	Marsh & Crow (1997) N = 80 (England)	Morthorst & Hansen (2002) N = 40 (Denmark)
< 10	50	40	60
10-15	88	90	100
> 15	100	66	100

Children's right to participate and conditions for participation in FGC

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is organized according to the rights of participation, protection and provision. The two latter rights, that of protection and provision, have in common the fact that they place the child in a receiving position pacified and subdued by other people's decisions, and place the child as an objective. Opdahl (2002) describes the basic difference between the two latter rights and the former – the right of participation. The right of participation assumes that a minimum amount of self-determination is accepted, for example by accepting the child's right to say 'no' to participation. The child's right to be a participant in the FGC assumes that the child is offered a status as a *subject*. Giving the child the right to participate is equivalent to giving the child subject status (Opdahl, 2002).

Article 12 of The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is one of several articles concerned with the child's right to participate. This Article states that children must be given the opportunity to form and state their own opinions and further, have the right to be consulted and to make decisions. Concerning children's possibility to construct their own views, a significant condition is the *need for information* presented to the child on what goes on within an FGC, and to inform about the aim of such a conference and what is to be debated. This is another important condition for children's participation in FGC.

The role of the support figure

In the preceding paragraph, the FGC was referred to as a deliberative process and characterized as a dialogue which attempts to answer normative questions (e.g. what benefits the child?) by using argumentation procedures. Four criteria for a deliberation were presented: the inclusion of the involved parties, the establishment of meeting places for dialogue, establishment of power balance structures, and publicity of the deliberation (Skivenes & Eriksen, 2002). With focus on the child as a contributor in an FGC, it is of immense importance to look at the third decisive factor for deliberation – the power balance structure. There is a need to neutralize any imbalance in power, knowledge and the capability to present arguments and views. The ability to present one's own case often varies, reflecting education and social background. Children, depending on age, need support to facilitate the expression of their opinions.

The natural immaturity of children concerning authority and skills is a part of the reason why the child needs a support figure in an FGC. This person is selected based on the relation to the child, and is frequently a person who the child trusts. In one of the FGCs in the selection of the project "Children and Youth in FGC" the preferred support figure was based on *the complexity of the problem*. The FGC dealt with a 16-year-old girl's drug problem. The support figure was a friend of her father and the girl did not have any relation to this person. Nevertheless the person chosen had some personal experience as a relative to a drug addict. Being a woman and quite young as well were the main reasons for choosing her as the girl's support figure.

The role of the support figure is manifold, but a particularly important function is to supply information to the child which is essential when he or she has to express a personal opinion. Research by Lupton (2000) points to the arguments made by 35 children and youth in the age range 10 to 17 and what they thought was important in relevance to their participation in an FGC. Concerning information and the making of their own views the informants said:

"To be able to ask what something means if I don't understand... Being asked if there is anything I have not understood." (Lupton, 2000, p. 80).

The informants in this study stated among other things that it was important to have someone to whom they could address questions if there were things they did not comprehend. They signalled the importance of having the opportunity to ask someone if they did not understand or needed supervision. According to The UN Child Convention on the Rights of the Child the child must have subject status and be informed of the possibility to express his or her own opinions and for participation. Further it is vital to determine whether the child has understood the essence of the information. In relation to the FGC it is likely that the parents are too concerned with the pressure they are under, and consequently the child's conversation with the support figure can be very important for the child. The support figure is supposed to talk with the child before the FGC. Through such consultations the support figure can prepare the child for the meeting, clarify which role the child will have, and say something about the various outcomes of the FGC. The child's participation in the FGC will largely depend on his/her own self-confidence. The child's dialogue with the support figure before the FGC gives him or her the opportunity to practice and prepare his personal opinions.

The support figure might have an important role to play during the FGC to support the child when he or she presents their viewpoint. The children in Lupton (2000) say this about what is important when they state their mind in the FGC:

"Adults have to listen to what I want to say. (...) to be believed. (...) having a time when I'm not interrupted, when I can say what I want to say. (...) being allowed to say what I want to say without being told off. Being asked if there was anything I couldn't say..." (Lupton, 2000, p. 80).

The children thought it was important not to be interrupted and to be trusted. They also pointed out the need to be asked whether there were things they couldn't say. The child's possibility to express his/her opinion will also depend on how the other participants in the FGC react towards the child and his participation. Further, the support figure has a significant role when it comes to *taking care of the child perspective* in the FGC. Participants in an FGC have varied awareness and knowledge about children's right to participate and different attitudes towards including a child in decision-making processes related to difficult matters in a family's life. The role of the support figure is to remind the adult participants of the need to understand the child's perspective, and further, that this understanding is important to be included when reaching a decision. During the FGC the support figure can take the child into an adjacent room in order to talk to him, and this might make the adults aware of the child's perspective.

The support figure is supposed to play an active part in bringing forth the child's view, even if this diverges from his/her own view or that of any other participant. The Swedish FGC training, used by many Norwegian local authorities, refers to the support figure's duty as following:

"The child's spokesperson must use his effort to claim the child's view even if this conflicts with, for example, the parents'. Prior to the meeting the spokesperson shall meet the child to get a picture of what the child thinks." (Lindström, 1998, p. 6).

The FGC comprises three phases: preparation, carrying out the FGC and follow-up. The child's relation to the support figure is important in all these phases. The informants in Lupton's (2000) research wanted their participation in the FGC to be significant and hence that the FGC would lead to concrete results. They also insisted that their arguments should not be used against them in the future:

"What's talked about in the FGC must not be talked about outside. (...) Ensuring that the discussion in the FGC is not argued about afterwards." (Lupton, 2000, p. 80).

The child might also need support after the FGC, and where the support figure could play an important part in the child's life subsequently. This was the case for *Peter's* support figure. As she learned more about *Peter's* life during the FGC, she later took a more active part in his life. She was not aware of how difficult things had been for him and it was now easier for her to ask him questions about his well-being.

Different ways of participation

The child's support figure provides the child with the possibility of participation in the FGC in different ways: *directly*, *indirectly* and through a *combination* of both. Different ways of participation are referred to here in relation to where the child is situated when the FGC is arranged.

Direct participation means that the child is given status as subject. The child is informed, present and participates in the discussion in the FGC. When the child takes part in the discussion in the FGC directly, the support figure is an important person. The child might need support if he or she should be given the possibility to express his or her own views. The support figure might also help *the others* to see the child's point of view. *Indirect participation* means that the support figure gives voice to the child in the discussion. The child can participate indirectly in two ways. He can physically be somewhere else, or at the location where the FGC is arranged but in a room outside where the discussions take place (the way *Peter* was). One condition for indirect participation, however, is that the child's support figure or another person has talked

with the child before the FGC to clarify the child's ability and thoughts and to bring the child's view into the dialogue of the FGC. If the child is situated in a nearby room where the FGC takes place, the support figure might speak with the child also during the meeting. In this way the child can acquire information and also express his or her own thoughts and meaning during the discussion in the FGC. The third way of participation – a *combination of direct and indirect participation* – means that the child participates in parts of the FGC. When the child does not take part in the discussions, the child's views are represented by the support figure. The various forms of participation in the FGC involve the child as a party to the discussion. Participation may be realized in different ways.

Did Peter participate in his FGC?

Information and status as a subject is referred to above as necessary for participation. The information *Peter* received before the FGC was insufficient. He didn't know the subject of the meeting and he didn't know *who* would attend. When his grandmother arrived, and later when his aunt arrived he said: "You, here?" He was obviously glad to see them, but it surprised him as well. Neither was *Peter* kept informed during the FGC, such as when his family was working on the plan. *Peter* was not granted the status as *subject* in the FGC. Nobody asked him about his opinion and the final decision was taken without including *Peter's* thoughts and opinions.

The decision in *Peter's* FGC was not taken in a child perspective. *Peter's* voice was missing. He was only 8 years old. Most 8-year old children are not able to cope with a 6-hour meeting. But *Peter's* need for recreation did not mean that he had to be excluded from participation in the meeting. This is where his support figure has an important role to play, by bringing the child's point of view into the discussion. *Peter's* support figure was engaged the day *before* the FGC. She had not talked to *Peter* before the meeting, and she did not talk with him *during* the meeting. *Peter* did not take part in the FGC directly, and he had no possibility to participate indirectly. Perhaps the plan would had been different in some of the points if *Peter* had been heard before and during the FGC.

After the FGC *Peter* said that the FGC was "cool". He had a great time playing with the student from the Child Welfare, but finding the FGC "cool" is not a criterion for participation. If *Peter* had been present during the FGC this might have been of practical importance concerning the decisions made. The presence of the child in the FGC can make the adults aware of *whom* they must focus upon in the discussions. But in this position children are given status as objects rather than subjects which would have given them the opportunity to participate in the decision making process.

Why should children participate in FGC?

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and our understanding of children, they have the right to express their own views and it is natural to suggest that children should have the possibility to participate in a decision-making process like an FGC. Several arguments can be presented in support of this. First, the child's own experiences and ideas might have an influence on the decision made. Children and adults have different perspectives on their philosophy of life. The adults participating in *Peter's* FGC tried to find some practical and effective solutions regarding transport to and from the sports club. *Peter* was engaged in what was important to him regarding his everyday life together with his schoolmates. His perspective differed from those of the adults. If decisions are to be taken based on a child per-

spective, this should also include the child's own view on what is important in his/her everyday life. Because of this the child has to be asked his/her opinion.

A second argument to allow the child to take part in the FGC is that participation in the decision-making process may be significant when the framework of the child's future is formed. Children who participate in the discussions in the FGC are given more opportunities to understand the situation. It is through conversations that the decisions are legitimized. Without any access to what has been said in the discussions it may be more difficult for the child to accept the decisions that are made, and it might result in less motivation when it comes to accepting the framework and the action programme following the FGC. One example of this is taken from *Frank's* FGC. *Frank* was 14 years old at the time of the FGC. The extended family was gathered to find a more stable solution concerning where *Frank* should live. Because of conflicts between *Frank* and both parents' new partners he could not stay with either parent. The year prior to the FGC *Frank* had lived a nomadic life staying in four different places. *Frank* was determined to rent a room of his own. In such a situation, feeling no one wanted him, this may be seen as an expression of clever self-determination. *Frank* took part in the discussions at the FGC. The extended family found out that *Frank* was too young to live on his own, and decided that he should move in with one of his mother's friends who also participated in the FGC. *Frank* knew him well and they had a good relationship. *Frank* felt that this was the right decision to make. A few months later a new FGC was arranged, and the framework was evaluated. It was decided that the child welfare authorities should consider the friend as offering a possible foster home for *Frank*. At the end of the second FGC *Frank* said that being present at the two meetings he had realized that he was too young to take care of himself. He felt that the solution they had reached was good. If these decisions had been made without *Frank's* participation, he would probably have experienced this differently.

Involvement in the FGC may also have a therapeutic effect on the child. *Anne's* FGC was to determine where *Anne* should live. She was 13 years old and wanted to live with her father. *Anne* had grown up living with her mother but had regular contact with her father. She had contacted the child welfare authorities herself because of conflicts with her mother and because her mother smoked marihuana. *Anne* had run away to her father and stayed there for ten weeks prior to the FGC. During this period she had hardly spoken to her mother or her mother's family. *Anne* was told that she could participate in the discussions at the FGC, but the adults felt that they should "clear the air" and talk about adult matters that were not meant for *Anne* to hear. What happened, however, was that they didn't let her in until the framework plan had been determined and it was decided that she should move in with her mother again. *Anne* was called back to the meeting and the plan was presented to her. She reacted strongly with anger and tears, and ran out of the room and locked herself in the bathroom.

There are three ways of understanding *Anne's* strong reactions. First, she was not given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. She was 13 years old and was used to determine her own life. She was also told that she could take part in the discussions in the FGC. Secondly, the decision made in the FGC was the opposite of what she wanted. She wanted to stay with her father. Third, as expressed in an interview afterwards, she had a feeling of guilt and was afraid of what the others were thinking of her. No one in the extended family had wanted the FGC and she felt that her first contact with the child welfare authorities had triggered off something that the others thought was unnecessary. She had worried about the FGC. After the meeting she did not know what they had been talking about and she thought that everybody was angry with her. She didn't think that her parents loved her, and after the FGC there was a lengthy process where her mother, father and her grandfather went into the bathroom to talk with her. They tried to make her see that she meant everything to them, and that no one was angry with her. *Anne's* support figure at the meeting said in the

subsequent interview that nobody had said anything derogatory about *Anne* during the discussions. On the contrary, she had thought that *Anne* should have been here. She would then have heard the positive expressions that her mother, father and the extended family had used when referring to her.

Giving children the opportunity to participate in the FGC may also have a positive effect on the upbringing for democratic education. An essential point in the FGC model is that participation is not about 'winning' one's own argument, but to listen to and respect the best argument – no matter who is presenting the case. Participation might also strengthen the child's status as subject. This is probably of great importance to children in contact with Child Welfare, as many families have traditionally taken the role as objects in various decisions made by public officials on behalf of the family. In this perspective the FGC must be considered as an empowerment strategy where the experience of *participating* and *participation* in the decisions being made might provide the child with some new strategies on how to handle difficulties later in life. Participation can then be considered as a protective factor.

Conclusion

We often talk about the four pillars of FGC. The first is that the FGC must be arranged involving the *extended family* where relatives, friends and other significant persons for the child meet to discuss the problem and to find solutions for the child. The second is that the extended family is entrusted to *find solutions without any professional assistance*. The third pillar is that a *co-ordinator*, who is not employed by the child welfare authority assists the parents and the child to carry out the FGC's resolutions. The last pillar is that the discussions must result in a framework which the child care authority must take into consideration. I agree with Anderson and Bjerkman (1999) when they point out the need for a fifth pillar in the FGC model: *the child perspective*.

An FGC is a resolution model concerning normative issues. From a deliberative perspective all affected parties must participate if legitimate decisions are to be made. The child is at the centre of the FGC, and the child is an affected party within the FGC. An FGC in a child perspective is based upon the child being given an opportunity to communicate his or her own conceptions and experiences through different forms of participation, and that these are incorporated into the decision-making process. The child's right to participation affects both the argumentation and the right to co- and self-determination. In this article I have mainly been occupied with conditions important to children's opinion-building and the possibilities for them to express their views concerning participation in the FGC.

To carry out an FGC with a child perspective must be based on a dialogue where the *argument* – and not the persons presenting the argument – are brought into focus. In this perspective, the criterion of the deliberative theory of *power and expertise equalization* is of great importance. Children's participation in the FGC depends on the establishment of power balance structures. We have taken a closer look at how the child support figure can contribute to counterbalance the inequality of power and expertise between the child and adults in the FGC. This study showed that the child's support figure can help the child develop opinions and express views. When attempting to increase the child's possibility for participating in an FGC it is important to put focus on the purpose of and meaning of being the child's support figure. The role as support figure deals with both the children's opinion-formation and their right to co- and self-determination (Skivenes & Strandbu, 2004).

The child's age and maturity – seen in proportion to the type and seriousness of the case – will certainly also be significant to the child's participation. This affects the vital discussion about

the situation of the child's right to and need for protection and participation, which is also a central issue in the project "Children and Youth in FGC". This issue will be addressed in future publications from the project.

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